



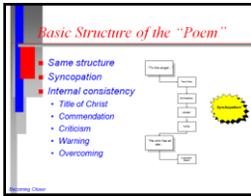


The fundamental problem with these two chapters is that the interpretations are completely at odds with each other. The poetic approach views them as warnings to the church in general, based upon the idea that “seven” churches is therefore a symbol of the complete church.

The historicist interpretation agrees, in general, with this, adding the idea that (like the Preterist interpretation) these are letters addressed to the specific churches in question. This, as will be seen, is born out by the fate of each of these churches. It is quite the case that each of these churches received the results promised.

The futurist, on the other hand, takes the interpretation that seven indeed signifies completeness -- the complete history of the church age. In this view, the letters to the churches are really not addressed to those specific churches (at least, not primarily, but only by way of example) but in fact these churches describe the seven “ages” of the history of the church. This view has some practical problems, but in general the distinction between one “age” and the next -- and determining just which part of Christendom is meant -- is so vague as to make this technique plausible.

Were it not for the division among readers, it would be plausible to entertain a mixed view: that these letters represent the ages of the church, amplified in more detail starting in Chapter 1. Unfortunately, such a soothing combination of views seems to be impossible. Opinion is so heavy, and invective so frequent, that no one who seriously writes on the subject in this century seems capable of such a unified approach.



There are a variety of ways of structuring these passages; some authors use as little as four and others more items within each. The key is to note that the structure is similar in all cases -- and the exceptions are important. There are in fact three main points to be considered:

1. The structure of all seven letters is very similar. In fact, considered as structure without content, it is identical. Passages like "To the angel at ... write" and "he that has an ear..." are framing passages -- like a chorus in a song. As such, they lay out the poetic nature of the passage. We are therefore entitled to draw conclusions not only from the meaning of the text but its structure.

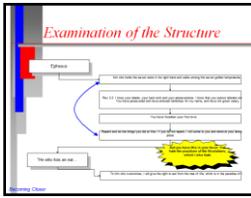
2. One key element of this structure is *syncopation*. Musically, this means to accent a beat; to bring it in early or late, to leave it out or stick in an extra one. The key is this: whatever is *different* is being *emphasized*. So when we see this syncopation in these two chapters, we may conclude that the differences from the "standard" form are significant.

3. In the content areas, there is an internal consistency between all the areas of the section -- including consistency between the title given to Christ in that letter and the other sections. Each "verse" (letter to a church) is a consistent whole. By the way, all the titles of Christ used here are taken from the first chapter -- yet another mark of a carefully constructed tapestry.

Becoming Closer



Text only for reading



We will review only the first letter in such detail -- time will not permit the others to be examined this way. We see the greeting; then the title of Christ.

Christ is the one holding the seven stars. The Greek here implies an act of strongly grasping and *completely* holding. The implication is clear; the one who is doing the reminding is the one who holds the church entirely, and who is also amidst the church.

And what does he praise? (Interesting, isn't it, that praise is first?) He mentions these:

- toil - it means sweaty hard work. (Interesting test!)
- endurance -- hupomene, again.
- testing of men -- this is a church which will not tolerate heresy.

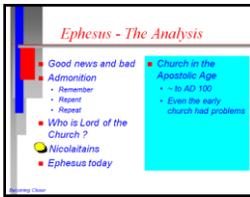
But something has gone wrong; we may speculate as to what. The passage is capable of two meanings: either they have lost their first enthusiasm (as we say a man really loves his hobby) or that they have lost that loving sense of brotherhood -- perhaps both. Perhaps the fight against heresy became bitter; who can say?

So what does the Lord tell them to do? I am indebted to Chuck Smith for the "three R's":

- Remember
- Repent
- Repeat

Then comes the syncopation: the Nicolaitans. Who they are, and what they did, we will cover on the next slide.

The reward, for the overcomer in Ephesus, is to eat from the tree of life. It is an interesting connection, for it refers to the tree found in the Garden of Eden -- and nowhere else. It is certain that, whatever else it is, the story of the Garden is an allegory, and an artistic work. Here the Spirit harkens us back to it -- the implication being that the curse of sin will be removed from us. So at the first, the staggering implication comes: all of sin, and all of its effects, are to be wiped out. And we shall be there to see it.



