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PREACHING THE SEVEN CHURCHES
OF REVELATION 2-3

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PREACHING THE SEVEN CHURCHES
OF REVELATION 2-3

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To my father and mother,
Larry Eugene and Peggy Bevill Key,
your spiritual imprint is indelibly struck on my mind and in my heart.

To our daughters Brooklyn and Lizzie,
you are beautiful and blessed gifts from the Lord.

And most especially to
Kimberly,
your constant love, counsel, and sacrifice
continue to exponentially enrich my life and ministry.

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PREFACE

First, I wish to express profound gratitude to my parents, Larry and Peggy Key, who laid a spiritual foundation in my early years for which I will remain eternally thankful. Thank you for teaching me “the sacred writings, which are able to make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15). Also, thank you for the continued love and support in both my life and ministry. Further, I remain grateful for my brothers, Brad and Chad, whose humor and encouragement continue through the best and worst of times.

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Of all those mentioned, no one has been more singularly instrumental to my development as a person and minister than my loving wife, Kimberly Key. Her sacrificial spirit in these last nine years continues to inspire others and myself. Through the trial and triumphs of these years, she has proven herself again and again as a disciple of Jesus Christ, a wife, and now as a mother to our Brooklyn and Lizzie. Her ministry to me makes my ministry possible. No wiser and more caring woman has ever walked the face of the earth.

The greatest gratitude is owed to my Lord and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose selfless sacrifice at the cross in taking my sins that I could become the righteousness of God continues to give me life and joy. Further, his calling to “preach the Word” resonates in my mind, heart, and life. I will never forget, when at the age of fifteen, I knelt and wept as I came to the realization of the Lord’s will for my life. The consummation of my life and ministry will be to see him and sing “Worthy is the Lamb

who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev 5:12).

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The message of Jesus to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 is the only direct discourse of Jesus communicated to local congregations found in the New Testament. Yet, the message of Jesus to the seven churches is at times lost amidst more colorful apocalyptic images in Revelation. Further, sometimes overlooked is that the book of Revelation is the “the revelation of Jesus Christ” intended to reveal Jesus, the Son of Man, to the seven congregations persevering in their witness amidst threatening persecution from without and problems from within.¹ In such a context, the church needed a clear understanding of Jesus’ will in her local congregational life.

In our time, Jesus’ instructions to the seven local congregations should be understood as being relevant for all churches.² Beale rightly surmises that the consequence of such verbiage is that “although each letter is addressed to the particular situation of a particular church, it is relevant for the needs of all ‘seven’ of the churches, and consequently for the universal church.”³ Aune notes of this “stereotyped formula” that the seven messages “were intended to be read together and heeded by each of the

¹G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1998), 223. Beal surmises, “The Son of Man vision is primarily developed in the introductions of the letters.”

²David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 115, 130. Aune points out that number seven “had the greatest symbolic significance for humanity in all ages and in all parts of the world. The author was preoccupied with the symbolic significance of the number seven (commonly understood to signify completeness) which he used fifty-four times.” Beyond Scriptural evidence, church history supports the number seven having a universal significance. Aune points out that both the Muratorian Canon and Victorinus support this view.

³Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 226.

congregations.”⁴ A significant clue indicating the universal intent of the messages is the words of Jesus to the church in Revelation 2:23: “And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.”⁵ Thus, beyond the normative understanding that all Scripture is “inspired and profitable” for the church, the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 have direct implications for churches in all places at all times.

Sent from Jesus through John to the churches, the letters themselves are filled with historical data written in light of the local context of each church.⁶ The *Sitz im Leben* of each congregation is traceable to the local context of each congregation. Jesus through John speaks with “intimate pastoral knowledge of each congregation and was dealing with actual situations in each place.”⁷ Thus, “I know” becomes the words of Jesus to signify thorough knowledge of the congregations’ past and present.⁸ Jesus knows these local congregations and is intimately concerned for their welfare.

With the local context in mind, implications for methodology and ministry are profound when one considers that Jesus’ message to each congregation ends with the exhortation to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Thus, the churches of Asia Minor as a whole were to hear what Jesus said to each congregation, for to say it to one

⁴Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 119.

⁵Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture texts are taken from the English Standard Version.

⁶Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 20. Hemer notes that in order to “tabulate . . . a few principles governing the handling of the text . . . [such a work] involves making the broadest possible study of their ways of thought and cultural background. It is important to have a picture of the character and circumstances of the cities” (20).

⁷J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, Pelican Commentaries (London: SCM Press, 1979), 77.

⁸George Eldon Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1972), 36. Ladd notes, “The many allusions to local history, topography, and conditions in these churches lead to the inescapable conclusion that John was personally and intimately acquainted with them.”

was to say it to all as “all the churches of Asia Minor were to heed the promises and warnings given to each church and apply it to themselves.”⁹ The prophetic command of Jesus is for all congregations to hear and heed (Rev 2:2, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14).

Familiarity with the Literature

The literature on the seven churches is limited primarily to commentaries. As one would expect, the literature represents a wide confluence of interpretive views of the book. The great majority of the literature does not understand Jesus’ words to the seven churches as representing time periods in church history, but specially contoured messages to each congregation. One finds that much has been written on the local setting of each church. Thus, contextualized interpretation of each congregation is given great emphasis in the compendium of literature on the seven churches. Further, the great majority of commentators see Jesus’ message to the seven churches as being for all of them. With little exception, the literature sees Jesus’ message to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 as both personal in its message for each church in Asia Minor and universal in its scope of speaking to the church whenever and wherever she finds herself.

Osborne’s commentary on Revelation is undoubtedly one of the best exegetical commentaries available. His handling of the Greek text is superb and his interpretation is grounded in his understanding of the Greek. He competently considers the various schools of interpretation on Revelation while validating his own interpretation. Interestingly, Osborne’s understanding is reflective of the menagerie of the various schools of interpretation. While acknowledging the apocalyptic genre of Revelation and identifying himself as an idealist, he sees the message of Revelation 2-3 as being addressed directly to seven, distinct churches in seven cities of Asia Minor. In doing this, he shuns the premillennial-dispensational understanding of seeing the seven churches as

⁹Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 105.

being representative of seven ages of the church.¹⁰ Rather, he interprets the seven churches as being “form letters” which are addressed “both to individual churches and to all of Asia Minor.”¹¹ This volume is the new gold standard of commentaries on the book of Revelation.

Robert Mounce’s commentary is concise and understandable. His interaction with differing interpretations is very helpful. Understanding the apocalyptic genre, Mounce asserts that chapters two and three are “messages . . . special words . . . proclamations” which he believes “form a sequel to chapter one.”¹² Looking forward to the rest of Revelation, Mounce sees the seven churches as “a literary composition designed to impress upon the church universal the necessity of patient endurance in the period of impending persecution.”¹³

Beale’s volume is a must for any serious student wrestling with the exegetical content of the book. Beale, who teaches at Westminster Theological Seminary, is amillennial in his interpretation. Believing John’s purpose in Revelation is to reveal Jesus through symbols, he takes a symbolic approach utilizing the Old Testament to illumine such symbolism. He interacts with differing schools of interpretation, especially the dispensational variant of premillennialism. Interestingly, he places less weight on the historical background of the seven letters as he notes that “many proposals on the background that have been suggested as having interpretive significance for the letters are

¹⁰Osborne, *Revelation*, 105.

¹¹Ibid.,104.

¹²Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 65.

¹³Ibid.

intriguing but often hard to demonstrate as probable allusions.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, his commentary on the seven churches is very insightful.

Aune’s commentary on Revelation is the most exhaustive work on the book. Unfortunately, Aune holds to the theory that Revelation was derived from multiple sources undergoing at least two, if not three stages of composition. In his interpretation of the seven churches, he considers them to be a “corpus . . . intended for a specific congregation,” while at the same time “distributed to all the congregations.” He believes the letters to be “analogous to the publication of imperial edicts.”¹⁵

Beasley-Murray’s scholarly commentary seeks to convey the importance of the apocalyptic genre of the book. As a historic-premillennialist, he believes in a millennial reign that will begin after Christ’s return. He characterizes the seven churches as “biblical prophesy in their constant appeal for works which can stand the test of the Lord’s judgment” and which will “not disqualify the hearers from participation in the inheritance of the kingdom.”¹⁶ Also, he locates the message of the seven churches as having future implications “to all the churches.”¹⁷

Ladd’s commentary is scholarly, but not exegetical. Ladd sees himself as “blending both the preterist and the futurist methods.”¹⁸ This work holds more closely to a preterist interpretation as he approaches Revelation from an understanding that proper interpretation must understand the apocalyptic genre and its language. Ladd is a historic premillennialist (i.e., premillenarian), standing in the tradition of the early church fathers

¹⁴Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 228.

¹⁵Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 130.

¹⁶G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1981), 72.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 14.

Irenaeus and Polycarp. Concerning the seven churches, he interprets them as “special messages to the seven churches” while also believing them to be “intended for a wider audience.”¹⁹

In regard to homiletical commentaries, Hamilton’s volume is written with the understanding of the gospel as being central to Jesus’ message. In keeping with this thesis, he notes, “There is a sense in which by addressing these seven churches, John has representively addressed all churches.” Further, he sees the seven churches as forming a chiasm. In noting this chiastic structure, he insists that the interpreter must take into mind the “cumulative effect” of what Jesus says to the churches.²⁰

Another homiletical commentary is Craig Keener’s volume. He sees the churches as “prophetic letters” from Jesus beginning with the prophetic formula “Thus says.”²¹ He even goes as far as to declare the seven churches as oracles reminiscent of the Old Testament written with Jesus’ deity in mind. Practically, Keener has much to say about how these letters apply for the church today especially in light of their local context and how these churches “reflect the values of their culture.”²²

Colin Hemer’s volume is very useful in locating background information in regard to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. As the book is written with the belief that a “historical approach” with “reminiscences . . . applied to the particular needs of local churches”²³ Hemer’s work is superb and without equal in developing the historical setting of each of the seven churches as well as the local references in these churches. Most

¹⁹Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 36.

²⁰James Hamilton. *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 54-55.

²¹Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 105.

²²*Ibid.*, 109.

²³Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 1.

works of value on the book of Revelation cite Hemer in seeking to develop the historical settings of the seven churches.

Hemer's work was not fully original, as his task was first undertaken by the Scottish archaeologist and New Testament scholar William Ramsey. Though older than Hemer's work, Ramsey's classic *Letters to the Seven Churches* utilizes both archaeology and historical background information to unlock the historical settings of the seven churches. His analysis of the seven churches, as well as connections from the text to the historical setting, still make it a valuable resource but his understanding of the message of Jesus to the seven churches is restricted.²⁴ His scholarship in matters of geography and history have been used by both I. Howard Marshall and F. F. Bruce in their works on the book of Acts.

William Barclay's first volume of his two volumes on Revelation is helpful. In his usual way, Barclay takes historical information and shows its contemporary significance. Though the work is not heavily exegetical, it is "highly relevant" for understanding how the message of the seven churches applies today.²⁵

The slim exposition by John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Churches*, looks at each of the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 with incredible insight for the twenty-first century church.²⁶ In bridging the gap between the ancient text and modern world, Stott centers in on an exalted view of Jesus from Revelation one. All the while, he offers a faithful exposition regarding the Christocentric message to these congregations of the seven churches as well as to the congregations of today's church.

²⁴William M. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 40. Ramsey myopically argues that each message of Jesus to the seven churches was for that congregation alone in its current setting. Though he admits that this "singleness of vision" is not the same for each church, it is nonetheless present.

²⁵William Barclay, *The Revelation of St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vii.

²⁶John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003).

Void in the Literature

Amidst the various interpretive frameworks and challenges in interpreting apocalyptic literature that Revelation presents, lost are the practical implications from Jesus to the church. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that outside of the Gospel accounts, nowhere in the New Testament do we find such a lengthy address by Jesus. Furthermore, nowhere in the New Testament do we have such a lengthy message addressed directly to the church by Jesus. While most commentators agree that messages of Jesus for each of the seven churches is “to all the churches,” there is not much consensus on the practical implications of the message of Jesus to local congregations. Further, one cannot look at these practical implications without understanding the implications for preaching. This is especially true in light of Jesus’ will for the one preaching to each local congregation. Outside of Barclay and Stott, the literature devoted to the practical implications of Revelation 2-3 is limited. Thus, the gap in the literature is in regard to the practical implications of the seven churches for ministry and preaching in the local church context.

Thesis

The thesis is that when Revelation 2-3 is properly interpreted it can be contextualized into practical implications for the church. Thus, Jesus’ message to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 makes universal implications for the universal church. This thesis will purport that the message of Jesus to each church when properly interpreted and explained can then be contextualized into poignant implications for the life, teachings and ministry in the local church. Further, the messages of Jesus to the seven churches have profound implications for preaching to the New Testament church when understood as prophecy. Thus, my thesis is that the seven churches can be viewed as having significant contemporary relevance in revealing Jesus’ will for churches throughout time. The benefits of this thesis are its emphasis on identifying the practical implications for local congregations from the exegetical and structural content of the

biblical text. Further, this thesis shows the implications for preaching in light of Jesus' prophetic messages to the local congregations under the New Covenant.

Method

This thesis takes an exegetical approach to understanding the message of Jesus to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. Further, Jesus's breakdown of local congregations as given by John in Revelation 2-3 shows a common pattern for the structure and practice of the congregations. The consequences of such an interpretive work will result in implications from the seven churches which are applicable to the contemporary church. Further, the implications for preaching in local congregations will be examined in light of Jesus' messages to the preaching pastors of the seven churches.

Summary

In summary, this thesis (1) examines Jesus' understanding of the local church in its structure and practice in Revelation 2-3, (2) discerns practical implications which reflect the will of Jesus for a congregation, (3) and communicates selective implications for preaching derived from the prophecies to the seven churches.

CHAPTER 2
THE SEVEN CHURCHES AS LOCAL
CONGREGATIONS

Introduction

Most references to the church in the New Testament are specifically addressed not to the church universal but to local congregations. The seven congregations of Revelation 2-3 are addressed with special attention to their city's distinctive features which each congregation mirrors to various degrees.¹ According to Osborne, the local congregations were to some extent reflective of their *Sitz im Leben* as “each reader in the individual city is reminded of the extent to which they are part of this world, for their churches all too often resemble their cities.”² The original readers of Revelation would have picked up on the local “imagery and symbolism,” especially in regard to “specific local circumstances.”³ Yet, the “specific social, political, cultural and religious world of the first readers needs to be understood” and in doing so the images of Revelation will have “meaning . . . appropriated [for] today.”⁴ So each church in Revelation 2-3 is

¹Scobie classifies the local references into three types: “a) events in the past history of the cities; b) topographical features of the sites; and c) aspects of the contemporary life in the cities.” Charles H. H. Scobie, “Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 606.

²Osborne continues, “One of the amazing features of these letters is the extent to which each church is addressed through the history of the city in which it resides. It is hard to imagine more creative and rhetorically powerful letters than these This builds on the New Testament pattern of teaching in which believers are called to be citizens of heaven more than earth (Phil. 3:17-21), seeking heavenly more than earthly treasure (Matt. 6:19-20), and considering themselves to be ‘aliens and strangers’ on this earth (1 Pet. 1:1, 17; 2:11).” Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 109-10.

³Scobie, “Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches,” 606.

⁴Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19.

addressed within its local context with relevant direct and indirect references to the locale in which each congregation exists.⁵ With this in mind, the main purpose of this chapter is to show that in light of the variety of each church's context, the repeated pattern of the seven churches prioritizes for us what Jesus values in all churches in regard to both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. As such, the seven congregations are representative of all congregations as within "the broader purpose of the book the seven represent the church universal at all times."⁶ Further, this chapter's approach will show that when the message of Jesus to each church is properly interpreted and explained within the repeated structure of these messages, poignant implications for the life, teachings and ministry in the local church become apparent. Thus, the repeated pattern with its content is critical to rightly interpreting the message of churches for today's churches.⁷ As Baukham notes, "These are not as such letters but prophetic messages to each church. It is really the whole book of Revelation which is one circular letter to the seven churches."⁸ So the best way to interpret these seven messages is to compare and contrast the content in the seven messages through examining them in light of this repeated structure.

The Angel of the Church

In John's Apocalyptic, angels play a heavy role and must be understood as the messengers of heaven who do God's bidding. With the backing of divine authority, these messengers who delivered the Law to Moses now deliver the message of Jesus to the churches (Deut 33:2; Ps 68:17; Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2). Throughout Revelation,

⁵Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 109.

⁶R. L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7, An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 223.

⁷See Hemer's argument where he argues that the content of each letter rather than the literary structure should be the driving force for interpreting the seven churches. See G. W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), s.v. "Seven Churches," by C. J. Hemer.

