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THE SPIRIT ADDRESSES THE CHURCHES: A BIBLICAL-
THEOLOGICAL EXPOSITION OF REVELATION 2-3

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**THE SPIRIT ADDRESSES THE CHURCHES: A BIBLICAL-
THEOLOGICAL EXPOSITION OF REVELATION 2-3**

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I dedicate this doctoral research ministry project to my parents, Dr. Rey and Mrs. Yolanda Tibayan. Your investment, nurture, leadership, love, provision, and example have shaped and continue to shape me into a man who seeks to know and enjoy Jesus Christ in and above all things. From your marriage and parenting; to your Christian growth in listening to sermons on the radio in the morning and on the commute; to your demonstrable commitment to be present with and for Christian Fellowship Bible Church, Community of the Word, CrossView Church, and now Bethany Baptist Church; your light, life, and love continue to inspire me to be and do my best with what you have given me. I can never repay you. May this doctoral project and the earning of the doctorate be another taste that our Heavenly Father's face shines on you. I love you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CCEC	Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>MSJ</i>	<i>The Master's Seminary Journal</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
REBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary (Revised Edition)
SBET	Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary
TTCS	Teach the Text Commentary Series
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

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PREFACE

Without Christ Jesus and his seven spirits, Revelation would remain a locked book of confusion and conjectures for me and I would not preach it to my church family. So I thank God for uniting me to his Son in the power of his Spirit and for his repeated gift of understanding his words as I think over what he says (2 Tim 2:7).

I am next thankful for my parents, Rey and Yollie Tibayan, to whom I dedicate this project. My brothers Dennis, R. C., and Eric filled out my household foundation in my formative years. Thank you brothers for sparring with and pouring into me.

Building on my parents' foundation were my pastors at Christian Fellowship Bible Church and Capitol Hill Baptist Church. They not only taught the Bible but shepherded the community of saints to do the deep work of shaping and reforming my social imaginary for Christian discipleship. Along with CrossView Church LA and Bethany Baptist Church (BBC), these churches have molded me in ways beyond calculation. My professors at The Master's College, The Master's Seminary, The Resurgence Training Center, and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary challenged, stimulated, and strengthened my thinking. Among these pastors and teachers, I give thanks especially for Ed Ormeo who taught me to tremble at God's Word; Mark Dever, whose vision and embodiment of a healthy church opened up a world of godly ambition; Will Varner who taught me to love the Greek NT and make no excuses; and John Piper and Jim Hamilton, whose classroom ministry, forged and magnified by their church ministry, equipped me make textual and inner-canonical connections I might otherwise overlook.

I owe glad thanks to Southern Seminary. Jim Hamilton's vision for a DMin in

Biblical Theology was the exact program I needed for exegetical and theological development for a lifetime of pastoral ministry in Los Angeles. Justin Jackson and Matt Searles sharpened my thinking and deepened my joy as brothers in the same cohort. Brian Vickers has encouraged me in his teaching and patience. Michael Wilder gave me confidence. I'm grateful for Michelle Tipton's excellent proofreading work. I especially thank Joe Harrod for advising, challenging, and encouraging me to see this project to completion with great patience and wisdom.

Daniel and Kirsten Gardner's encouragement, support, and prayers have pushed me when I thought about quitting. Jean Hilte's warmth and belief strengthened me. Jim Armstrong kept me from the pit of discouragement. Jun Henares lovingly pushed me toward the finish line. BBC faithfully exercises responsibility for my discipleship and has empowered me to finish this work as part of my faithful discipleship. My secretary Barbara Spann heroically keeps BBC running. Space limits my ability to mention numerous members by name. My fellow pastors Ben Bratcher and John Kim gave me the space and capacity through their faithful shepherding ministry. My senior pastoral assistant John Lee faithfully filled the pulpit to give me space to prepare for the oral defense.

To my children: I love you more than life. May your offspring spread God's light, life, and love. Rock, you are a strong and noble man who fills me with godly pride. I hope you never lose your joy and drive to live out godly manhood for our King and his kingdom. Key, you are my original baby girl who keeps teaching me how to be a better girl dad. May your beauty and insatiable desire to learn inspire many. Story, you are beautiful, warm, loving, and funny. I hope your joy goes deeper and spreads wider than I can ask or think. City, my cute munchkin, your questions and quest to know God challenges our family to grow spiritually. May flowers bloom wherever God sends you. Reed, you are strong and bold. Your sweetness melts our hearts. I pray you channel your strength for great good in our world. Although you're bold you're still my baby.

Most of all: Joleen. You are the delight of my eyes, not only for your charm and beauty but your fierce and fiery fear of the Lord. I honor you for your powerful and effective love creating and driving a godly home. You give yourself to make our home a sweet refuge and ministry base for Christ's kingdom. God could not have given me a greater wife for life and ministry. Your support and strength make me a thousand times more the man I am today. How is it possible that I finished this project with my joy and life intact? The single human explanation is you. God knew it was not good for man to be alone and you know my life would stall and be derailed without our union and communion as saints and spouses. I learn more of Jesus through you than anyone in the world. I am blessed and overjoyed to have it so. You are my best friend and favor. You have followed me on this crazy ride and I will gladly spend the rest of my life pursuing you as we pursue our Lord Jesus. Thank you for being my ride-or-die on my quest to "kill the dragon and get the girl."