So we see “good news and bad news.” God praises; God criticizes. Note that the criticism has a purpose: it is to cause repentance. God does not criticize or discipline us because He is vindictive; He does so to produce repentance. For the experienced Christian, there is a lesson here:

- Remember what you were like when you were first a Christian? Remember the love and enthusiasm? Is there some reason you should not be so now?
- Repent, therefore, and regain that first love.
- Then repeat what you did at first.

It is interesting that athletic coaches spend so much time on the basics. We see why God does here; he points it out clearly that the Lord of the church, the head, is Jesus Christ. Jesus will have his bride spotless, as we shall see later. Thus, he will not be satisfied as long as there is something to criticize (pleased with progress, but not satisfied).

The Syncopation- note the passage about the Nicolaitans -- it's the syncopation in this section. The Nicolaitans were a heresy that sprang from Nicolaus, a deacon. Nicolaus (one of the seven deacons in Acts, according to Eusebius) wrote that the body “must be abused” (an early form of “no pain, no gain”- actually, he made the statement with regard to his repentance of jealousy of his wife) and was misinterpreted to mean that the body should really be abused -- as in promiscuous sex and drunken orgies. This sect taught that the body was evil and should be given over to evil (while keeping the mind and spirit pure, of course!) Note that the Lord hates the *practices* of the Nicolaitans, not the sinners themselves.

In the futurist view, this is the church of the Apostolic age, up to about 100AD (death of John) -- and even then the church had its problems.

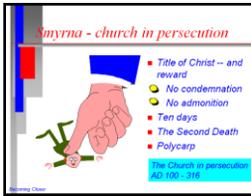
What happened to Ephesus? The city is a ruin. It housed one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (the temple of Diana of the Ephesians); it was a rich city on a major trade route; it has been a ruin for centuries. The lampstand has been removed; he who has an ear, let him hear.

Becoming Closer

Smyrna

(Rev 2:8-11 NIV) "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. (9) I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (10) Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. (11) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

Becoming Closer



This is the first of two churches which our Lord praises unconditionally; it is the church under persecution. (Rev. 2:8-10)

Begin with the title of our Lord: what greater comfort is there to the church under persecution than to know that our Lord is the one who has conquered death? What greater comfort than this when facing death: I know that my Redeemer lives, and I shall see him (Job 19:25)

What a paradox: the church seems haggard, weak, oppressed and poverty stricken -- and it is so rich! The Power of Paradox opens our eyes, and blinds those who say they can see.

The striking thing about this church is in the syncopation again: there is no condemnation. Tertullian had it right: the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. It is when the church is suffering persecution, hounded by Satan on all sides, that she is strongest. For this church, there is no need of condemnation or of admonition: they have it right.

What, then, are these "ten days?" In keeping with the day=year interpretation (familiar from Daniel) we would interpret this as a ten year period of persecution. Various periods could be suggested for this; they certainly had enough for that. One such period included the death of Polycarp, in AD 155. Polycarp was a disciple of John, and was the bishop ("angel?") of Smyrna when Revelation was written. Eusebius (IV.15) tells us of his martyrdom. A young Christian had been martyred for the amusement of the crowds. He faced death so nobly that the mob called for the death of Polycarp, the bishop. Polycarp had been granted a vision of his death; a dream of his pillow in flames. Polycarp made no effort to escape. The constable who escorted him to the pyre said, "For what harm is there in saying Lord Ceasar, and to sacrifice, and thus save your life?" Polycarp refused. As he entered the arena, he heard the voice from heaven: "Be strong, Polycarp, and contend manfully." The proconsul gave him several chances to deny Christ and live. One got the reply, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong; and how can I blaspheme my King that has saved me?" The proconsul threatened him with being eaten by wild animals; then by fire. Polycarp replied, "You threaten fire that burns for a moment and is soon extinguished, for you know nothing of the judgment to come, and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the wicked." The executioners wanted to nail him to the post; so great was his strength of character that when he declined, they let him remain simply tied. The fire was lit - and the flames kept from him. Eusebius records the next scene thus: "At length the wicked persecutors, seeing that the body could not be consumed by fire, commanded the executioner to draw near to him and to plunge his sword into him; and when he had done this, such a quantity of blood gushed forth that the fire was extinguished."