⁸Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 2.

angels are beings who “were the angels in charge of each church but were also corporately identified with the churches. In one sense they were asked to intervene in the spiritual needs of the churches; in another sense they represented the churches.”⁹ These angels were messengers who heralded the message of Jesus to the congregation they were protecting as heavenly emissaries.¹⁰ The significance is that each local congregation has its own angel who is assigned to guard the congregation and who shares responsibility for their care and conduct.

The Locale of the Church

The tailored message of Jesus to each congregation “is addressed through the history of the city in which it resides.”¹¹ This is described by Hemer as “a measure of identification between the characters of church and city.”¹² Thus, the message of Jesus is contoured within the context of each church’s locale. Such a precedent emphasizes the local nature of each congregation.

Ephesus was the greatest of all the cities of Asia Minor as it was located on the Western edge of a convergence of paved roads from the north, south and east.¹³ This along with its seaport location made it a major hub for trade. Religiously, it typified the syncretism of the Greek culture with the exception being a special affinity for Artemis whose temple resided in Ephesus. It is believed by some that when Paul ministered for

⁹Osborne, *Revelation*, 99.

¹⁰The angel followed by the genitive τῆς ἐκκλησίας should be understood as objective (“angel to the church”).

¹¹Osborne, *Revelation*, 109.

¹²Hemer, “Seven Churches.” Hemer notes that “historical and local study is important both for interpreting the larger situational context of the letters and for appreciating the pointedness of their detailed imagery.”

¹³Aune notes that Ephesus was “the administrative center of the province.” David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 137.

three years in Ephesus, the church there became a hub for him to plant the other six congregations of Revelation 2-3 (Acts 19:1-40).

For Smyrna, the church lived as a threatened minority due to the Jewish population loyal to Rome. Civically, they saw themselves as “the first in Asia” amongst its choice cities. Their allegiance to Rome was unmatched as it was the first city to erect a temple to the goddess Roma while being the second city to receive the privilege of being a religious epicenter for the imperial cult.^{14 15}

Pergamum became the leading religious center of Asia as “temples, altars and shrines were dedicated to Zeus, . . . Dionysus, . . . and Asklepios” dotted the landscape.¹⁶ The Christians who refused to worship accordingly would have been accused of refusing to show “civic loyalty and patriotism.”¹⁷ As the capital of the province, Pergamum “became the centre of the imperial cult in the whole region.”¹⁸ Undoubtedly, it was the “most intense” of the seven cities as it had temples to both Augustus and Trajan.¹⁹ Such a locale, caused Jesus to note in 2:12, “I know where you dwell.”²⁰ Where they dwelt was “the center of Caesar worship for the for the province.”²¹ As such, observance of this worship became a test of loyalty to Rome, for the imperial cult was the keystone of imperial policy, and refusal to take part in the official cult was considered high

¹⁴Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 114.

¹⁵William Barclay, *The Revelation of St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 75.

¹⁶Osborne, *Revelation*, 139.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 84.

¹⁹Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 180.

²⁰Thomas calls it “settled residence.” Ibid., 181.

²¹Barclay, *The Revelation of St. John*, 90.

treason.”²² For the Christians in Pergamum, they are residents where Satan also is a resident.

Thyatira is perhaps the least significant of the seven cities of Asia Minor. Hence, it is the one we know the least about.²³ Its importance was found in its trade guilds and the specialty craftsmen who dominated the landscape. When there were meetings of these guilds, there would be “a common meal, . . . [which] frequently ended in sheer debauchery and licentiousness.”²⁴ The “social, political, economic, and religious life of the city” was dominated by these union guilds.²⁵

Sardis was once a shining light of life and vibrancy but by the time of the writing of Revelation was living in the past and dead. Further, the city though viewed as an “impregnable military stronghold” had fallen twice to military attacks due to lack of vigilance by the watchmen at the walls.²⁶ The imperative “watch” is commanded twice to the congregation and was obviously tied to the dying city’s past history (Rev 3:2).

Philadelphia is the city known as the gateway to the east due its location along a major trade route leading to Phrygia.²⁷ The city was devastated by an earthquake in AD 17 and continued to live in horror of the tremors. Most of the residents lived outside the city in makeshift huts as most feared living anywhere near the dilapidated and

²²George Eldon Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1972), 45.

²³Barclay notes, “We know less about Thyatira than about any of the other seven cities and are, therefore, seriously handicapped in trying to reconstruct the situation.” Barclay, *The Revelation of St. John*, 102.

²⁴Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 90.

²⁵Alan F. Johnson, *Revelation*, in vol. 12 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 443.

²⁶Osborne, *Revelation*, 171.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 184

increasingly fragile buildings inside the city.²⁸ Religiously, the superstition brought on by the phenomenon of repeated tremors made Philadelphia a hotspot for the religious syncretism that plagued most Greek cities.

Laodicea was located on two major trade routes leading into the eastern province of Phrygia. By the time of writing it was a major banking center due in large part to the trade of the black wool prized by the textile industry.²⁹ Also, it was famed for its school of medicine, which was known for compounding medicines to fight various diseases.³⁰ Religiously, the city embraced the syncretistic spirit of the age melding the Greek gods Zeus while embracing Men Karou with its Temple thirteen miles to the west.

The Lord of the Church

The high Christology at the beginning of each message shapes what Jesus will consequently say. The formula *Τάδε λέγει* reflects the Old Testament prophetic pattern of a divinely authoritative message. Beasley-Murray reflects that the formula is prophetic due to the “constant appeal to works which can stand the test of the Lord’s judgment and which will not disqualify the hearers from participation in the inheritance of the kingdom.”³¹ The prophetic formula at the beginning of each message emphasizes that “Christ assumes the role of Yahweh.”³² Also, by the time of John’s writing, *Τάδε λέγει* was used of Roman edicts issued to citizens from the Emperor.³³ Biblically, these

²⁸Barclay, *The Revelation of St. John*, 126.

²⁹Johnson notes, “That the city’s banking assets were noteworthy is evidenced by the fact that Cicero cashed huge bank drafts in Laodicea.” Johnson, *Revelation*, 456.

³⁰Osborne notes that Laodicea was known for curing eye diseases through a compounded drug known as Phrygian powder. Osborne, *Revelation*, 201.

³¹Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 72.

³²G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 229.

³³On Roman edicts issued by Augustus, see Aune, *Revelation I-5*, 126-29.

resemble oracles communicated to various people in the Old Testament (Isa 13-23; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32; Amos 1-2).³⁴ Clearly, these are prophetic messages from Jesus to each congregation with a specially contoured description of Jesus.³⁵ James Hamilton rightly notes, “each introductory statement Jesus makes also relates to some aspect of the message to that church.”³⁶ In keeping with the Apocalyptic’s purpose to reveal Jesus (Rev 1:1), these descriptors of Jesus are customized to fit his message for each congregation.

To Ephesus (as perhaps the epicenter church through which Paul planted the other six churches of Asia Minor), Jesus “possesses” the other churches (Rev 2:1).³⁷ Further, Jesus is seen as walking amidst the congregations indicating his intimate presence amongst his churches (Rev 2:1). So the churches are in the hand of Jesus while he also is intimately aware of his congregations.

To the church in Smyrna Jesus is “the first and the last” (ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος-Rev 2:8) meaning he is the one who is reigning as the Lord over the past and future timelines of history.³⁸ In a proud city known for calling itself the “first” in all Asia, Jesus is the sovereign first who providentially controls the times. Further, Jesus is the one who “died and came to life” who by enduring death found life (Rev 2:8). For the suffering saints in Smyrna, the resurrection life of Jesus was their hope.

³⁴Keener, *Revelation*, 105.

³⁵Johnson notes, “Each letter begins with an introductory declaration of the risen Christ, which uses imagery corresponding in almost every case to his attributes as seen in the Patmos vision of ch. 1 and presents Him in terms relevant to the needs of that church.” Johnson, *Revelation*, 424.

³⁶James M. Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 58.

³⁷Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 37.

³⁸This was used of the Lord in Isa 41:4; 44:6; 48:12.

The letter to the church in Pergamum, Jesus is the one “who has the sharp two-edged sword” (τὴν ῥομφαίαν τὴν δίστομον τὴν ὀξεῖαν-Rev 2:12). This Thracian broadsword became a symbol of Roman governance and justice as it was meted out by the Roman proconsul who lived in Pergamum. Such a symbol “tells the church that it is the exalted Christ, not Roman officials, who is the true judge.”³⁹ In the Apocalypse, the sword proceeds from the mouth of Jesus and is his judging word that cuts down his enemies (1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21).

To the church in Thyatira, Jesus is described with a title that is unique to the Apocalypse-“the Son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ-Rev 2:18)-but not unique to the exalted Jesus in the New Testament (Acts 13:33; Col 1:13; 1 Thess 1:9-10). This specially given description is pertinent to Thyatira due to the emphasis given to the son of Zeus, Apollo, in the city. So in contrast to the culture, Jesus is the rightly entitled Son of God. For a church that has compromised with the culture such a description reminded the readers of the authority of the one who is about to speak. The description of Jesus having “eyes like a raging fire” describes the powerful one who judges those with whom he is displeased (Dan 10:6; Rev 1:14-15).

The title for Jesus to the church in Sardis shows how Jesus “holds” the seven stars which is a reference to the fullness of the Holy Spirit in his power and presence (Rev 3:1; 1:4; 4:5; 5:6). For a church facing death, Sardis needed a fresh infusion of God the Holy Spirit from Jesus. Further, Jesus sovereignly controls the angels, the messengers, to the churches and so the message they give is his message.

To Philadelphia, Jesus is given the title of God himself-“the holy one, the faithful one” (Rev 2:7; see also 6:10). As holy, Jesus is set apart (Ps 16:10; Isa 6:3; Hab 3:3). In Revelation, the truth is coupled with faithfulness and righteousness (Rev 3:14; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2,11; 21:5). Contextually, Jesus is the one who is faithful because he is

³⁹Osborne, *Revelation*, 140.

holy and true. Further, Jesus is the one “holding the key of David” (Rev 2:7) symbolizing authority as the Messiah to give access to God.⁴⁰ In the *Sitz im Leben* of Philadelphia where the Christians were living under intense persecution from the Jews, access to God cannot be hindered by any person because when Jesus “opens” a door no one can “shut” it (2:7).

To the Laodicea church, Jesus is “the Amen” (Rev 3:14). This means he is the one who knows and speaks the authoritative truth from God. As God’s “Amen” as he is the assurance of all the promises of God as everything Jesus speaks is the truth.⁴¹ The second title-ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός- contrasts Jesus towards the lukewarm Laodiceans who are neither faithful in persevering in their witness nor faithful in communicating the testimony of Jesus. Further, magnifying the contrast, Jesus is “the ruler” exercising sovereign control over all. Clearly, a Christological theme in the early church, the hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 echoes a similar theme. The Laodicean wealth may have brought power and control yet the reality is that they possessed neither.

The Strengths of the Church

The phrase, “I know your works” reveals Jesus’ insight into the walk of each congregation.⁴² He sees the real truth of the spiritual condition of each congregation looking past their outward appearances. It is an absolute “clearness of mental vision.”⁴³ Works are the criterion of the authenticity of faith.”⁴⁴ Christians are the “workmanship . .

⁴⁰The “key of David” is taken from Isa 22:22 where the Lord instructs Eliakim become the chief of Hezekiah’s household. The phrase is used of access to the King. Jesus used this language of himself in Matthew 16:19 as he gave his apostles authority over his kingdom.

⁴¹Keener, *Revelation*, 158.

⁴²Οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου is also found in 2:9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15.

⁴³Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 133.

⁴⁴Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 73.

. created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph 2:10). Even the congregations with the most problems, Jesus always has something positive to say to set the atmosphere of what will follow.

In Ephesus, “toil” refers to a faithful labor, a work that will be rewarded by Jesus (Rev 2:26; 14:13). Doctrinally, they are unable to endure false teachers and false teaching. Further, Jesus praises them for their “patient endurance” in the midst of identifiable evil (Rev 2:3).⁴⁵ In the context of faith, it is a persevering trust in Jesus that permeates one’s walk through the darkness of evil. Barclay calls it “the courageous gallantry which accepts suffering and hardship and turns them into grace and glory.”⁴⁶ For the church in Ephesus, they had endured “because of” the name of Jesus which had brought hatred from their opponents (Rev 2:3; Matt 10:22; 22:49; Mark 13:13).

The church in Smyrna (against which Jesus cites no problems) is commended for their tribulation, poverty and slander (Rev 2:9). Contextually, these are persevering traits because the church has persevered through these persecutions. “Tribulation” (τὴν θλίψιν-Rev 2:9) is best understood as persecution or affliction. Jesus likened it to the tribulations of the last days (Matt 24:21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24). “Poverty” (τὴν πτωχείαν-2:9) is abject poverty suffered under the aforementioned persecution most likely from the heavy Jewish population in Smyrna. Such poverty is a strength because while poor they are “rich” (πλούσιος-2:9). Their spiritual wealth is probably due to their failure to give in to the persecution of their pagan neighbors. Thus, they are rich and will be rewarded in the life to come (Mark 10:29-30). Further, the Christians in Smyrna endured “slander” (Rev 2:9). Here Jesus implies that this is the slandering of God’s people which is a form of blaspheming God himself.

⁴⁵It is used 4 times in reference to the seven churches (2:2, 3, 19; 3:10); ὑπομονήν is used throughout Revelation (1:9; 13:10; 14:12).

⁴⁶Barclay, *The Revelation of St. John*, 62.

Pergamum lives “where Satan’s throne is” (Rev 2:13). The epicenter of Satan’s throne was due to the Roman imperial cult with its uncompromising demand for religious allegiance to Caesar and the empire.⁴⁷ Clearly, this Roman opposition is demonstrated throughout Revelation. In spite of the pressures of its locale, Jesus commends the Christians who continued to “hold fast my name” (κρατεῖς τὸ ὄνομά μου-2:13). In the midst of Roman intimidation, they publically called themselves Christians.

Thyatira has four works that characterize her strengths. “Love” (ἀγάπη-2:19b) is both vertical (love for God) and horizontal (love for man). “Faith” (πίστιν-2:19c) is a persevering faith that overcomes the world. “Service” (διακονίαν-2:19d) refers to an active life of service on the behalf of others.⁴⁸ “Endurance” (ὑπομονήν-2:19e) is a victorious overcoming victory in the midst of pushback from the world.

Sadly, Sardis possesses no strengths. “I know your works” is the normal introductory formula but with Sardis Jesus uses it as a jumping point to expose their weaknesses. The only strength is that a remnant referred to as a “few names” (Rev 3:4) have remained faithful. Those who have not “soiled their garments” (Rev 3:4), are those who have not defiled their garments either to immorality (Rev 14:4) or to idolatry (1 Cor 8:7).

Philadelphia is strengthened by Jesus exhortation that he has given them an “open door” (θύραν ἠνεωγμένην-Rev 3:8) of ministry effectiveness in gospel witness.⁴⁹ So the Philadelphian Christians were privy to an open door that Jesus promised “no one

⁴⁷Osborne notes, “It was emperor worship that most directly occasioned the persecutions under Domitian and Trajan, and Pergamum was the center of the imperial cult for all the province of Asia.” Osborne, *Revelation*, 141.

⁴⁸Thomas notes that service was oftentimes used of “voluntary service in supplying food to the needy.” Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 212.

⁴⁹The apostle Paul used this language to describe the Lord supernaturally opening a door of effective ministry where the opportunity was previously not ideal for gospel witness (Acts 14:27; 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:3).

will shut” (Rev 3:7). Lacking worldly stature and power, Jesus knows they have “little power” (Rev 3:8) but commends their internal and external witness. Internally, the Philadelphian congregation had “kept” his “word” (Rev 3:10) by faithfully guarding the truth. Externally, their witness meant they were faithful to the controversial name of Jesus (Rev 3:8).⁵⁰

Jesus’ opening salvo at Laodicea is addressed with blatant irony showing that there is nothing to praise as they are “neither cold nor hot” (Rev 3:15). The location of Laodicea outside of a natural water supply meant that its water was pumped in from the hot springs of Denizli. The water arrived lukewarm and laden with calcium carbonate which made the water harsh to drink. Just to the east, Colosse was known for its cold drinking water thought to be the best in the region. Just to the north was Hierapolis known for its breathtaking cliff with hot springs visible from Laodicea. So Laodicea’s spiritual life produced works that were at best “lukewarm” (Rev 3:16). Such a spiritual state made Jesus sick as he promises, “I will spew you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:16).

The Problems of the Church

“But” sets the contrasting tone for Jesus to introduce the problems in each congregation. John Stott sees these problems as fitting into three categories: “physical through a persecuting emperor and his deputies . . . intellectual, through false cults, and moral, through sub-Christian ethical standards.”⁵¹ As such, persecution, doctrine and holiness are central to the problems of the church.