No church could better represent the age as given by the futurists. it lasted from about 100 AD to AD 316, when Constantine made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire (in hoc signo vinces).

The fate of Smyrna? To this day the Turks refer to it as "infidel Smyrna" - the church that would not be conquered; it stands as a beacon to us to this very day.

Becoming Closer

Pergamum

Rev. 2:12-17 (NIV) To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword: (12) I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. (13) Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. (14) Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (15) Repeat therefore to them: I will also come to you and will fight 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, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

Becoming Closer



The two edged sword, as we saw last week, is connected with the Scripture. If you will note carefully what the Scripture (Rev. 2:12-17) says, Christ promises to come and fight against “them” -- not the church, but those who teach the heresy. The sword, of course, is the Bible, the word of God -- and what other weapon would work? There is a reason for Bible study, and this is a good example of it.

Christ commends the church for being true to his name. I wonder how many of us would pass that test; are we faithful in proclaiming Him on Sunday only? Antipas -- we know nothing other than the name -- paid the price of naming the Name. Could we? Especially if the price included the disgrace that went with it? Remember, our Lord died the death of a common criminal; a death so shameful that Roman citizens were exempt from it (they were executed by sword).

There is an interesting connection here between the name Balaam and Nicolaus. Both names (in their original languages, Hebrew and Greek) can mean “to conquer the people.” And indeed the seductive heresy is a conquest -- whether that of sexual sin or worldliness.

The reward for the one who overcomes is described in three ways:

- Hidden manna -- reminiscent of manna in the wilderness, it should symbolize the eternal provision of God (remember that manna did not spoil over the Sabbath, but would otherwise spoil overnight). This is God’s provision as yet unrevealed.
- The white stone -- the concept of the “blackball” is still familiar to us, and dates from these times. A white stone was a “vote” for admission to the club!
- The new name -- possibly a reference to the pagan idea that knowing the hidden name of a God gives you power over it, it is more likely a hint of things to be revealed. It is very obscure. Isaiah 62:2 is the reference point: an new name to be revealed.

From the futurist point of view, this becomes the church of the Roman Empire - the state church. Pergamum (where Satan has his throne) is thus representative of Rome (per Revelation 13). The interpretation begins somewhat to break down at this point. One interesting observation is this: we now see idolatry (represented by the eating of meat sacrificed to idols) introduced. Is this the image (pun intended) of the veneration of saints, and statues thereof?

The city is now Bergamos; it is small, and some Christians remain in it.



It is no accident that the description of the Christ is the one with the eyes like blazing fire - for here He penetrates behind the disguises to the heart. (Rev 2:18-29)

The church appears to be a blessed church. It is full of love and faith, showing perseverance -- all admirable qualities in any church. Indeed, these qualities are *growing*. If you or I were to walk into this church, we'd be impressed. What's wrong? We have no records to tell us who this woman Jezebel was specifically -- we must take the name as referring to an influence like that of Jezebel in ancient Israel. So what was that influence?

It's still with us. Jezebel (not a native Israelite) was the wife of King Ahab, and the power behind the throne. She was the one who connived to get Naboth's vineyard; she was the one who fed the prophets of Baal. She was the one who killed the prophets of the Lord, threatening Elijah (remember the showdown on Mt. Carmel?) and finally was killed at the hands of Jehu. She is a figure of backstage intrigue who introduces "compromise" ("let's be open minded about this -- it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere, one religion is just as good as another....").

Adultery, from the earliest of the prophets, is taken as symbolic of idolatry. Indeed, the metaphor is the entire basis of the book of Hosea.

The futurist interpretation is especially appealing here. This is the time when the worship of Mary and the saints, the use of statues (idols, to some) in the Roman Catholic and Eastern churches grows rapidly. It is a time of great piety -- Notre Dame de Paris was built in this age -- and great faith. Indeed, Will and Ariel Durant, in their *The Story of Civilization*, entitle this volume *The Age of Faith*. Jezebel represents all this idolatry which is creeping into the church.