The most prominent weakness is Jesus’ opposition to Ephesus’ abandonment of “the love” they had at “first” (Rev 2:4). The affectionate fervor for Jesus that

⁵⁰Luke 2:9-10.

⁵¹Stott goes on to compare these three categories “as the dragon’s three allies: the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth (or the false prophet) and the harlot.” John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 10.

accompanied conversion had grown cold.⁵² Degenerating into a cold orthodoxy, spiritually the Ephesians loved truth more than God. Such religious orthodoxy meant the love was still present but was not like the intensity of the first love they had for Jesus. It means that “what they had possessed as a body when founded was now missing.”⁵³

Pergamum unlike Ephesus embraced the heresy of “the teaching of Balaam” (Rev 2:14). In the Old Testament passages, Balaam instructed Balak to tempt the Jews into sexual fornication to distance them from God. Whatever the teachings, the language of apostasy is used-“to cast a snare” (βαλεῖν σκάνδαλον-Rev 2:14).⁵⁴ In embracing the teachings of Balaam, they embraced heteropraxy due to embracing heterodoxy. The strength of the Roman ties and the imperial cult did much to make inroads into the church. Toleration along the lines of accommodation meant these Christians believed they could embrace idolatry while continuing to worship Jesus as Lord. Such syncretism draws the direct ire of Jesus who saw their participation as outright apostasy.⁵⁵ Further, as with the paganism of the ancient world, there was “sexual immorality” (Rev 2:14) which in John’s Revelation in both literal (Rev 9:21; 21:8; 22:15) and metaphorical (Rev 14:8; 17:2; 18:9).⁵⁶

The congregation in Thyatira was “tolerating” the false prophetess “Jezebel” whose prophetic oracles from God were “misleading” the Lord’s servants (Rev 2:20). In Revelation, this deceptive misleading is characteristic of the false prophet in 13:14 and 19:20 and also Satan in 12:9 and 20:3, 10. Thus, they were embracing Babylon. With the

⁵²Jesus warned in Matt 24:12 that “the love of many will grow cold.”

⁵³Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 141.

⁵⁴See also Rom 9:33 and 1 Cor 1:23.

⁵⁵Johnson, *Revelation*, 441.

⁵⁶The mention of this immorality, which went along with idolatry and the emphasis on practice should cause the interpreter to lean toward a literal interpretation.

trade guilds dominating the commercial life and livelihood of its citizens, the Christians were under intense pressure to worship the patron gods and to participate in the feasts where the revelry easily turned into sexual immorality (πορνείαι-2:21). Thus, the Christians faced social and economic pressure to give in and to compromise.⁵⁷

Unlike the previous introductory formula, Jesus does not use the phrase—“this I have against you.” Rather, Jesus charges that Sardis has a “reputation of being alive” but this is deceptive because the church is actually “dead” (Rev 3:1).⁵⁸ The insinuation is that the church is unaware of the absence of the Spirit when they worship. Stott believes that “beneath the pious exterior of that respectable congregation was secret uncleanness.”⁵⁹ Hamilton postulates that this is linked to the church not confessing Jesus due to the influence and threat of the local synagogue in Sardis.⁶⁰

The problem in Laodicea was the spiritual complacency that blinded the congregation to their true spiritual condition. The problem originated in a smugness of wealth as the Laodiceans are pictured as saying—“We are wealthy” (Rev 3:17). Such material wealth deceived them into thinking it was the result of spiritual wealth as they insisted: “We have grown rich and have need of nothing” (Rev 3:17).⁶¹ The city’s reputation of refusing Roman help and rebuilding itself after a devastating earthquake

⁵⁷Aune elaborates, “It is possible that Jezebel was a patroness or hostess of one of the house churches that made up the Christian community at Thyatira, who found herself in conflict with other Christian patrons, probably over an attempt to accommodate Christian practices to the surrounding culture by justifying the eating of meat sacrificed offered to idols.” Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 203.

⁵⁸Interestingly, “alive” is given in its verb form (ζῆς) while “dead” is given in its noun form (νεκρός). This further shows a contrast between the perceived life and the actual reality of inactive death.

⁵⁹Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 79.

⁶⁰Hamilton notes, “But perhaps the promise Jesus makes about acknowledging those who conquer before the Father (3:5) points to the church in Sardis being tempted to avoid confessing Jesus so that they would not be distinguished from Judaism.” Hamilton, *Revelation*, 106.

⁶¹Jesus warned of this spiritual smugness as he insisted that it was with great difficulty that a rich man would enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:24; Mark 10:25; 18:25).

carried over into the church who needed no divine aid. The devastating verdict was the church was spiritually defunct. “Wretched” means they were unhappy and miserable though they undoubtedly sought to convey the opposite (Rev 3:17d). Rather than being envied, they were “pitiful” (Rev 3:17e). They are like those whom Paul described as possessing no resurrection hope (1 Cor. 15:19). Then with the locale of Laodicea at the forefront, Jesus warns that spiritually they are “impoverished” (πτωχός-3:17f). Though the city was known for its famed wool used in the finest of clothing, spiritually they were “naked” (τοφλός-Rev 3:17g), i.e., exposed and ready for judgment.⁶² Lastly, they are spiritually “blind” as they are unable to perceive spiritual truth (Rev 3:17h).⁶³ Beasley-Murray sums their condition by noting, “To have enough religion to disguise one’s need of a living faith is to be in a worse condition than having no faith at all.”⁶⁴

The Answers for the Church

When problems are cited in five of the seven churches, Jesus issues a series of clear imperatives. This commanding, imperative mood strikes with key words. “Repent” Μετανοέω is the solution mentioned for all five churches that Jesus finds lacking. Repentance always involves an intellectual, emotional and volitional transformation in the person repenting. Scripturally, repentance is always accompanied by a saving faith (Acts 20:21), but John’s Revelation goes further and defines it as an ongoing discipline in the Christian life well after one’s initial conversion. Further, repentance always brings radical change in the form of spiritual fruit (Luke 3:8). As an aorist imperative, it is the response demanded by remembering the past times of spiritual obedience and blessing

⁶²Nakedness was used to mean being exposed before God and awaiting divine judgment in both the Old and New Testaments (see Isa 20:1-4; Ezek 16:36; Heb 4:12-13).

⁶³Spiritual blindness was used by both Jesus (John 9:39) and the apostle Paul (2 Cor 4:4) to emphasize a person being unregenerate.

⁶⁴Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 105.

with the hope of recapturing the same in the present (Isa 44:21; 46:8-9; Mic 6:5; Gal 1:6-9; 1 Thess 4:1-4; 2 Pet 3:1-2). But in the context, it had a more immediate effect of remembering within the context of ones own spiritual journey.⁶⁵ Thus, “repentance” is an echo of the Old Testament command to recall earlier experiences and practices.⁶⁶

The Ephesian church’s repentance would be shown by turning back to the original love they had at first (Rev 2:5). Beasley-Murray notes, “They must go back to the cross and the empty tomb of Christ where love was kindled at first [and] at his feet renounce their self-righteousness and there let love be kindled again.”⁶⁷ Their first flush of love at conversion was needed again.

In Thyatira, the Christians were to repent by turning from the sins of idolatry, idolatrous practices (especially the idolatrous feasts) and sexual immorality. Such an imperative shows that “the church’s integrity is endangered by the presence of people who advocate such views and practices. Indeed, the toleration of sub-Christian morals within its fellowship implies a culpable indifference of the church to the very things which distinguish it from paganism”⁶⁸ Interestingly, a past gift of opportunity to repent had come and gone implying that Jezebel had already been warned to repent. Yet sadly, she was “not willing”—ὀὐ θέλει—with the present tense indicating that there were ongoing attempts to persuade her to repent (Rev 2:21).

The solution for Sardis is contained in five imperatives. The first command from Jesus is “be watchful” (Rev 3:9a). Eschatologically, is used of spiritual alertness and the need to wake up (Matt 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35-37; Luke 12:36-38). The second

⁶⁵Thomas notes, “The basis for renewal is to bear constantly in mind the manner in which they had received and heard the gospel.” Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 251.

⁶⁶In the Old Testament, see Isa 44:21 and 46:8-9. See Paul in Gal 1:6-9 and 3:2-3 as well as 1 Thess 1:5-10, 2:13-14, and 4:1-2.

⁶⁷Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 77.

⁶⁸Ibid., 87.

command is “strengthen what remains” (Rev 3:9b). The few things that were true to Jesus needed supporting as they were about to die (Rev 3:9c). When their works were tested, they were not qualitatively “complete” (Rev 3:2) in God’s sight. The third command is to continue “remembering” (Rev 3:3a) the spiritual truths they had received and heard that was passed down through the apostolic tradition. The fourth command is to continue guarding (τήρει-3:3d) it carefully with aim of preserving it for the future. The fifth command is to repent (Rev 3:3e) which encompasses faithfulness to the other four commands.

In Laodicea, “the church, like the city itself, had grown fat and complacent, satisfied with its wealth, but quite devoid of any spiritual depth.”⁶⁹ The solutions are directly applied to the problems already noted. For the Laodicean poverty, Jesus counsels them to buy from Jesus “gold refined by fire” (Rev 3:18).⁷⁰ Purchasing such gold from Jesus would give them true wealth but such gold could not be bought or bartered but is on the basis of faith alone. For their nakedness, Jesus counsels them to clothe themselves in white garments used in Revelation of the white clothing of the righteous (3:4,5; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14). Further, for the blindness Jesus instructs the Laodicean Christians to “anoint your eyes with salve that you may see” (Rev 3:18). The solutions are Gospel-oriented solutions of trusting Jesus to give spiritual wealth, righteousness and sight.

The Warning to the Church

For Ephesus, failure to repent is couched in threats of conditional statements of warnings. “If not” then Jesus threatens his coming in an imminent, disciplining judgment reflective of the parousia (Rev 2:5).⁷¹ Further, Jesus threatens to remove their

⁶⁹Osborne, *Revelation*, 202.

⁷⁰“From me” (παρ' ἐμοῦ) is emphatic contrasting the fact that the Laodiceans were a consumerist people but they were buying from the wrong merchant.

⁷¹Rev 1:4, 7-8; 3:10-11.

lampstand (Rev 2:5). Osborne points out that “the seriousness of the language and the strong sense of warning throughout the book (for instance, in the overcoming passages)” thus suggesting a “subsequent loss of their status as a church”⁷²

For Pergamum, Jesus is coming quickly but with the added *ταχύ*, meaning his coming will be very soon in a present judgment.⁷³ The consequent war incited by Jesus is reminiscent of other instances in John’s Apocalypse like God’s war against evil (Rev 19:11), as well as Satan’s war against the Lamb (Rev 16:14; 17:14; 19:19) and against his saints (12:17; 13:7). Jesus will come to the church but the heat of the battle will be against the idolaters. The battle will be one-sided, as the words out of the mouth of the one whose name is the Word of God (Rev 2:16). As such, he will obliterate his enemies (1:16, 21; 19:13).

For Thyatira, Jesus breaks into a prophetic warning that assures an oncoming judgment due to their failure to repent (Rev 2:21). Having committed adultery with the gods of the guilds, she will be cast onto a different “bed,” one “of sickness” under divine judgment (1 Cor 5:5; 11:27-29; 1 Tim 1:20). The adulterers swept up in this practice still have time to repent but if they fail to they will know “great tribulation” (Rev 2:22). This great tribulation is a terrible affliction that is imminent. Yet, the “children” of Jezebel who have imbibed her teaching to the point of recalcitrance without hope of repenting, Jesus promises-“I will kill” (Rev 2:23).

Even in judgment, there is a lesson as the church will know that Jesus is the one who “searches the mind and heart” (Rev 2:23). He promises to make an example of Thyatira for all the churches as everyone will know that he searches the “hearts and minds” of his people. This is a divine examination delving into people’s motivations and

⁷²Osborne, *Revelation*, 118.

⁷³Aune rightly distinguishes between the coming of Jesus at the Parousia (Rev 22:7, 12, 20) while 2:16; 3:11 refer to an early arrival in judgment prior to the final judgment. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 188.

thoughts (Jer. 17:10). Moreover, this is *lex talionis* as Jesus will give in judgment one's deserved outcome (Ps 62:12; Mt 16:27; 1 Cor 3:13; Eph 6:8; Col 3:25; Rev 22:12).

For Laodicea, the warning is couched in terms of love as Jesus reminds—"As many as I love, I reprove and discipline: be zealous and repent" (Rev 3:19). Jesus' love leads him to both "reprove" (Rev 3:19b) and "discipline" (Rev 3:19c). The idea is correcting the problem with the goal being to restore someone.⁷⁴ The congregation's response is to move from lukewarmness and be zealous in doing what Jesus has told them. Such zeal would indicate repentance. All the while, Jesus' invitation is for fellowship as Jesus is pictured as being outside the church.⁷⁵ The invitation is to all who hear and open the door. The promise is that Jesus will enter and give intimate fellowship to his own church by inaugurating a relationship with them.⁷⁶

The Persecution of the Church

The most direct persecution was experienced by the Christians in Smyrna who were facing the synagogue of Satan. In 2:10, Jesus warns of an imminent threat—"you are about to suffer." What they await is prison, as "the adversary and the threat of death loomed (Rev 2:10). All of this is happening with the aim of a future testing (Rev 2:10).⁷⁷ Satan seeks to destroy their faith while the risen one will vindicate it. Reflective of Daniel 1:12-14, the tribulation will be for ten days, meaning it was limited and doable for these Christians. This most often repeated command of Jesus—"do not fear" (Rev 2:10)- builds

⁷⁴See Prov 3:11-12 and Heb 12:5-6 for love being the driving motivation for such reproof and discipline.

⁷⁵Perhaps no verse in the New Testament is more misinterpreted than Rev 3:20. This is not a direct evangelistic appeal to those outside of Jesus, but rather a direct appeal to the church to enter into fellowship with Jesus.

⁷⁶In Revelation, the future marriage supper of the Lamb is being reinforced (Rev 19:6-9).

⁷⁷Prison in the ancient world was not punitive but rather a holding place prior to trial or execution or as Aune points out that prison was used as "a means of coercion to compel obedience." Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 166.

upon the greater corpus of the entire redemptive narrative of the Lord's people in the face of persecution. Further, they are to "be faithful unto death" (Rev 2:10) showing faithful endurance remembering that "God will bring victory out of seeming defeat" (Rev 2:10).⁷⁸ Such faithfulness is characteristic of both Jesus (1:5; 3:14; 19:11) and his followers in Revelation (2:19; 14:12; 17:14). Further, such faithfulness secures "the crown of life" (τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς-Rev 2:10). This crown was given to the victor in military and athletic events but this crown will be the reward of eternal life after death (1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; 1 Pet 5:4).

In Thyatira, the persecuted minority who refused the false teaching Jesus would not lay another "burden" on them but charges them in an aorist imperative to "hold fast" (Rev 2:25). As such, there must be a continuing perseverance in the truth from Jesus-"until I come" (Rev 2:25). The coming of Jesus weighs heavily in their persevering.

For Sardis, spiritual vigilance was necessary for Jesus threatened to come upon them as a "thief" (Rev 3:3).⁷⁹ Such imagery was used both by John in Revelation 16:15, Jesus in Matthew 24:43 and Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4 of the need for spiritual diligence while guarding against spiritual indifference. Caught unaware, Jesus will suddenly come in judgment to Sardis to remove their lampstand. This sudden coming will precede the parousia.

For Philadelphia, they were faced with Jewish persecution from "the synagogue of Satan" doing the works of their Father the Devil (John 8:44; 2 Cor 11:13-15). They lied about being true Jews because true Jews were those who embraced Jesus as the Christ (Rom 2:28-29). These Jews would be made to "come and bow down" before

⁷⁸Osborne, *Revelation*, 134.

⁷⁹The imminence of judgment is felt in Jesus coming upon (ἦξω ἐπὶ σέ) rather than coming to (πρός).

the feet of the Philadelphian Christians (Rev 3:9). Originating from Isaiah 60:14, this prophecy was originally used of the nations bowing before the Jews. Now this prophecy applies to the Jews bowing before the Gentile Christians of Philadelphia.⁸⁰ Such vindication of the church by Jesus is reminiscent of the Apocalypse (6:9-11; 18:20; 19:2). Further, such vindication will show the Jews who rejected their own Messiah that Jesus loves them (John 13:1; Gal 2:20).

Because of the Philadelphia church's patient endurance in keeping Jesus teachings, he promises to protectively keep them from the hour of trials (Rev 2:10). Dispensationalists use this verse to argue for a rapture of the church out of a literal tribulation. The key is the contextual understanding of "the whole world" (Rev 2:10). In Revelation, what awaits the whole world of unbelievers is the judgment of God (Rev 12:9; 16:14) that is "about to" occur.⁸¹ So the promise of Jesus amidst imminent judgment for the wicked, is that the church will not be swept up into that judgment.