Note then the admonition of the Lord: "Hold on." He does not impose upon the peasant of the Middle Ages the sore duty of reading the Scriptures (which by now have been locked up in Latin). He says, simply, hold on. Don't plunge in to the "dark secrets of Satan" but hold on to the faith. Surely this is great assurance for the Christian in the dark.

And the reward? He gives two things:

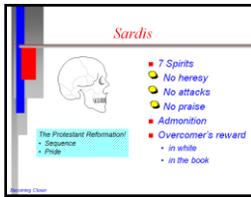
- He mentions that the overcomer will have authority with Him. This is explicitly proclaimed (see Matthew 19:28) to the Apostles and elsewhere confirmed in Revelation. The quotation is Psalm 2:8-9.
- He will give him the "Morning Star." This might seem perilous, for in Isaiah 14:12 Satan is so described. But at the end of Revelation (22:16) he makes it clear: the Morning Star is Jesus himself. We shall have him.

This last would have had special appeal to the saints of the middle ages. Thomas Aquinas -- practically the definition of the Mediaeval church -- has a legend about him. After writing his *Summa Theologica* God appeared to him, saying "Thou has written well of me. What would you have for your reward?" "Only thyself, Lord; only thyself."

Sardis

Rev. 3:14-17V "To the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These are the words of the one who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds, you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.' (1) Wake up! Strengthen what remains and do what to do, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. (2) Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard, obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. (3) Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for their names will be there, to be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. (4) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

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This church is the one most condemned. Indeed, the most notable thing is the lack of praise for anything. (Rev 3:1-6)

The title of Christ is significant here. It symbolizes (as does the Spirit in general) the *life* of the church. A church out of touch with her Lord is a dead church. Everything about this letter is a powerful warning.

The interesting thing is that this church appears to be doing well. The reputation is that of a church which is doing great things. But see the syncopation:

- There is no heresy in this church. Heresy is at least a sign that people are thinking, that they care about doctrine. They don't even have that.
- There are no attacks on the church from the outside. If Satan does not bother to attack, there may be a reason!
- There is no praise. There is nothing -- absolutely nothing -- for this church to smile about.

This church has sunk so far that our Lord begins his admonition with "Wake UP!" There is an interesting sequence of commands:

- REMEMBER what you were taught
- OBEY that teaching
- REPENT.

Why does repentance come third? As Bonhoeffer put it, everyone knows that only those who believe, obey. What they don't know is that only those who obey, can believe.

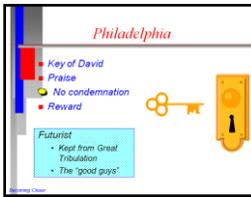
Even in this dire circumstance there are a few old fashioned fossils. Those who hold to the Lord's teaching. For these overcomers, he promises two things:

- They will be robed in white -- the color of rejoicing, victory and purity. In chapters 6 and 7 we will see these white robes again.
- Their names will be in the book of life, confessed before the father.

Perhaps a small reward, compared to other churches. But hear the fate of Sardis: the town that was the home of Croesus (as in "rich as...") is now a ruin.

FUTURIST: In an interesting turn, the futurists identify this with the Protestant Reformation! The idea is that this reformation was in fact nothing but a cover for a dead church. This seems almost impossible to me -- until you look at the sequence. Then it becomes easy to understand.

Recall that one of the great appealing points of the futurist view is its "exclusiveness." There is an air of being the elite that's in the know. Obviously, such a doctrinally correct church could not be either in the period of Sardis or of Laodicea; clearly, all the other ages are accounted for. Therefore, "our" church must be in the age described by Philadelphia. The theory was first propounded in 1830. Therefore, the church before that time -- the church of the Reformation, and the Roman Catholic church of the counter-Reformation, must be the church at Sardis. Is it not strange that the reason for a theory's popularity has so little to do with its correctness?



Rev 3:7-13.

The first key point here is in the title of Christ. He is “holy” (meaning separated) and “true” (not so much honest in the Greek as *real*).

The big point is “the key of David.” The significance, taken from Isaiah 22:22) is that he opens and shuts the door of the Temple (in this instance, no doubt, the Millennial one). By this passage we see in the symbolism the effect of Matthew 16:19, the keys of the Kingdom. The church has always understood that she is the inheritor of the promises to Israel (Galatians 6:16), the Israel of God. If we make this transmutation effective here, we find that the Jews of this time will find out -- at the Return -- that Jesus, the Messiah, loves the church. The door is now open, and no one can shut it on us.

This church is well praised. Despite their little strength, they have kept the word and not denied the Lord. Our syncopation comes in that there is nothing negative. Even in this, there is a warning: “I come quickly.” This is warning to those who are not faithful, and comfort to those who are.

The reward is very significant. They are to be kept from trial; the Jews will be at their feet. More than that, they become a pillar in the temple of the New Jerusalem, and are given the tremendous privilege of knowing three names (think of it in terms of knowing someone powerful on a first name basis):

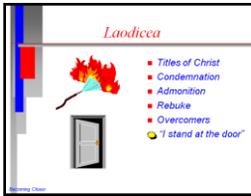
- The new (and unknown) name of God. This is said elsewhere in Revelation to be placed on their foreheads -- just like the mark of the beast for those who do not overcome.
- The new (and unknown) name of the city of God, the New Jerusalem.
- The new (and unknown) name of Jesus, the Christ.

All these “news” will be shown in good time. The city of Philadelphia is still in existence, and still has an active Christian population.

To the futurists, this section begins to cause problems. It is easy enough to identify “hour of trial” in verse 10 as the Great Tribulation (based upon the futurist theory). The hard part is the sequence. Up to now these seven churches have been taken in order. The difficulty, again, is no one wants to be in Laodicea when the Lord comes.

Laodicea

Rev. 3:14-22 (NIV) "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's temple: (14) I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! (15) So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. (17) You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. (18) I counsel you to buy gold from me, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and ointment to put on your eyes, so you can see. (19) Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. (20) Here I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he will eat with me. (21) To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I have overcome and am seated with my Father on his throne. (22) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."



Rev 3:14-22. The church is in the world, and this church is of the world. So the titles of Christ begin by telling us three things:

- He is the “Amen” -- the Hebrew thought here is the word “truly”.
- He is the faithful witness -- the one who has seen God, as no one else has. He is therefore the one person this world is looking for -- and denying the existence of.
- He is the ruler of creation. The worldly church takes God’s laws of the creation for granted, not knowing who gives these laws.

This church is given no praise -- only condemnation. There is no “Yet” in Laodicea. This is in keeping with Christ, who asks that a man be for him or against him (Mark 9:40). This church thinks it has the best of both worlds: Christ and riches; it has neither.

So Christ admonishes them -- and in their own language:

- He tells them to buy gold from him (and Laodicea was a banking center for Asia Minor)
- He tells them to get white clothes (and Laodicea was famous for its mass production clothing industry)
- He tells them to buy salve for their eyes, that they might see (and this to a town which had a famous medical school -- which exported eye salve all over the known world.)

So Christ rebukes them -- but does so in love (see Prov. 27:6).

To the overcomers a simple promise is made; you will sit with me on the throne I am given (i.e., you will share my authority).

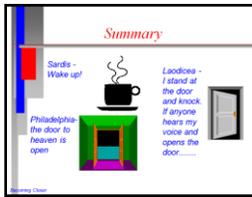
There is one last syncopation: “I stand at the door and knock.” In the futurist view, this means that Christ is coming, soon. This view sees this as the church of today (except, of course, the congregation of the writer). In any view, it is significant. Christ knocks; the meal he would share is (in the Greek) the main meal of the day. He would not just “sup” with you; he would feast.



There are seven messages, each timeless:

- Is your zeal slackening? Remember your first love
 - remember
 - repent
 - repeat
- Are you in persecution? Be strong in it; the disciple is not above his master. Share his suffering; share his reward.
- Does it matter what you believe? Yes! Watch your doctrine! Study to show yourself approved.
- Is your church proud of its works, but missing its Lord? Hang on to Him; you can overcome.

Becoming Closer



- Is your church dead? Wake up and smell the coffee!
- Is your church in revival? Rejoice; the door to heaven is open for you?
- Is your church lukewarm? Don't worry -- but listen. He stands at the door and knocks; will you let him in?