The Conquerors of the Church

Repeatedly, there is the encouragement in the phrase τῷ νικῶντι. This metaphor for victory either on the battlefield or the athletic arena is used 21 times by John and it is used in Revelation alone 15 times. In the greater context of the Apocalypse, the Lamb is the ultimate overcomer who conquered his enemies at the cross (5:5-6; 17:14). As Osborne notes, "In a sense, 'overcoming' is a result of the process of endurance (2:7,11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21)."⁸² The overcomers will receive "all the promises

⁸⁰Some commentators wrongly believe this applies to the Jews turning in worship to join the Gentiles in the worship of the Messiah. This false interpretation fails to take into account that the Jews are bowing at the feet of the Philadelphian Christians, not Jesus' feet.

⁸¹Such imminence in Revelation "refers to the final events preceding the parousia." Osborne, *Revelation*, 193.

⁸²Osborne, *Revelation*, 114.

... described in the final vision of the book.”⁸³ Such overcoming is a persevering in faith as John reveals in 1 John 5:4-5.⁸⁴ This victory is achieved by “being victorious within the specific situations of their own churches.”⁸⁵ Thus, conquering occurs on the local church level by persevering in faith.

One of the dominant imageries in the Apocalypse is faith leading to life. For Ephesus, to the one who overcomes the tree of life will be available as it is in “the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7; 22:7; 22:2). The paradise lost in Eden would be restored by Jesus with access again available to the tree of life to eat its fruit that represents eternal life (Gen. 3:22; 22:1-4).

In Smyrna, many if not most of the believers were hearing what the Spirit is saying. Though the overcomers would experience death, they would not experience the “second death” (Rev 2:11). Revelation 20:6, 14 and 21:8 show this second death to be the eternal death suffered by all who do not “overcome” (who do not believe).

In Pergamum, for those who have an ear to hear the first reward will be the spiritual food of heaven which represents eternal life in John’s Gospel (Rev 2:17; John 6:35, 48). Further, they will be given a white stone with “a new name written on the stone which no one knows except the one who receives it” (Rev 2:17). Such a stone shows a favorable vote of approval from the Lord himself as white stones were cast in Roman elections. Such a cryptic new name symbolizes the reward of being renamed by the Lord himself in keeping with Isaiah 62:2.⁸⁶

⁸³Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 272.

⁸⁴Osborne notes, “Overcoming in Revelation is analogous to πιστεύω in Paul.” Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.

⁸⁵Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 14.

⁸⁶Keener notes, “In Israel’s own history, a change of name was often associated with a promise (Keener, *Revelation*, 127).

The promise in Thyatira is for those who guard the works of Jesus as opposed to the works of Jezebel. To guard the works of Jesus is used of obeying the words of Jesus in John's writings (John 8:51-55; 14:23-24; 15:20; 17:6; 1 John 2:5).⁸⁷ The first promise is to give "authority" over the nations in the Messiah's kingdom (Rev 2:27; Ps 2:8-9; 149:5-9; Isa 60:14; Dan 7:14-18; Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; 2 Tim 2:12). In the immediate context of Revelation, the conquerors will share in Jesus victory over the nations (Rev 1:6; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4-6). In violent imagery, the saints will "shepherd them with a rod of iron" (ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ-2:27).⁸⁸ From Psalm 2:9, this rule is one of utter destruction in judgment as Jesus with this rod of iron will shatter the nations (Rev 12:5; 19:15). The devastation in this final war will obliterate the nations (Rev 19:11-21). Further, the church will share in the morning star-Jesus himself (Num 24:17; Rev 22:16).⁸⁹

In Sardis, those who have not defiled their garments, they will "walk with [Jesus] in white" (Rev 3:5). This imagery in the early church was reminiscent to the baptismal garments that were white, symbolizing spiritual life.⁹⁰ In a city know for bitter defeat, the few faithful in Sardis would wear white robes reminiscent of the robes worn by the Romans during festive events celebrating military victories. As conquerors, disciples were those who were walking in white and these would walk with Jesus reminiscent of victory processions (John 12:35; Col 1:10; Eph 4:1; Rev 14:14; 19:11). Further, Jesus promises that their names will not be removed from the book of life (Rev

⁸⁷Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 209.

⁸⁸The shepherding imagery overarches the passage even with the rod of iron (ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ.) that is used for killing an animal that threatens one's flock.

⁸⁹While the Roman legions carried the symbol of Venus into war as a sign of power and sovereignty, Jesus and his followers will share in the true power and sovereignty of God.

⁹⁰Barclay notes, "It was common at baptism to clothe a man, after he had emerged from the water, in clean white robes, symbolic of the cleansing of his life." Barclay, *The Revelation of St. John*, 121.

3:5). Such a book was one of security for the righteous (Ps 69:28; Luke 18:20; Phil 4:3; Heb 12:23).⁹¹ In Revelation, it is the chosen conquerors whose names were written in it before the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8; 17:8; 21:27). Sealing further future security, Jesus promises to confess the names of the conquerors to his father (Matt 10:32; Luke 12:8).

To Philadelphia, Jesus stresses that he is coming quickly but unlike previous usages, this coming is one of blessing and reward. So the Philadelphian church must “hold fast” in light of Jesus’ imminent coming. Failure was not an option as Jesus warns them to hold fast so “no one may seize your crown” (Rev 3:11). The one who gives the crown is Jesus and he is the one who can take away their crown as well (2:10). So if they continue to persevere they will be given a secure place in God’s intimate presence where conquerors “will constitute a part of” the Temple.⁹² This is ultimate eschatological salvation. In a place with the memory of the great earthquake of AD 17 dislodging them from the city and into the surrounding countryside, Jesus promises they would never again be displaced (Rev 3:12). Further, though they were treated as “nobodies” in Philadelphia, they would be given a new name in Jerusalem, “the city of my God.”⁹³

For the one in Laodicea who conquerors, they are promised a seat on Jesus throne, emphatically showing that all who persevere will reign with him. Jesus teaching reiterates this theme while Revelation gives further backing.⁹⁴ Further, the reign of the conquering saints will reflect his reign-“as I also conquered and sat down with my Father

⁹¹Beasley-Murray points out that “the idea of a book of life is an ancient one, and is derived from the custom of keeping a register of citizens.” Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 98.

⁹²Keener, *Revelation*, 151.

⁹³This theme of the new name was rooted in Isa 62:2 where the Lord promises to designate a new name for his people.

⁹⁴Matt 19:28; Luke 22:29-30; Rev 2:26-27; 20:4.

on his throne” (ὡς κἀγὼ ἐνίκησα καὶ ἐκάθισα μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ αὐτοῦ-3:21).

The Call to the Church

The phrase “he who has an ear” (ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω) is a prophetic warning for the reader to hear and listen to the exhortations of Jesus. Used in the Gospels by Jesus, the phrase on the surface refers to the spiritual hearing of the one listening.⁹⁵ Obviously, the call “to hear” is “to obey.” In Revelation 2-3, it has a “dual function of signifying that symbolic revelation will be received by the elect but rejected by unbelievers.”⁹⁶ If one interprets this statement in light of Mark 4:9-12 and Isaiah 6:9-10 one cannot help but see the sovereignty of God to enlighten some while blinding others. Further, one cannot miss that the hearing formula is found mostly in the synoptic gospels and used only once in an eschatological discourse (Matt 11:15).

With the seven churches, the Spirit is speaking inspired Scripture that ultimately locks in its applicableness for all congregations. The one speaking is Jesus through his Holy Spirit “who bears testimony to Jesus” (Rev 19:10). Yet even with the congregations that do everything right (see Philadelphia) this call is still given knowing that future faithfulness is instilled by God’s Spirit. Aune rightly notes, “Placed at the conclusion of each of the seven proclamations, this formula functions as a proclamation formula, i.e., as an injunction to an audience to pay very close attention to the message that it accompanies.”⁹⁷ But, one can also see Enroth’s point that the hearing formula is “a

⁹⁵Osborne, *Revelation*, 121.

⁹⁶Beale continues, “The exhortation assumes a mixed audience, of which only a part will respond positively.” Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 234.

⁹⁷Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 123.

strong call and encouragement” in light of “God’s decision and dispensation” of suffering which “God has granted.”⁹⁸

The fact that these letters were sent to all the church throughout Asia Minor shows that the Spirit is speaking to all the churches. So as Beasley-Murray points out, it is highly improbable that these letters were sent in “isolation.”⁹⁹ Rather, they were written and sent as a unit for the greater whole of all churches then and now.¹⁰⁰ The applicability of the seven churches in this call means “the message to a single congregation is broadened in application to all the churches of Asia, and so the church throughout the world”¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The seven churches reveal Jesus as the Lord of the church intimately aware of the local contexts of each congregation both internally and externally. Aune rightly notes, “the implicit function of these proclamations, however, is to demonstrate that the risen Christ, speaking through the prophet John in the Spirit, knows precisely the situation of each and every one of the seven communities.”¹⁰² In other words, the seven churches exist to reveal Jesus to his church.

Perhaps most disturbing is the perceived outward appearance and the contrasted reality of where each congregation really stands. Where there is a wrong within a congregation, it is Jesus himself who is affronted. Johnson writes, “in the letters all

⁹⁸Anne-Marit Enroth, “The Hearing Formula in the Book of Revelation,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 606.

⁹⁹Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 71.

¹⁰⁰Beasley-Murray notes, “The generalization that concludes each one the message is driven home to all the churches.” *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰²D. E. Aune, “The Form and Function of the Proclamation to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3),” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 203-4.

derelictions are viewed as forms of inner betrayals of a prior relation to Christ.”¹⁰³ So Jesus is insulted by the church’s failure to live in light of his glory. With this said, the *Sitz im Leben* is critical to rightly interpreting and applying the practical implications for the church today. Namely, Jesus is intimately aware of each congregation within the city in which they live and cares greatly for the structure and practice of his churches.

¹⁰³Johnson, *Revelation*, 432.

CHAPTER 3
IMPLICATIONS FROM THE SEVEN CHURCHES
FOR CHURCHES

Introduction

Jesus' commands to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 contain implications for today's church. The message of Jesus to the seven churches was "to all the churches" in all times (Rev 2:23). This means "all the churches of Asia Minor were to heed the promises and warnings given to each church and apply it to themselves."¹ If the seven churches are understood as having universal applicability in their own times due to the Spirit speaking to all the churches, then clearly there are implications for congregations today.² Beale rightly surmises that "although each letter is addressed to the particular situation of a particular church, it is relevant for the needs of all 'seven' of the churches, and consequently for the universal church."³ Even as the Spirit spoke to these seven distinct congregations, each letter ended with the admonition to "hear what the Spirit says *to the churches*." The body of the letters can be categorized as focusing on three critical areas. First, Jesus' assessment of the life of the church both internally to one another and externally to the world is detailed. Second, Jesus' instructions regarding the teachings of the church in regard to both sound doctrine and heretical doctrine is examined. Lastly, the present ministry of Jesus in disciplining his church in the present via church discipline and his future ministry of reward is interpreted.

¹Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 105.

²The Muratorian Canon agrees, noting, "John also in the Revelation writes indeed to seven churches yet speaks to all." James M. Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 54.

³G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 226.

The Internal Life of the Church

In the church, living out the gospel internally is a must for gospel witness externally. So each message addresses the internal life of how believers are relating to one another in light of the gospel. Oftentimes, this is where local congregations have a disconnect. Without an internal witness, the external witness of the church is viewed as hypocritical and loses its power in the local context within which the church lives.

Internally, Ephesus struggled with a vertical love for Christ that then led to a struggle in their horizontal love for one another (Rev 2:4-5). Their failure to obey the first great commandment inevitably led to their failure to obey the second great commandment (Matt 22:36-38). This internal witness is especially troubling to the external witness of the church as Jesus reminded his disciples that love is the distinctive mark of the Christian (John 13:35). As Osborne points out, “A church that has forgotten to love is a church that has ceased to be a church.”⁴ The work of the church in living as disciples through loving one another became dutiful drudgery with the greater delight being doctrinal expediency. Congregations who fail to love one another in light of the love of Jesus become a gathering of the “frozen chosen.” Internally, the Ephesian church needed to remember their previous love for Jesus experienced at conversion (Rev 2:5a). So if a church has become cold and sterile in their approach to Jesus and one another, they need to go back to the love of Jesus demonstrated in the gospel.⁵ Such love is the by-product of a gospel focus on the self-sacrificial love of Jesus and his cross.

The church in Pergamum was characterized by a steadfast perseverance (Rev 2:13). This perseverance was even more impressive as they remained true to the name of Jesus and did not deny their faith (Rev 2:13). Considering the strength of emperor

⁴Osborne, *Revelation*, 125.

⁵Hamilton applies this by noting, “When we meditate on the gospel, we become people who want to lay down our lives for others the way Jesus laid down his life for us. We become people who want to love other people the way we have been loved.” Hamilton, *Revelation*, 68.

worship in the city and the threat of capital punishment for all who refused, this was no small feat.⁶ These virtues are the byproduct of spiritual perseverance despite cultural pressure to compromise. Like Pergamum, congregations today must persevere in faith within when facing persecution from without. Internal compromise of the gospel is especially easy when there is external societal pressure.

A progression in the sanctifying deeds of love . . . faith . . . service . . . perseverance” characterized the church in Thyatira (Rev 2:19). Of these works, Mounce points out, “The first two identify the motivational forces of Christian activity, and the other two, the results that follow.”⁷ Ideally, every congregation’s latter deeds should be greater than the first. This is indicative of an evolutionary progression that should characterize all churches. Such an understanding calls for churches to constantly evaluate everything with an eye toward pleasing Jesus. Churches grow through faithfully living out gospel deeds of “service” and “perseverance” that are motivated by “love” and “faith.” Unfortunately, many churches are leery of assessing their internal health. The stagnation and decline of many congregations is due to an unwillingness to evaluate and gauge congregational health in light of the gospel.

While the movement of the church in Thyatira was healthy in many ways, internally the church was morally corrupt. Tolerating a “Jezebel” and her prominent sexual exploits, the congregation was spiritually compromised because of this self-proclaimed prophetess.⁸ Like Thyatira, churches are oftentimes complicated mixtures of

⁶Thomas notes, “Emperor worship was prominent in Pergamum. The city was a leader in this form of worship A temple erected to the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma had stood in the city since 29 B.C.” R. L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 184.

⁷Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 85-86.

⁸Aune suggests that she was a local leader perhaps from the Nicolaitan sect. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 214.

holiness and unholiness, especially in regard to sexual purity.⁹ The church in America desperately needs to hear Jesus' words. The church was chosen by God to be inwardly holy and outwardly blameless (Eph. 1:4). Jesus' will is holiness demonstrated through sexual purity (1 Thess 4:3). Witnessing and serving externally will only be effective to the degree we live out the gospel internally.

The church in Sardis possessed a gleaming reputation of being "alive" but in reality Jesus declared it "dead" (Rev 3:1). This is indicative of subpar works that "might pass human scrutiny, but not that of God."¹⁰ Jesus confronts them for having forgotten the apostolic tradition that they "received and heard" (Rev 3:3). The centrality of the authoritative gospel was lost.¹¹ Failure to confess their corporate sins led to the threat of Jesus coming "against" this church (Rev 3:3). Not surprisingly, the correlation between sound orthodoxy and orthopraxy is proven as most of the congregation had "soiled" their garments (Rev 3:4). The parallel for today is unmistakable, as many congregations appear to be alive with programs, activities and even large building projects, yet inwardly, their distaste for apostolic doctrine has slowly led to spiritual erosion in the lives of the people. Outwardly, many churches appear to be alive but in reality are dead. Busy but not busy doing the works Jesus desires.¹² Nominal Christians and nominal churches who have long

⁹Hamilton rightly notes, "Sometimes when we go to address problems, even ones that are not so serious, we fail to see and acknowledge the good things that may be happening. Jesus is encouraging this church. They have problems, but those problems don't keep him from seeing and commending the fruits of the Spirit in their lives." Hamilton, *Revelation*, 96.

¹⁰Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 144.

¹¹Hamilton notes, "He seems to be calling them to remember the way they 'received and heard' the gospel of Jesus Christ, slain for sinners and risen from the dead to accomplish salvation. The language of reception is prominent in Johannine statements regarding 'the beginning point of Christian faith' (cf. John 1:12; 3:11, 32, 33; 5:43; 12:48; 13:20; 17:8). The language of reception is also used in the New Testament to point to the passing on of the Christian gospel (cf., e.g., 1 Cor 11:23; 15:1, 3)." Hamilton, *Revelation*, 97.

¹²Stott notes, "Beneath the pious exterior of that respectable congregation was secret uncleanness." John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 79.

abandoned the gospel are Christians in name only and are spiritually dead in their sins.¹³ When the gospel is not central with its corresponding doctrines, sin creeps in and unknown to the church, spiritual death takes hold.

Laodicea was a church who had lost their wholeheartedness to Jesus as they were “neither hot nor cold” (Rev 3:15). The tepidness of the congregation caused Jesus to have nothing for which to praise them. The lukewarmness of Laodicea was the result of a spiritual smugness resulting from their wealth.¹⁴ One cannot help but see the parallel for today’s wealthy churches in the West. Osborne points out that “the Laodicean church is unfortunately a perfect parallel for some of the greatest problems in the church at the start of the twenty-first century, especially in the West and parts of the Far East. Affluence has made us lukewarm, for we have become self-satisfied and interpret our trappings of ‘success’ (big churches, beautiful buildings, huge budgets) as God’s blessings.”¹⁵ Today, congregations easily coast with little thought to the message and mission of the gospel believing their wealth is the consequence of God’s approval. Spiritual complacency leads to a gospel lethargy and is the kiss of death.

Interestingly, little is said of the internal life of the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia. The phrase “I know” immediately leads to a recognition of what they faced and what Jesus was doing for them. Persecution has a way of purifying the internal life of the church. Interestingly, only hints of the internal life are given but enough is known to surmise that the fires of persecution from outward affliction were refining the Smyrnan and Philadelphian churches. Living under the commands of Jesus brought heavy

¹³Victorinus of Petovium speaks of “those persons who are negligent and behave in a manner other than what they ought in the world, who are vacuous in works and who are only Christian in name.” William C. Weinrich, *Revelation*, Ancient Commentary on Scripture, vol. 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 40.

¹⁴Beale sees this wealth as ebbing caused by a “willing cooperation with the idolatrous trade guilds and economic institutions of their culture.” Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 304.

¹⁵Osborne, *Revelation*, 215.

consequences.¹⁶ Facing lethal persecution these two congregations receive only commendation from Jesus. Persecution has a way of keeping a congregation focused on the hope of the gospel leaving little oxygen for sin to flourish. Undoubtedly, the church in America has enjoyed centuries of ease from persecution yet the influx of secularism is beginning to erode the freedoms and protections congregations have previously enjoyed. Such threats have a way of forcing the church into an eternal mindset of living by faith in the Lord of the church.

The External Life of the Church

The external life of the church has everything to do with the witness of the gospel. Living out the gospel in the world is a must to be a witness.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the looming pressure to conform to the culture is prevalent. Keener rightly points out that “the letters to the seven churches often betray characteristics of the cities in which these churches flourished [which] reminds us how easily churches can reflect the values of their culture if we do not remain vigilant against those values.”¹⁸ The constant pressure of a pagan environment will challenge any congregation’s gospel witness. Much can be learned for congregations today who face similar pressures of living out the gospel in a dark society.

In Ephesus, one of their key works was perseverance. Thomas calls it the “Christian quality of endurance in the midst of hard labor [that] has the highest ethical

¹⁶Thomas notes, “The best explanation is that their poverty resulted from demands made of them because of their faith in Christ.” Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 163.

¹⁷Beale describes the uniqueness of his commentary is to show that “all of the letters deal generally with the issue of witnessing for Christ in the midst of a pagan culture. The churches with problems are all exhorted to strengthen their witness in various ways, and the two churches without problems are encouraged to continue to persevere in the faithful witness that they have been maintaining.” Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 227.

¹⁸Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 109.

standard.”¹⁹ The external pressures from the world had flooded into the Ephesian congregation causing them to test and challenge the validity of people they found to be false teachers. In their zeal to test false teachers, their love for others waned. Congregations who rightly see the threat of a pagan culture, must be careful to love those caught in the sins of the culture with the love of Jesus. Oftentimes, churches who are doctrinally exacting come across as angry and loveless while demonstrating little grace to those who need it most.

In Smyrna, the persecution reached deadly levels while deadly trials of persecution threatened (1 Pet 1:6-7). The slander of the Jews in offering up the Christians for refusing to participate in the spirit of the age with its emperor worship offers many parallels to today’s congregations. Living in a society that is against the church because they are not with the church is inevitable (Matt 12:30). The fiery ordeal of persecution should not be surprising (1 Pet 4:12; Matt 12:30; Mark 13:9-10; 2 Tim 3:12). Stott notes that “it seems probable that in their resolve to go straight in business, Christians having renounced shady methods and had thereby missed some of the easy profits which went to others less scrupulous than themselves. Or again, Jews and pagans may have been unwilling to trade with them.”²⁰ Boldness with the gospel in a secularistic society that increasingly targets believers will test the external witness of Christians today. Congregations will be unable to hide their gospel witness in a society that labels the implications of the gospel as “hate speech.”

The church in Pergamum lived under the threat of syncretism. The witness, Antipas, was persecuted under the Roman nationalistic practice of affirming Caesar as “Lord” while sprinkling incense to Caesar. Such a worshipful act would violate the Christian truth of Jesus alone being “Lord” (Phil 2:9-11). In reality behind the power of

¹⁹Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 134.

²⁰Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 31.

Rome, Satan ruled in Pergamum as its chief citizen.²¹ In Revelation, he is the ancient serpent whose wily ways are traceable to the beginning of creation (Rev 12:9). The darkness of Pergamum has disturbing parallels to Western society where error leads to further spiritual darkness.²² Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers keeping them from seeing the light of the gospel (2 Cor 4:4). So the spirit of the anti-Christ reigns as the father of lies and the great deceiver of the saints rules as the god of the world.

Thyatira capitulated to the pagan idolatry and practices by tolerating “sexual immorality” as well as “eating foods sacrificed to idols” (Rev 2:20). Externally, such activity crippled their gospel effectiveness. The Christians there faced pressure from the “business world” in which local trade guilds were essential to attain a livelihood yet tied to pagan deities and pagan practices.²³ Today, the church must be comprised of Christians who conduct business and commerce with the utmost integrity in keeping with the gospel. Today, Osborne observes, “Many Christians compromise their walk with Christ to enhance their profits or to keep their jobs.”²⁴ Such concessions compromise the confession and integrity of the gospel as impacting all of life.²⁵

²¹Notice John’s usage of Pergamum being the seat of Satan’s “throne” and where he “lives.” See John 12:31.

²²Stott notes, “Satan’s rule in Pergamum could be seen in “its multitudinous temples, shrines and altars, its labyrinth of antichristian philosophies, its grant of refuge to antinomian Nicolaitans and Balaamites, all bore eloquent testimony to the dominion of the evil one.” Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 52.

²³Ladd notes, “Probably the argument was put forward that the Christian knows that such alleged gods really have no existence and therefore no wrong is done in participating in temple feasts.” George Eldon Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 48.

²⁴Osborne, *Revelation*, 169.

²⁵Many new and exciting inroads are being made within the discipline of Christian vocation. Borrowing from Martin Luther and the Puritans, evangelicals are again looking to vocation as a primary avenue for gospel witness as society grows increasingly secularistic. One very notable example is Timothy Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church’s Center for Faith and Work.

Externally, Sardis was living in a hypocritical existence as they had a reputation of life but they were in reality dead. All looked well but external hypocrisy permeated the life of the church. Like the Sardis congregation, the church today can be blatantly hypocritical due to the breakdown of accountability within local congregations. Thomas rightly points out, “They had made peace with the surrounding society and fit in comfortably with their culture. The offense of the cross in that community had ceased to exist. A state of spiritual death pervaded the church.”²⁶ When sin is evident, many congregations have a way of quietly ignoring the obvious while the gospel of Jesus gets discredited in the eyes of a watching world. Ultimately, in their external witness, they were “suppressing their witness was by assuming a low profile in idolatrous contexts of the pagan culture in which they had daily interaction.”²⁷ Jesus rebukes the lackadaisical approach to Christian witness. Christians today must shine the light of Jesus into the dark, idolatrous contexts in which they live and work.

In Philadelphia, though living in an atmosphere of serious persecution, the congregation’s faithfulness came with the promise of Jesus to “set” before the faithful “an open door” of gospel effectiveness (1 Cor 16:7-9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:2-3). So powerful was the opportunity that Jesus promises no one is able to shut the door (Rev 3:8). Even in the face of formidable opposition, the church with “little power” was guaranteed to be a powerful witness to the gospel. Today, congregations must live out their witness realizing that true gospel effectiveness is something only Jesus can accomplish.²⁸ Sadly, many congregations believe the power to make disciples resides internally through gimmicks and programs while ignoring the spiritual disciplines that

²⁶Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 247-48.

²⁷Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 276.

²⁸Stott elaborates, “Christ has the keys. He opens the doors. There is no sense in trying to barge our way unceremoniously through doors which are still closed. We have to wait for him to make openings for us.” Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 107.

invite the blessings of Jesus on a congregation. More people and more money are oftentimes wrongly perceived to be an indicator of Jesus' power at work. The reality is that Jesus must do a supernatural work for gospel effectiveness or otherwise churches will be ineffective.

The deadly self-sufficiency of lukewarmness in Laodicea showed itself externally as a self-sufficiency from those who thought of themselves as rich and needing nothing. Such spiritual self-sufficiency is deadly for a congregation who no longer looks to Jesus for light and life. Inevitably, the centrality of the gospel is lost. When wealth brings spiritual complacency, external witness becomes a non-factor. In the Southern Baptist Convention, where most churches are plateaued or declining, external witness is anemic for this very reason.²⁹

The Heretical Teachings of the Church

Doctrinal teaching is critical to fulfilling Jesus' commission to "make disciples" (Matt 28:18). Local congregations must identify and reject heretical teaching while embracing sound teaching in keeping with the revealed word of Jesus. The measuring rod against which all teachings must be compared is Jesus and his teaching. The command of Second John 1:9 is clear—"Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son." Jesus' teachings are the standard against which all teaching in the church must be measured. False teaching destroys the gospel's power to make and grow disciples while opening the door to destructive gospel living.³⁰ While not all the congregations Jesus addresses struggled with false doctrine, the majority did.

²⁹Michael McCormack, "Study Updates Stats on Health of Southern Baptist Churches," *Baptist Press*, accessed November 15, 2004, <http://www.bpnews.net/19542>.

³⁰Hamilton notes, "Do you want to know how a church dies? I would suggest that we have a hint here. It starts with false teaching, which leads to idolatry and immorality, which kills the church." Hamilton, *Revelation*, 86.

In Pergamum, tolerating the teaching of the Nicolaitans probably “validated a certain level of participation in civic life, the celebrations of the city of Pergamum . . . would have been idolatrous and immoral in nature.”³¹ A doctrinal vacuum in regards to orthodoxy precipitated such compromise. Stott notes that some had “departed from the narrow path of revelation and wandered into the byways of speculation and error.”³² In our own time, when the confessions of most churches ascribe to orthodoxy, the disconnect is oftentimes found in *how* Christians practice what they claim to believe. Like then, today, doctrinal heresy often surfaces as an errant form of heteropraxy. Beasley-Murray makes this connection as he points out that “the toleration of sub-Christian faith and morals within its fellowship implies a culpable indifference of the church to the very things which distinguish it from paganism.”³³ As of the writing of this thesis, the current legalization of homosexual marriage and its acceptance in seemingly orthodox churches shows how slyly heteropraxy can creep in.³⁴ In the West, many congregations are and will compromise on critical points of doctrine and practice mirroring the compromise of Pergamum.

Thyatira took it further and tolerated the practicing of heresy and sin in their midst. Jezebel represented a form of “antinomianism . . . by a prominent woman claiming the gift of divine prophecy.”³⁵ This false prophetess was promulgating heterodoxy by intermingling supernatural revelation with fornication. Thyatira’s indifference under the

³¹Hamilton, *Revelation*, 89.

³²Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 44.

³³G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 87.

³⁴Notable evangelical figures like the former editor of *Christianity Today*, David Neff, have accepted homosexual marriage as being blessed by God.

³⁵Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 87.

guise of toleration was lethal.³⁶ Thus, one could rightly insist that apostasy can be as easy as turning a blind eye to unsound teaching.³⁷ In Thyatira, excommunicating Jezebel from the fellowship of the church was needful.³⁸ Today, congregations who play “fast and loose” with doctrinal error open the door to false doctrine. Discerning doctrinal error requires the ability to exercise doctrinal discernment when essential, cardinal doctrines are being distorted or altogether denied. When heresy is present confrontation in keeping with Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18:15-20 becomes necessary. When there is a failure to repent, the congregation must excommunicate (1 Cor 5).

The Sardis church had avoided the teachings of the Nicolaitans and Jezebel. But in guarding the church on these two fronts, compromises to the Roman Imperial Cult came in the back door.³⁹ Visually, the church had stopped the onslaught of the consequent sexual immorality and idolatry. Yet, incipient nationalism caused the Christians to bow a knee to Caesar. Undoubtedly, this was justified under the guise of civic duty. Cultural compromise can show itself in some of the most odd ways. Currently, many evangelical congregations are increasingly facing the onslaught of secularism and the erosion of religious freedoms in America while at the same time mixing Christianity

³⁶Ladd notes, “They recognized the presence of a false prophetess; they recognized also the evil character of her teaching, but they tolerantly refused to deal with her.” Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 51.

³⁷Keener says of this, “In other words, if we choose to look the other way when apostasy is occurring, the we must share the Lord’s reproof.” Keener, *Revelation*, 128.

³⁸Hamilton notes, “They had a responsibility to protect the flock. They had a responsibility to exclude her from the church. Instead they were tolerating her, and as a result of the church’s failure to act, she was leading the servants of Jesus in sin.” Hamilton, *Revelation*, 98.

³⁹Hamilton adds, “Perhaps the appearance of life in the believers in Sardis is due to their avoidance of one error, but the gates are unguarded at another point. At that unguarded point, it as though the enemy has swarmed into the church and killed much of it.” He goes on to also raise the possibility that the church had hidden under the safety of being viewed as a Jewish sect. Hamilton continues, “But perhaps the promise Jesus makes about acknowledging those who conquer before the Father (3:5) points to the church in Sardis being tempted to avoid confessing Jesus so that they would be distinguished from Judaism. If they were not distinguished from Judaism, they would be exempt from mandatory participation in Roman Imperial Cult.” *Ibid.*, 104-6.

with American nationalism. Most would not identify this as compromise, yet how can churches sing songs like “God Bless America” while this country aborts over one million children each year?⁴⁰ Compromise with the culture always lurks in traditions that are considered widely acceptable.

In Laodicea, their abandonment of doctrine left a vacuum for spiritual lethargy to set in. Therefore, Jesus cannot say anything good and leaves them with the verdict that they are “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked” (Rev 3:17). The gospel with its implications in both what the church believed and how they lived was long forgotten. Believing their spiritual success was directly tied to their financial wealth, they failed to introspectively assess themselves. Smug complacency caused them to miss the fact that they were “selling out their faith by idolatrous syncretism.”⁴¹ Today, in some congregations heresy is next to impossible because many churches have no doctrinal understandings or stances. The dearth leads to a misunderstanding of the message of the gospel and the true mission of the church in making disciples. An amorphous, shallow belief in Jesus has become commonplace in many congregations.

The Sound Teachings of the Church

The greatest hindrance to heresy is sound doctrine. Orthodox doctrinal teaching is critical to the church’s effectiveness in fulfilling the will of Jesus. Disciples must follow Jesus’ teaching and doing so requires obedience. The slippage in sound teaching can be ever so subtle with slight shifts that over time are unrecognizable. Thus, diligence to doctrinal truth is a must.⁴² Hamilton notes, “We must know the gospel, know

⁴⁰If one finds this assertion odd, consider the following: Could one imagine the apostle John encouraging the seven churches to have a day to celebrate the Roman Empire? In the greater context of Revelation where Rome is pictured in the darkest and evil imageries, the answer is obvious.

⁴¹Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 305.

our Bibles, and know Christian theology so that we can tell the difference between someone who increases our faith in Jesus by telling us the truth about his greatness and someone who makes us feel good about ourselves by giving us pep talks and ‘encouragement’ to rely on our own resources.”⁴³ The teachings of the church are clearly important to Jesus and his will for his church.

Ephesus was a congregation known for its exacting devotion to the truth.⁴⁴ The command to “test” false teachers is a demand from Jesus for churches to test the doctrine of those who teach (Rev 2:2). In Ephesus, the “evil” people were “self-styled apostles” (Rev 2:2).⁴⁵ Today, such testing is necessary in discerning people’s character and teachings (1 Thess 5:21; 1 Cor 14:29; 1 John 4:1-3).⁴⁶ Rarely do churches today test a potential teacher’s doctrine with an eye for orthodoxy. Such discernment requires knowing people yet congregations often ask someone to teach without knowing their beliefs. Osborne rightly notes, “The key is to separate between cardinal doctrines (issues that are clear in Scripture and essential for the Christian faith) and non-cardinal issues (points that are not as clear in Scripture and are not essential for remaining a Christian).”⁴⁷ Further, testing involves testing doctrine. Such testing demands the ability to discern between primary and secondary doctrines. Undoubtedly, most congregations are

⁴³Hamilton, *Revelation*, 66.

⁴⁴Ladd notes, “The church in Ephesus was outstanding because of its ability to distinguish between true and false apostles and its refusal to tolerate those who were false.” Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 39.

⁴⁵Aune, *Revelation 1-7*, 143.

⁴⁶The Didache specifies in 11:8 that a true “prophet . . . should have the habits of [the] Lord.” Aaron Milavec, *The Didache* (New York: The Newman Press, 2003), 37.

⁴⁷On this Osborne adds, “The key is to allow the history of dogma (church history) to control our interaction on theological issues. We have known the cardinal doctrines for fifteen hundred years—the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Holy Spirit (but not the Charismatic debate), the return of Christ (but not the millennial issue), baptism (but not the mode), substitutionary atonement (but not Calvinism or Arminianism). We need to be clear about what heresy is but be firm when we encounter it.” Osborne, *Revelation*, 125.

vulnerable to heresy creeping in without notice. Doctrinal diligence demands a discernment that is thoroughly biblical.

This slander from the Jews in Smyrna was undoubtedly doctrinal as there was a push to disavow the Christians as a sect undeserving of Roman exemption and protection. Doctrinal compromise in regard to Jesus as the Christ would have inevitably been a temptation. The Jews teaming up with the Romans to persecute Christians for not sacrificing to Caesar was common.⁴⁸ Living with the pressure of the imperial cult, the church is commanded to persevere and “not fear” (Rev 2:10). “Be faithful” speaks of a persevering faith undoubtedly grounded in the doctrinal confession of Jesus, not Caesar, as Lord. Today, in a culture of religious pluralism and tolerance, believing in the exclusivity of Jesus alone as Lord (God) brings alienation and isolation. As secular hostility increases, congregations will be faced with the inevitable choice of whether to persevere in calling Jesus “Lord” or bend to the pluralistic spirit of the age.

Ultimately, sound doctrine is reflective of staying true to Jesus himself by staying true to his name. In Pergamum, this was demonstrated by the fact that as Jesus notes, they “hold fast to my name, and you did not deny my faith” (Rev 2:13). As Stott poignantly surmises, “his name stands for himself. It is the revelation of who he is and what he has done. It represents the fullness of his divine-human person and saving work. To remain true to his name is therefore to hold firmly to our conviction that he is both our Lord and Savior.”⁴⁹ The true anti-Christ is anyone who denies that the “Christ has come in the flesh” and who does not interact with society accordingly (1 John 2:22). Christology may not be at the forefront of many congregations’ minds but it should be. Understanding Jesus for who he is and what he has accomplished for us is critical to our salvation and the salvation of those around us.

⁴⁸See Beale’s concise and persuasive argument in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 240.

⁴⁹Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 46.

In Thyatira, their lack of discernment eroded gospel truth leaving shards of vulnerable orthodoxy. Jesus commendation is to “hold fast what you have” until his coming (Rev 2:25) In light of Revelation 2:24, this sound doctrine is the received truth from the apostles. As both Tychonius and Andrew of Caesarea point out, “Christ exhorts those who have not turned from the truth of the church to persevere in the apostolic teaching so that God might acknowledge them.”⁵⁰ Whenever doctrinal compromise occurs, congregations can always fall back on the sure bedrock of the received tradition of the church in the Scriptures. As the church historian Jaroslav Pelikan points out, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”⁵¹ The tradition of the church as given by the apostles as contained in the Scriptures is always a place for any congregation to turn when doctrinal erosion is prevalent. Tradition that is not rooted in the teachings of the Apostles is not tradition and not truth.

In Sardis, five imperatives are a call back to the truth-“Wake up; strengthen what remains; remember; obey; repent” (Rev 3:2-3). For today, congregations must first “wake up” out of their spiritual slumber and realize that there is a problem. Secondly, congregations must examine themselves to see whether they are getting the beliefs and practice of the church right in the sight of Jesus. Third, “remember” signals that the church must get back to the truth as received and heard in the apostolic tradition of the Word. Fourth, “obey” means to not just hear the word but also obey it by proving to be true disciples of Jesus. Fifth, if a church will get into the word of truth it should repent of all that is “not complete in the sight of God” (Rev 3:2). Believing the truth requires congregations to live the truth.

⁵⁰William C. Weinrich, *Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 33.

⁵¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

Philadelphia was a picture of a sound commitment to the gospel. Under intense pressure they “kept” Jesus “word,” meaning they guarded the word of truth (Rev 3:8). Beale rightly shows that this means “the Philadelphian Christians have been faithful to the early church’s kerygma about Jesus, especially to his courageous loyalty through persecution in testifying to the Father.”⁵² Faithfulness to the “name” of Jesus was to hold fast the confession of Jesus as Lord under the opposition of Jews even if it meant death. With the growing persecution of Christians in America, one notices the controversy that mentioning the name of Jesus brings. Like our brothers and sisters across the globe, congregations in America will face certain persecution if they are unwavering in their confession of the ever-controversial name of Jesus.

For a wealthy church like Laodicea, purchasing gold, white garments and salve is indicative of a need for gospel conversion (Rev 3:18). In this commercial epicenter, such language is reminiscent of the salvific invitation of the Lord in Isaiah 55:1: “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” In a city that proudly refused Roman subsidies to repair the city after a devastating earthquake, Stott points out, “they could manage without an imperial subsidy, but they could not manage without the grace of Jesus Christ.”⁵³ For congregations to have sound doctrine they must first understand and believe the gospel. The absence of saving grace was their downfall. Church membership rolls all across America and in the Southern Baptist Convention reflect the unregenerate state of many congregations where upwards of two-thirds do not even bother to attend worship. Take into account that not all members present are truly regenerate. Congregations must wake up to their spiritual bankruptcy. Tragically,

⁵²Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 289.

⁵³Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 118.

congregations in such an unregenerate condition lack the spiritual sight (like Laodicea) to see their true spiritual condition.

The Ministry of Church Discipline

The ministry of Jesus in disciplining his church is exacted in several ways. What is crucial is that congregations live in light of his imminent return. It is this that brings accountability to the lives of believers especially in knowing what the future holds (Rom 13:11; 1 Pet 4:7; 1 John 2:18). Practically, local congregations must be disciplining worldliness within while overcoming the world without. As Hamilton points out, “Jesus intends the whole church to repent, and given his teaching in Matthew 18:15-18, the repentance needs to take place in the form of corrective discipline.”⁵⁴ While his discipline may seem punitive especially in light of the strong imagery of Jesus moving against his own church, it is eternal judgment that Jesus is seeking to prevent. Thus, congregations today must heed these threats of discipline made by Jesus.

In Ephesus, the church must “repent” and “remember” (Rev 2:5). These two together “refer to the moral and spiritual state that each congregation previously enjoyed but from which it had since departed.”⁵⁵ Remembering is looking back to the past when they were living in line with the truth. Also, they had to repent, which is a call “for a decisive change of attitude with its resultant action.”⁵⁶ The threat of Jesus to remove their lampstand is lethal to the congregation. Stott insists, “No church has a secure and permanent place in the world. It is continuously on trial.”⁵⁷ Sin is serious and when

⁵⁴Hamilton, *Revelation*, 57.

⁵⁵Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 147.

⁵⁶Thomas, *Revelation*, 142.

⁵⁷Stott continues, “Many churches today have truly ceased to exist. Their buildings remain intact, their ministers minister and their congregations congregate, but their lampstand has been removed.” Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 26-27.

committed by the unrepentant, it is lethal to a congregation. Spreading like untreated cancer, the loss of love in following the great commandment threatened the future of the church as the Lord of the church threatens to take back his light. As Beales notes, “They will cease to exist as a church when the very function that defines the essence of their existence is no longer performed.”⁵⁸ Churches are called to bear the light of Jesus on a lampstand so it will shine before the eyes of a watching world. An internal witness of love must lead to an external witness for the gospel (Matt 5:14-16; Mark 4:21). When the church ceases to live as disciples and make disciples, Jesus closes the church.

When facing error, the discipline of the church in Pergamum was couched in a call to repent. The faithful in the church had a responsibility to exercise church discipline through confrontation and excommunication if needed. Beale notes, “The church had a responsibility to cease tolerating this movement, to repent and to discipline its adherents If action was not taken quickly, the whole church could be captivated by these teachers.”⁵⁹ Jesus himself was coming to them with the sharp, double-edged “sword” of his “mouth” (Rev 2:12). This “sword,” the word of truth, cuts against all error because it is living, active and Spirit-inspired (Heb 4:12; Eph 6:17). The word disciplines the church by holding it to the truth. Likewise the same truth that builds the church also judges the ones who reject it.⁶⁰ Sexual immorality has long been a quiet sin swept under the rug in most congregations. Oftentimes, the negative aspects of church discipline (especially in regard to sexual immorality) do much damage by failing to positively show why sexual purity matters. God’s creative purpose in sexuality, human worth and God’s design for human relationships must overarch every church discipline narrative in regard to sexual

⁵⁸Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 232.

⁵⁹Ibid., 251.

⁶⁰Stott notes, “In other words the very gospel of Christ which saves those who obey it destroys those who disobey it.” Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 54.

immorality.⁶¹ The imagery of the cutting sword is a blunt reminder to congregations that Jesus will fight against his own people. The same word that saves is the same word that can damn a local congregation.

In Thyatira, Jesus' penetrating gaze intensely "searches hearts and minds" (Rev 2:23).⁶² Jesus is the one who "knows what is in man" and needs no one's testimony (Mark 2:8). The accountability of the church is unmistakable as she is "laid bare before the eyes" of Jesus (Heb 4:13). The discipline of the all-seeing gaze of Jesus means the church lives and ministers before an audience of one. Thus, Stott surmises, "to remember this is a most powerful stimulus to holy living."⁶³ Further, Jesus warns the church in Thyatira that belligerent unwillingness to repent would lead to Jesus giving "each of you" according to their "works" (Rev 2:23). Death is threatened for all of Jezebel's children, followers, who do not repent. From a "sickbed" to "death" the disciplining hand of Jesus will bring swift judgment. The modern parallel is that churches that tolerate sin will undergo the disciplining hand of God (Heb 12:4-11). Such discipline can be meted out through weakness, sickness and even death among church members (1 Cor 11:30). Churches who embrace the politically correct spirit of our age in tolerating sin will face a similar judgment from Jesus.

In Sardis, the church was asleep. The charge was to wake up. As Aune notes, "Watchfulness is an indispensable characteristic of the people of God in view of the immanence of the end (Mark 13:33-37; Matt 25:13)."⁶⁴ Jesus promised to "come, like a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come against you" (Rev 3:3). The church

⁶¹Keener notes, "Those still involved in immorality must also be reached in Christian love; they must learn how much God thinks they are worth." Keener, *Revelation*, 130.

⁶²"One sees "the dangers of a 'soft' love that tolerates all things and judges none." Keener, *Revelation*, 140.

⁶³Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 67.

⁶⁴Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 227.

was unprepared for the discipline Jesus would bring. The discipline of Jesus would lead to the removal of Sardis' lampstand as like a thief he would steal the spiritual life that was waning. In America, the coming of Jesus to remove a congregation's lampstand is not unusual. Each year 3,500-4,000 churches close their doors.⁶⁵ The closing of local congregations is the work of the one who alone establishes and builds his church (Matt 16:18).

In Laodicea, Jesus warns the church that he will "spit" them out of his "mouth" (Rev 3:16). The church made Jesus sick and nauseated him to the point of vomiting the church out.⁶⁶ While harsh, Jesus promises that such poignant criticisms of reproof and discipline are for those whom he loves (Rev 3:19). Their hope was to be "zealous and repent" (Rev 3:19). Failure to do so shows that the unrepentant are unbelievers who have been confronted by Jesus in their unbelief. The lethargic must awaken zeal and repent of their desperate situation. Spiritual complacency is a cancer to congregations and their members who think themselves safe and secure. Today, phrases like "once saved always saved" while true betray a sense of testing one's salvation with the aim of assuring its authenticity (2 Cor 13:5). Past experiences do not trump the present, ongoing reality of a persevering faith in Jesus which validates one's past experience of faith.

The Ministry of Church Conquering

Each message to the seven church ends with a call to overcome as conquerors. Jesus is the ultimate conqueror who has trail blazed the path for his church. Conquering takes on various forms in Revelation 2-3 but more often than not the forces being

⁶⁵Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Post-Modern Age* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 10.

⁶⁶Stott notes, "Christ's forceful expression is one of disgust. He will utterly repudiate those whose attachment to him is purely nominal and distasteful." Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church*, 119.

conquered are internal as believers must “conquer their own sinful tendencies.”⁶⁷ Compromise (both within and without) is the temptation of the local church.⁶⁸ The conquerors receive what Baukhaum calls “eschatological salvation” as they are moving to an “eschatological destiny” which closes the book.⁶⁹ Hamilton says that to receive this salvation, “the Christians in each of the seven churches in chapters 2-3 [must] engage in the eschatological battle . . . In a sense the whole book is about the way the Christians of the seven churches may, by being victorious within the specific situations of their own churches, enter the New Jerusalem.”⁷⁰ The ultimate conqueror is Jesus who himself persevered through suffering to as the consummate conqueror (Rev 5:1-14). Likewise, for the congregations, “it is on the basis of believers heeding the exhortations of the body of each letter that they will inherit the promise”⁷¹ Conquering is the work of a church who is faithful to be obedient to the commands of Jesus. Thus, true triumph is following his word. Each message then closes with a promise that ultimately “gives us the one thing we cannot do without: himself.”⁷² Thus, each promise is a promise from Jesus of giving his church himself.

Ephesus’ reward would be to “eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.” This refers to the restored presence of God first enjoyed by Adam and Eve in Eden (2:7). What was lost in the Garden will be restored in the new heavens and new earth as God will again walk with his people. As Bede notes, “The tree of life is Christ, by the

⁶⁷Osborne, *Revelation*, 125.

⁶⁸Beale notes, “Believers are exhorted throughout the letters to ‘overcome’ in the midst of tribulation because of the temptations to compromise.” Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 312.

⁶⁹Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 14.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 234.

⁷²Hamilton, *Revelation*, 79.

vision of whom are holy souls are nourished in the celestial paradise in the present body of the church.”⁷³ The tree of life is ultimately the consequence of the cross where eternal life in God’s presence is secured.⁷⁴ Eternal life through the cross of Jesus is the gospel hope of all congregations.

For the congregation in Smyrna, conquering brought the vindication of Jesus though it may be after death. The “crown of life” is the prize used to symbolize victory in athletic contests.⁷⁵ As Beale points out, “Their defeat in death by the authority of the Roman crown meant their victory of life and inheritance of a ‘heavenly crown.’”⁷⁶ For all believers who persevere in faith there is a crown of life given at death (2 Tim 4:8; 1 Pet 5:4). Avoiding the “second death” and its eternal damnation is the sign of a persevering follower (Rev 20:6, 14; 21:18).⁷⁷

In Pergamum, where the darkness of society was reflective of Satan himself who ruled over the city, Jesus promises to give them himself-“the hidden manna” (Rev 2:17). In John’s gospel, Jesus is the all-satisfying bread of life (John 6:31-51). Also, the “white stone” represents the stone believed to have the secret name of God and as such “becomes the invitation to take part in Jesus’ supper.”⁷⁸ The “new name” is a renaming

⁷³Weinrich, *Revelation*, 20.

⁷⁴Hemer argues, “There is some indication that the ‘tree of life’ was associated with the cross of Christ in the mind of John In Revelation 22 the tree of life is placed in the New Jerusalem. Here the verdict of Eden is reversed It is natural to connect these words with Gen. 3, but the very close resemblance between the symbols applied to the heavenly city and the the seven churches suggests that in many particulars Rev. 21-22 is the consummation of Rev. 2-3.” Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 42-44.

⁷⁵Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 176.

⁷⁶Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 244.

⁷⁷Thomas notes, “This charge to faithfulness does not necessarily mean that everyone in the church would die as a martyr, but it does mean that with each one in the corporate body there should be a willingness to make such a sacrifice.” Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 171.

⁷⁸Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 253.

by Jesus that identifies the Christians in Pergamum with Jesus in the new city of God. Such a name recognizes the believer as belonging to Jesus as opposed to belonging to the world. Churches in our own time, must avoid worldliness at all costs and when it does it shows that it is composed of citizens of the heavenly kingdom.

In Thyatira, those who conquer by not tolerating Jezebel will be given authority over the nations and the revelation of Jesus himself, “the morning star.” He will judge the nations with a “rod of iron” shattering the unbelieving nations as “earthen pots are broken in pieces” (Rev 2:27). The conquerors who do not tolerate sin will help judge sinners as Jesus metes out his judgment. Ultimately, Christians will “judge the world” (1 Cor 6:2; Mt 19:28). To reject Jezebel, opens the door for the church to receive Jesus. Conditionally, those who persevere in Thyatira must be faithful “until the end.” This indicates that receiving the conquerors reward demands the church to be a people who persevere in the faith. This conditional promise is only for those who can overcome the teachings and practices of paganism in their congregation and culture.

In Sardis, those who had not soiled their garments would “walk with [Jesus] in white” (Rev 3:4). White is symbolic of a holy purity and righteousness given through the blood of Jesus (Rev 7:14). Thus, the saints are those who are justified.⁷⁹ This book lists the names of the redeemed who are spiritually alive (Rev 13:8; 20:15; 21:27). For a name to be removed signified the erasing of the names of those executed by the state.⁸⁰ Ultimately, the book represented that persevering Christians are “destined to participate in that kingdom.”⁸¹ For many, their name being on a church membership register is critical to their belief of being right with God. Yet, there is only one register that counts

⁷⁹Mounce notes, “Since they are made white by being washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:14), the figure is highly appropriate to portray justification.” Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 85-86.

⁸⁰Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 227.

⁸¹Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 98.

eternally. Christians should seek to have their names confirmed as being written in the Lamb's book of life as they trust Jesus by faith.

For Philadelphia, conquering meant they would be kept "from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world" (Rev 3:11). This is the tribulation that is coming upon the whole earth and from which Jesus will rescue his people (Rev 22:7, 20). The inscriptions are metaphors indicative of "eschatological salvation."⁸² To be a pillar of God's Temple is to be in God's intimate presence (Rev 21:22; 22:3-4). The victory of the church in Philadelphia was that their enemies would be made to bow down before them. In our politically correct age where the church is intimidated and shamed into being silent about the gospel, the future hope of God's presence should solidify our acceptance of present rejection.

Even in Laodicea, though outside the church Jesus offers hope as the Lord of the church. He is willing to come in and fellowship with any and all who heed his counsel. The promise is that they will set in authority with Jesus on his throne sharing in the judgment in the coming kingdom (Luke 22:29-30). This inherited throne from David is a major theme of the apocalypse (Rev 1:5, 7; 22:16). Mirroring the victory of Jesus as he sat down at the right hand of the Father, these Christians who overcome are promised to inherit the same victory. Conquering for the Laodicean Church and the church today is demonstrated in a repentance that leads to a triumph over worldly possessions.

Conclusion

Due to the chronological snobbery that exists in today's world, Christians like to think of themselves as being removed from the same issues that previous generations faced. Yet, churches today, like churches then, struggle with many of the same issues. Thus, these letters serve the major purpose of addressing "practical problems that are

⁸²Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 245.

found in all churches.”⁸³ So the applicability of the seven churches for local congregations today cannot be missed. As Hamilton points out, “What Jesus said to these churches was appropriate to the needs of each, and what he said continues to be relevant to churches with these same problems today.”⁸⁴ Like today, compromise with the world is the greatest temptation of these churches.⁸⁵ To conquer the world is to enjoy triumph with Jesus while compromise with the world leads to defeat and death.

Ironically, the church that perseveres in its witnessing faith wins a victory on earth even though it suffers earthly defeat.”⁸⁶ Ultimately, congregations who obey Jesus’ commands are those who persevere demonstrating they like their Savior overcome the world.

⁸³Osborne, *Revelation*, 105.

⁸⁴Hamilton, *Revelation*, 120.

⁸⁵Beale notes, “All the churches are faced with the temptation to compromise Therefore the exhortation to overcome is either an encouragement to continue standing strong against compromise or to stop compromising.” Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 269.

⁸⁶Ibid.

CHAPTER 4
IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHING
THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Introduction

The book of Revelation is a letter to the seven congregations addressed in Revelation 2-3.¹ Each congregation is to “hear what the Spirit is speaking to the churches” (Rev 2:7, 11, 17; 28; 3:6, 13, 22). The beginning and ending admission of John is that the Spirit’s message is given as prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19). Practically, Revelation was read during the worship services of the seven churches as prophecy from Jesus given by the Spirit and mediated through the prophet John.² Yet the message of Revelation is for all churches then and today to hear what the Spirit is saying “to the churches.” As such, the message of Jesus to the seven churches offers a unique opportunity to preach the message of Jesus directly to his church. Yet to do so, requires understanding the uniqueness of the message of Jesus to the seven churches as prophecy mimicking the salvation-judgment oracles of the Old Testament.³ Further, there are implications from the prophecy of Revelation 2-3 for pastors who preach. Moreover,

¹Baukham notes, “The habit of referring to chapters 2-3 as the ‘seven letters’ to the churches is misleading It is really the whole book of Revelation which is one circular letter to the seven churches. The seven messages addressed individually to each church are introductions to the rest of the book which is addressed to all seven churches.” Richard Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 149.

²Baukham describes Revelation as “prophecy intended to be read aloud in the context of Christian worship, and this claim to be a prophecy is confirmed by the epilogue of the book (cf. 22:6-7, which echoes 1:1-3, and especially 22:18-19).” *Ibid.*, 1.

³Baukham notes that Revelation is an “apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia The seven messages to the churches (2:1-3:22) are [prophetic] oracles written as Christ’s word to the churches.” *Ibid.*, 3.

there are implications for congregations to receive from preaching Revelation 2-3 as prophecy.

The Elements of Salvation-Judgment Oracles in Revelation 2-3

Delivering Revelation to the churches, John saw himself standing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets whom he calls God's "servants" (Rev 10:7). The letter to the seven churches is best understood as prophetic messages mimicking the salvation-judgment oracles of the Old Testament.⁴ This type of prophecy in the early church was relatively common.⁵ In keeping with the message of Jesus to the seven churches, this form contains "commendations or accusations with corresponding encouragements or exhortations to repent to avoid judgment."⁶ Aune identifies the fundamental elements reflective of salvation-judgment oracles as generally: (1) praise, (2) censure, (3) demand for repentance, (4) the threat of judgment, (5) the promise of salvation.⁷ With the notable exceptions of Smyrna and Philadelphia, the messages of the seven churches demonstrate the prophetic vision of Jesus to read the true spiritual condition of his congregations. As Baukham notes, "Jesus Christ addresses the churches as the one who knows the real truth of their condition The function of prophecy addressed to the churches is to expose the uncomfortable truth."⁸ While there is praise for the "works" each congregation is doing, there is the ugly underbelly of blunt censure in keeping with Old Testament

⁴Baukham notes, "These are not as such letters but prophetic messages to each church." Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 149.

⁵Aune says of the salvation-judgment oracle that "this type of prophetic-speech is the most common complex genre of prophetic utterance in early Christianity." David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 326.

⁶G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 225.

⁷Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 277.

⁸Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 122.

prophecy. The message of Jesus is laced with the threats and warnings reminiscent of Israel's prophets.⁹ The seven churches utilize "formulas [which] build on prophetic patterns and are intended to take the readers back to similarities with Israel in the prophetic period."¹⁰ As such, the salvation-judgment elements in Revelation 2-3 give Revelation a prophetic edge and echo the mixed prophetic messages of the Old Testament.

The Two Choices—Repent or Face Judgment

The two choices contained in the salvation-judgment oracles are starkly contrasted in each message.¹¹ Aune identifies the messages to the seven churches as being characterized by "threats of judgment and exclusion" for "improper behavior" and "promises of salvation and reward" for "proper behavior."¹² The erroneous behavior is borne out of each congregation not seeing Jesus for who he is and listening to his word. Repentance leads to eternal salvation as an overcomer in Jesus' kingdom. Failure to repent brings judgment as detailed both in the letter to the churches and throughout the Apocalypse. The response of the congregations in the seven churches to the salvation-judgment oracles is demonstrated by how they live.¹³ Judgment is near and not only

⁹Notable examples of salvation-judgment oracles are Hos 5:8-6:6 and Isa 1:21-26. Micah alternates between passages promising judgment (1:2-2:11, 3:1-12, 6:1-7:7) and salvation (2:12-13, 4:1-5:15; 7:8-20).

¹⁰Osborne notes, "In particular, this makes more powerful the warnings and promises. Will the readers be like apostate Israel or the righteous remnant in heeding (or ignoring) the content of these letters?" Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 106.

¹¹As Baukham notes, "When Christ has something against a church, the consequence is the alternative: repentance or judgment." Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 122.

¹²David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 126.

¹³Aune notes, "Proper behavior is encouraged by admonitions and conditional promises, and misbehavior is discouraged by accusations and conditional threats." Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 326.

threatens the world but the churches as well (Rev 2:16; 3:3; 16:15). So these prophecies warn of that judgment while containing “salvific intent...”¹⁴ As such, the church is revealed to be a mixed group of the faithful and the unfaithful. The faithful will experience the Lord’s salvation while the unfaithful will experience his judgment.¹⁵ Ultimately, the message of the seven churches pushes everyone to “fully accept the norms and values of the Christian faith.”¹⁶ So the message of Jesus alternates between salvation and judgment with the opportunity for either dependent upon the response of the hearers.

Implications for Preaching from the Salvation-Judgment Elements in the Seven Churches

Preaching Spirit-inspired prophecy from the preacher to the local congregation is rarely if ever addressed. Understanding the seven churches as prophecy mimicking salvation-judgment oracles gives one clear implications for preaching the seven churches. This is to say, understanding the seven churches as originating in the tradition of salvation-judgment oracles provides serious implications for preaching prophecy. This is to say, the preaching of the seven churches is true to the original authorial intent when preached as prophesy with appreciation for the intrinsic prophetic elements. This means to preach the seven churches, the preacher’s sermon needs to take on the prophetic implications of the text when addressing a local congregation. This has major implications for Revelation 2-3 having application for all churches at all times and in all contexts.

¹⁴Baukham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 123.

¹⁵Aune notes, “The basic purpose of these early Christian salvation-judgment oracles is positive: the promise of salvation is used to encourage perseverance and commitment to the Christian faith, while the threat of judgment is used only to convince wayward Christians and Christian communities to change their behavior.” Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 277.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 277.

Spirit-Inspired Prophecy

In Revelation, John was “in the Spirit” when he wrote the Apocalypse (Rev 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).¹⁷ The Holy Spirit’s role in Revelation is to inspire the apocalyptic prophecy of John. As Aune insists, “the role and function of the Holy Spirit . . . is primarily prophetic.”¹⁸ The Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of prophecy” in Revelation who has one purpose—“the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 19:10). To the seven churches, the Holy Spirit is speaking Jesus’ word through the prophecy of John so that Jesus and his word are known by each congregation (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).¹⁹ With this in mind, John intended for Revelation to be read in the public worship of the church making it critical to the preaching ministry of the seven congregations in Asia Minor (1:3; 22:18). Knowing the Old Covenant writings (including the prophets) “were written down for our instruction” (1 Cor 10:11), how much more the prophecy of the Spirit “to the churches.” Preaching what the Spirit speaks to the churches, means the preacher must speak the Spirit-inspired prophecy to the congregations they shepherd. The Spirit is still working through his preachers to speak his inspired word (2 Tim 4:2). So preaching prophetically requires the preacher to preach prophesy as Jesus’ word to his church.

¹⁷Baukham notes that to be in the Spirit “frequently denotes temporary experience of the Spirit’s power in prophetic speech or revelation.” Richard Baukham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (London: T & T Clark, 1993), 150.

¹⁸Aune argues in *Prophecy in Early Christianity* “Several important studies have convincingly demonstrated that the seven proclamations of Rev. 2-3 not only contain fragments of prophetic speech (e.g., 3:20), but also represent a typical form of prophetic speech considered as a whole.” Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 36.

¹⁹F. F. Bruce rightly notes, “It is through the Christian prophets that the Spirit of prophecy bears witness. What the prophets of pre-Christian days foretold is proclaimed as an accomplished fact by the prophets of the new age, among whom John occupies a leading place.” F. F. Bruce, “The Spirit in the Apocalypse” in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: Studies in Honour of Charles Francis Digby Moule*, ed. Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 337.

Spirit-Inspired Prophecy for Today

While most evangelicals feverishly defend inerrancy many fail to grasp the sufficiency of Scripture. Understanding Revelation 2-3 as prophecy echoing the salvation-judgment oracles of the Old Testament prepares one to unlock the meaning for congregations. As Osborne rightly insists, the present participle ἔχων along with the present tense λέγει “highlights the current activity of the Spirit in convicting the church of these truths.”²⁰ This is to say, the Spirit is speaking right now to churches who will hear what he has to say through the prophecy of the seven churches. As Baukham notes, “The Spirit’s prophetic ministry is both to expose the truth in this world of deceit and ambiguity, and to point to the eschatological age when the truth of all things will come to light.”²¹ As the medium of inspired revelation, the Spirit of Jesus is still speaking to his church in this world. Who better knows what the church needs to hear today than the Lord of the church? So the Spirit is speaking today to churches through the inspired prophecies what they need to hear today.

The Pastor as a “Prophet” to His Congregation

The role of prophets and prophecy in the early church is instructive for preachers today in understanding their role when preaching the apocalyptic prophecy of Revelation 2-3. What must not be missed is that the seven churches were written to be read and preached to the congregations of “the churches.”²² Usually in the early church prophets delivered oracles which were given to them by God in the worship meeting “declaring the revelation as they received it.”²³ As Hill notes, “The prophet is the one

²⁰Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 122.

²¹Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 125.

²²Baukham notes that “Christian prophets normally prophecies in “the reading of this written prophecy” was to occur “in the worship service” (1:3). *Ibid.*, 3.

²³*Ibid.*

who stands between the risen Christ and the church, giving voice to the church's Lord who is already present as *pneuma* but would be mute without his prophet."²⁴ While not receiving new revelation, preachers must see themselves as preaching in the prophetic tradition speaking for Jesus to his church when preaching from the Spirit-inspired prophecy of Revelation 2-3. As the word is preached, the preacher who takes on a prophetic role when preaching must do so with the aim of speaking from the word of the Scripture to the people as their pastor.²⁵ The pastoral element means applying the word directly to the local context of those who are preaching with the aim of a response.²⁶ Categorically, this would fall into what Peter Adam calls "words of exhortation" which he delineates with the verbs "call, denounce, warn, rebuke, command, give, judgment, encourage, appeal, urge, ask."²⁷ Also, preaching from Revelation 2-3 requires the preacher to pivot between salvation and judgment.²⁸ This is very much in keeping with the salvation-judgment oracles. So the preacher in preaching as a pastoral prophet must be specially attuned to the movement of the text while balancing this with his intimate knowledge of his congregation.²⁹

²⁴David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 91.

²⁵David Hill calls the prophets of the early church "pastoral preachers." Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 116-17.

²⁶Baukham notes, "The Christian prophets are prominent members of the Christian community." Rev 11:8, 16:6, 18:20, 24; 22:6, 9 show the local nature of the prophets. Baukham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 84.

²⁷Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1996), 76.

²⁸As Aune notes, "Prophets are the spokespersons of Yahweh, delivering to them his conditional word, sometimes threatening, sometimes benevolent." Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, xxvi.

²⁹Müller's assessment of prophecy in the seven churches as containing three basic elements is very helpful: "The basic form of this type of prophetic address is found in Rev. 2:1-7, and also consists of three basic elements: (1) accusation (v. 4), (2) admonition (v. 5a) and conditional threat of judgment (5b)." Aune continues by noting of Müller that he "finds this form in Rev. 2:12-17, 18-29; 3:1-6, 14-22. He traces this form, which originated in the OT, to John the Baptist (e.g. Matt. 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-9) and early Jewish apocalyptic (1 Enoch 91:3-10; Jub. 7:20-29; 36:3-11)." Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 276.

Implications from Hearing and Heeding the Preaching of Salvation-Judgment Oracles

Understanding Revelation 2-3 as apocalyptic prophecy mimicking the salvation-judgment oracles of the Old Testament has serious implications for the congregations who sit under the preaching of the seven churches. The message of Jesus to the seven churches is Spirit-inspired prophecy from Jesus communicated through the preacher for local congregations today. Each message in the letter exhorts the congregations to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” through demonstrating repentance. Such repentance prepares people to be faithful overcomers in their external witness in the world.

Preaching to Convict Congregations of Inspiration

To “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” is to embrace the message of Jesus to the churches as the Spirit-inspired word (θεόπνευστος-2 Tim 3:16). In Revelation, the Spirit “is considered to be the divine agent through which divine revelation is mediated to human beings.”³⁰ Also, John is “in the Spirit” when writing this prophecy (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).³¹ As Baukham notes, “What the Spirit says is what the exalted Christ says No doubt this is also implicitly the case with oracles in which the exalted Christ directly addresses the churches. . . .”³² So preaching prophecy must convince congregations that what is being said is Jesus’s word directed to them. Churches must see

³⁰Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 36.

³¹Baukham notes of this, “These four references to the Spirit are a claim that his prophecy is divinely inspired. They complement the claim that the revelation came from God and reinforce the very strong claim to divine authority (cf. 22:18-19) by which John places his work in the same category as the canonical prophets- or give it in a certain sense even a higher status, as the final prophetic revelation in which the whole tradition of biblical prophecy culminates (cf. 10:7).” Baukham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 117.

³²Ibid.

that the words are the revelation, not a “witness to revelation.”³³ In other words, the inspired Word does not contain the Word of Jesus, it is the Word of Jesus for that congregation. Further, what the Spirit says to the seven churches is the very word of Jesus himself for them to hear and heed.³⁴ The truth of the Spirit-inspired word is the bedrock doctrine for a congregation to receive the word.

Preaching to Convince Congregations of the Sufficiency of Scripture

A right understanding of the inspiration of Scripture should lead congregations to believe in the sufficiency of Revelation 2-3 to address the life and ministries of the church. Rationally, inspiration assumes sufficiency. The beauty of inspiration is that it allows for the text to remain sufficient in whatever context a congregation exists. Hearing what the Spirit says “to the churches” is a call for the hearer to grasp the present relevance of the ancient prophecy. Baukham points out that the hearing formula “seems to invite all readers to listen to the message addressed to each of the seven churches. It does not diminish the specificity of what is said to each church, as peculiarly relevant to that particular church.” So the call of the Spirit in the hearing formula assumes the sufficiency of the letter to all the churches.³⁵ Yet one cannot assume sufficiency because so many who believe in inspiration in *theory* do not believe in sufficiency in *practice*. Many congregations possess “a loss of confidence in the power of the Word” to do what

³³“The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 3.

³⁴As F. F. Bruce points out, “It is not that the Spirit is identical with the exalted Lord, but that the exalted Lord speaks to the churches by the Spirit-and the Spirit can scarcely be other than the Spirit of prophecy. The words which John writes to the churches by the Lord’s command he writes as a prophet.” As cited in Lindars, *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, 341.

³⁵As Baukham notes, “The range of different situations in these seven churches is sufficient for any Christian church in the late first century to find analogies to its own situation in one or more of the messages and therefore to find the whole book relevant to itself. Churches in later periods have been able to do the same, allowing for a necessary degree of adjustment to changing historical contexts.” Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 16-17.

God has promised.³⁶ Essentially, this is a loss of belief in the efficacy of God's Word as the living and abiding Word that is like a hammer which shatters rock (Heb 4:12; Jer 23:29). Preaching the prophecy of Revelation 2-3 as being the word of Jesus for the church today helps congregations to see its sufficiency. A weak understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture in a congregation's mind closes the door on any potential for the salvation-judgment oracles of Revelation 2-3 to be received powerfully.

Preaching for Internal Repentance

The salvation-judgment oracles of Revelation 2-3 are written to invoke a response of the hearers to the prophecy. Concluding each message, the hearing formula "functions as a prophetic signature and appeals to the hearers to hear and understand divine revelation."³⁷ The appeal of the hearing formula is for transformative change in the lives of all who hear Jesus' words. Osborne surmises that the hearing formula is "a prophetic warning to open one's mind and heart to kingdom truths . . . there is also a strong emphasis on the responsibility of God's people to open their ears, and it could be translated, 'Let the one who is willing to hear, listen.'"³⁸ So preaching the seven churches must challenge congregations to repent as they hear and heed Jesus. In the greater context of Revelation, Bauckham sees the prophecy in Revelation 2-3 as having "three closely related elements" of "discernment . . . prediction . . . response."³⁹ Discernment in relation to the seven churches shows "how things should look from the perspective of God's heavenly rule."⁴⁰ In congregations struggling to live as witnesses in a hostile world,

³⁶R. Albert Mohler, *He Is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 16.

³⁷Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 150.

³⁸Osborne, *Revelation*, 121.

³⁹Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 149.

⁴⁰Ibid.

prophecy audaciously assumes that the answer is to repent by seeing their situation through the lens of God’s perspective. Prediction shows how “the contemporary situation must change if God’s kingdom is to come.”⁴¹ Jesus addresses the situation of each congregation by confronting sin and compromise so congregations see their need to repent. Response shows itself in prophecy by calling the hearers to respond “to its perception of the truth of the contemporary world and its prediction of what God’s purpose must mean for the contemporary world.”⁴² The verdict of Jesus for each congregation calls for a response of repentance derived from seeing the world as Jesus’ truth dictates for it to be viewed. So preaching the seven churches requires one to acquire Jesus’ aim of life-transforming change from his word.

Preaching for External Witness

The aim of the prophecy in Revelation 2-3 is not just to save the hearers from judgment but also to strengthen the external witness of the church in overcoming the world. Thus, preaching the seven churches must help congregations to understand that the external witness of the church in a hostile world requires people to hear and heed the Spirit’s prophecy.⁴³ The overcomer is the one who hears and heeds the testimony of Jesus by faith. As John notes in 1 John 5:4, “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” Ultimately, preaching the seven churches needs to move congregations to live by faith in the Lord of the church so they bring others to faith in Jesus. The salvation-judgment form of prophecy in Revelation 2-3 is meant to lead congregations to building the kingdom of Jesus amidst the opposition of the kingdoms of this world. Baukham notes, “Prophecy

⁴¹Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 149.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Hill notes, “Judging from Revelation, the prophetic message is addressed directly to the community of faith rather than to those outside the church.” Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 86.

within the churches equips the churches to fulfill their prophetic ministry to the world, which is their indispensable role in the coming of God's kingdom, the task to which it is the function of Revelation to call them."⁴⁴ This means the Christians then and today must "meet the challenges which face them in circumstances of religious and political oppression."⁴⁵ So congregations live under a prophetic mandate to see the hostile world for what it is in which they witness as overcoming witnesses to Jesus. As such, preaching Revelation should for the hearers "open [the] world to divine transcendence."⁴⁶ Seeing the world through Jesus' eyes is critical to a congregation's witness in the world.

Conclusion

If one rightly understands the prophetic salvation-judgment elements in the seven churches of Revelation 2-3, there are implications for preaching prophecy. These implications from the seven churches gives preachers of local congregations the message Jesus is speaking through the Spirit to the congregations they lead.⁴⁷ Jesus is speaking to his churches in translucent language that sets the standard of who he is and the expectations he has for congregations in light of who he is. Further, Jesus expects congregations to respond to his prophecy in a spirit of repentance and to hear and heed his word. Thus, the message of Jesus to the seven churches offers a unique opportunity for preachers to speak the message of Jesus directly to their local congregation. As such this requires understanding the uniqueness of the message of Jesus to the seven churches as prophecy.

⁴⁴Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 121.

⁴⁵Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 278.

⁴⁶Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 7.

⁴⁷Baukhan notes, "The Spirit of prophecy speaks through the Christian prophets bringing the word of the exalted Christ to his people on earth, endorsing on earth the words of the heavenly revelations, and directing the prayers of the churches to their heavenly Lord." Baukham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 160.

CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY ASSESSMENTS AND
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Introduction

The seven churches of Revelation 2-3 demonstrate that Jesus is speaking to the churches today by what he said to the churches then. Mounce rightly notes, “We are reminded that the messages to the seven historic churches in Asia are at the same time a composite word to the church universal throughout time.”¹ Further, the seven churches were understood historically by the church to have present implications for congregations.² Yet today, little is said of the seven churches and how they speak to the church universal and thereby have much to say to local congregations today. This is to say, the implications for methodology and ministry are profound, especially when one considers that Jesus’ message to each congregation ends with the exhortation to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”³ So the message of Jesus to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 transcends its original context by communicating the will of Jesus for all churches in all places and times.

¹Robert Mounce, *Revelation 1-5* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 114-15.

²The Muratorian Canon states, “John also in the Revelation writes indeed to seven churches yet speaks to all.” James M. Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 54.

³Beasley-Murray notes, “Each letter is adapted to the needs of the individual congregations, but by the generalization that concludes each one is the message is driven home to all the churches.” G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 72.

The Seven Churches for the Churches

The repeated admonition of the message of Jesus to the seven churches is to “hear what the Spirit is speaking to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17; 28; 3:6, 13, 22). Grant Osborne rightly notes that the “major function” of the seven churches is “to address practical problems that are found in all the churches.”⁴ So when properly interpreted and explained, the seven churches give the church today practical application for the life and ministry of the church. Though congregations existed in a variety of contexts, the repeated pattern of the seven churches prioritizes for us what Jesus values in all churches. With all the problems within the seven churches, in an odd way they encourage the church today. As Harrington points out, “There never has been a perfect Christian community. Christians have been faithful and heroic, and they have been frail and vacillating. It is not enough for us to find comfort in the word to Philadelphia; we must also hearken to the word to Laodicea.”⁵ This to say, the seven churches squash a utopian view of the early church and the church today. So whenever or wherever a congregation lives and ministers, every congregation can know the word and thus the will of Jesus.

The Seven Churches for Internal Witness

The testimony of Jesus confronts the real truth of the spiritual condition of each congregation despite public perception. For Smyrna and Philadelphia the perception is that the churches are weak, poor and ineffective. Yet, Jesus offers only praise with no censure as the internal witness of those congregations to the gospel is what is leading to their persecution. For the remaining five congregations that outwardly look well, Jesus commends them for what they are doing well and demands repentance for what they are doing poorly. The call to repent is critical to the internal witness of a congregation to the gospel. Calling a congregation to repent holds congregations accountable to remember

⁴Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 105.

⁵W. J. Harrington, *Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 55.

the past times of spiritual obedience and blessing with the hope of recapturing the same in the present (Gal 1:6-9; 1 Thess 4:1-4; 2 Pet 3:1-2). Contextually, repentance means recalling a congregation's spiritual history and journey.⁶ Further, repentance involves turning away from error by embracing truth. This is to say, the internal witness of a congregation must have sound doctrine to instruct them in the will of Jesus. Doctrine both believed (orthodoxy) and lived (orthopraxy) is critical to the witness of the church to the gospel internally.

The Seven Churches for External Witness

The internal witness of the gospel within the church fuels the external witness of the church to the world. The *Sitz im Leben* of the seven churches demonstrate to congregations today how a church's locale impacts the challenges a congregation faces from external pressures while also presenting unique opportunities for them to have an effective external witness. The gospel fuels the church to give testimony to Jesus within each congregation's context. The enemy of gospel witness and gospel living is heterodoxy. It gives birth to the temptation to compromise both in what a congregation believes as well as how a congregation lives.⁷ When compromise creeps in, the received truth of the church in the Scriptures is critical to returning to a gospel-centered external witness (2:24). As Baukham notes, "[Revelation] reminds us that the church's witness to the world is authentic only as primarily a witness to truth-to the one true God and the truth of his righteousness and grace."⁸ True, gospel witness demands an unwavering

⁶Thomas notes, "The basis for renewal is to bear constantly in mind the manner in which they had received and heard the gospel." R. L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7, An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 251.

⁷As Beale points out, "All the churches are faced with the temptation to compromise Therefore the exhortation to overcome is either an encouragement to continue standing strong against compromise or to stop compromising." G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 269.

⁸Richard Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge

commitment to the truth of Scripture. Because of the seven churches, one might define witness as the unwavering response of the church to the truth in spite of external persecution. Pressure from society must be accepted as an opportunity to be faithful to Jesus. This requires the church to live with a heavenly worldview. As Baukham notes, the seven churches cause “the here and now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence.”⁹ This transcendence eclipses the external pressure and persecution so the church lives as kingdom citizens witnessing to the gospel.

The Seven Churches for Overcoming

The seven churches demonstrate how believers in the churches were to be overcomers as well (2:7,11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Congregations must be overcoming the world by understanding their eternal impact on the kingdom through their local context.¹⁰ As Baukham notes, “In a sense the whole book is about the way the Christians of the seven churches may, by being victorious within the specific situations in their own churches, enter the new Jerusalem . . . the message to each church alerts that church to what is specific about its section of the battlefield.”¹¹ The unique setting of churches requires them to see their setting as presenting unique challenges on how to live victoriously in their local context. Those who conquer are faithful to hear and heed the word of Jesus to the church. The reward for conquering is the presence of Jesus with its various blessings.¹² Baukham notes that John “shows the Christians of each of the seven

University Press, 1993), 160.

⁹Ibid., 8.

¹⁰Osborne notes that overcoming is “a result of the process of endurance.” Osborne, *Revelation*, 114.

¹¹Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 14.

¹²Hamilton notes that Jesus “gives us the one thing we cannot do without: himself.” Hamilton, *Revelation*, 79.

churches how the issues in their local context belong to, and must be understood in the light of, God's cosmic battle against evil and his eschatological purpose of establishing his kingdom."¹³ In other words, when Christians are victorious locally the kingdom of God is advanced both universally and eternally. This demands bold contextualization of the gospel to each congregation's local setting. This involves the church going against the flow of the worldly system in which they live by envisioning how the kingdom of God can be advanced.¹⁴

The Seven Churches for Preaching

Preaching the seven churches as prophecy shows the will of Jesus for local congregations (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19). Like the early Christian prophets, preachers must embody the prophetic role by acting as "the guardians and preservers of Christian behavior, beliefs and customs" in the local congregation of the church.¹⁵ As shepherds of the flock, preaching the seven churches needs to embody the prophetic elements of Revelation 2-3 while speaking directly to one's local congregation. Since the Spirit is speaking to "all the churches," he who inspired the prophecy still longs to show churches the truth he has spoken that they might hear him speaking. Mirroring the message of Jesus to the churches, preaching must pivot between looming judgment and the hope of salvation through repentance. As Baukham notes, "Revelation's prophetic critique is of the churches as much as of the world. It recognizes that there is a false religion not only in the blatant idolatries of power and prosperity, but also in constant danger that true religion falsify itself in compromise with such idolatries and betrayal of the truth of

¹³Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 15.

¹⁴Baukham notes that in Revelation the church "is called always to be counter-cultural." Ibid., 160.

¹⁵David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 277.

God.”¹⁶ So preaching must challenge the church to remain true by embracing orthodox truth while not being seduced by the world’s error.

Conclusion

The Apocalyptic’s purpose is to reveal Jesus so congregations will remain faithful to him (Rev 1:1).¹⁷ The Spirit is speaking to all the churches so “the message to a single congregation is broadened in application to all the churches of Asia, and to the church throughout the world.”¹⁸ What this thesis has sought to demonstrate is a consensus of practical implications of the seven churches for churches today. While the *Sitz im Leben* of each of the seven churches means the message of Jesus is contoured for each church, all the churches are to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The seven churches “tell us what Christ thinks of his church, both as it is and as it should be.”¹⁹ This means that “although each letter is addressed to the particular situation of a particular church, it is relevant for the needs of all ‘seven’ of the churches, and consequently for the universal church.”²⁰ Further, this thesis has shown how the prophecies of Jesus have serious implications for preaching for ministry and preaching in the local church context. The hope is that the seven churches are embraced as prophecy from the Holy Spirit to the churches today.

¹⁶Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 162.

¹⁷Johnson writes, “in the letters all derelictions are viewed as forms of inner betrayals of a prior relation to Christ.” Alan F. Johnson, *Revelation*, in vol. 12 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 432.

¹⁸Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 76.

¹⁹John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of His Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 15.

²⁰Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 226.

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ABSTRACT

PREACHING THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION 2-3

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In the New Testament, the message of Jesus to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 is the only direct discourse communicated to local congregations. When properly understood and interpreted, the implications for methodology and ministry are profound, especially when one considers that Jesus' message to each congregation ends with the exhortation to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." As detailed in chapter 1, this thesis purports that the message of Jesus to each church when properly interpreted and explained can then be contextualized into poignant implications for the life, teachings, and ministries of the local church. Chapter 2 demonstrates that the best way to interpret these seven messages is by comparing and contrasting the content in the seven messages through examining them in light of the repeated exegetical and structural content. Chapter 3 shows that the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 contain implications for today's church in regard to its life, doctrine, and discipline. Chapter 4 examines the implications for preaching in light of Jesus' prophetic messages being an echo of the salvation-judgment oracles of the Old Testament. Chapter 5 contains summary assessments and conclusions in regard to the practical implications of the seven churches. The benefit of this thesis is its emphasis on the practical implications for local congregations today in light of Jesus' message to the seven churches.

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