Until he comes.

P. J. Tibayan

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Biblical theology is essential to understanding and applying Scripture correctly. The pastor's job prioritizes preaching and teaching the Scriptures. The Christian's job requires him to get equipped by his pastor in knowing, enjoying, and applying Scripture in every area of his life for the salvation of the lost and building up of the saints (Eph 4:11-16). Just as exegesis and systematic theology are indispensable to this task, so is biblical theology. Graeme Goldsworthy boldly asserts that, without biblical theology, pastoral effectiveness is in jeopardy:

I would dare suggest that if the senior pastor is not making sure that all of the teachers and leaders are being trained in biblical theology, he or she is undermining his effectiveness and should make it his or her priority to rectify the matter. Biblical theology is the key to sound interpretation, the source of a reliable topical analysis of the Scriptures and the heartbeat of effective ministry.¹

What is Biblical Theology?

God wants humans to understand what the Bible teaches about God, man, the world, the church, history, and the future destiny of all things. Christians are responsible to teach one another and all nations "to observe everything [Jesus] commanded [them]" (Matt 28:20). Pastors, therefore, must preach and teach the Bible expositively in order to equip their churches.

Expository preaching is a primary mark of a healthy church.² This preaching happens when the words and goal of the biblical text(s) control the words and goal of the

¹ Graeme Goldsworthy, "Biblical Theology as the Heartbeat of Effective Ministry," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect & Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 286.

² See Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013) 65-84.

sermon preached.³ Since every passage is part of the whole Bible, the goal of the whole Bible necessarily informs the goal of every passage. Therefore, expository preaching must utilize a biblical-theological perspective. The relationship between the parts and the whole connects expository preaching with “whole-Bible biblical theology.”⁴ Mindful of biblical theology, one may define expository preaching with this addition: a sermon is expository if the words and goal of the text, *in light of the whole Bible*, control the words and goal of the sermon.

The problem with preaching biblical-theological expository sermons is defining biblical theology. Definitions run the gamut from “theology faithful to the Bible” to “seeing Jesus in every Bible passage.” Not everyone who claims to do biblical theology shares evangelical presuppositions.⁵ The definitions cited below are from those who share evangelical presuppositions. After reflecting on these definitions a succinct definition of biblical theology will be formulated and used to guide this project.

A Working Definition of Biblical Theology

Though non-biblical definitions of terms are not divinely authoritative, they are teaching tools to help explain concepts. The Bible does not define biblical theology.

³ Mike Bullmore, “A Biblical Case for Expository Preaching,” 9Marks.org, February 25, 2010, <https://9marks.org/article/biblical-case-expositional-preaching>. Mike Bullmore writes, “What is expository preaching? A sermon is expository if its content and intent are *controlled* by the content and intent of a particular passage of Scripture.”

⁴ This phrase is taken from D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 100. Graeme Goldsworthy helpfully calls this, “canonical biblical theology,” *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 227.

⁵ See a helpful list of evangelical presuppositions for biblical theology in Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 38-55. For a similar list, see Peter J. Gentry, “The Significance of Covenants in Biblical Theology,” *SBJT* 20, no. 1 (2016): 13-19. To see the effect of presuppositions on different definitions of biblical theology see Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

Therefore, a definition of this theological task must be measured against the words of Scripture and not the other way around. There are many valid ways of defining biblical theology, but not all definitions are created equal. Some are better than others.

Biblical theology is the study and application of Scripture using its own terms connected to the whole Bible with its storyline pointing toward Jesus Christ.

The Bible starts with the creation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and ends with Jesus and his bride in the new heavens and earth. Consequently, historical progression is crucial to defining the discipline of biblical theology. Geerhardus Vos defines the discipline as “nothing else than the exhibition of *the organic progress* of supernatural revelation in its *historic continuity and multiformity*” (emphasis mine).⁶

Biblical theology also relates the text to the whole Bible and to Jesus. Graeme Goldsworthy identifies biblical theology as the revelation of God and his ways⁷ in the way the Bible reveals it within its historical framework. Biblical theology studies how every text relates to (1) every other text in the Bible and (2) Jesus and his gospel.

Before one relates the text to the broader storyline and connects it to Jesus and the rest of the Bible, the text must be exegeted and studied on its own terms. Stephen Wellum includes these four elements of biblical theology in defining the discipline:

[W]hat, then, is biblical theology? It is best viewed as a *hermeneutical* discipline which seeks to do justice to what Scripture claims to be and what it actually is. . . . Biblical theology as a hermeneutical discipline attempts *to exegete texts in their own context* [italics mine] and then, *in light of the entire canon, to examine the unfolding nature of God’s plan and carefully think through the relationship between before and after in that plan* [italics mine] which *culminates in Christ* [italics mine].⁸

⁶ Geerhardus Vos, “The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology,” *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical-Theological Preaching* 14, no. 1 (May 1999): 3-8, <http://www.kerux.com/doc/1401A1.asp>.

⁷ Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 40, 54, and “What is the Discipline of Biblical Theology?,” 9Marks, February 26, 2010, <https://9marks.org/article/what-discipline-biblical-theology/>.

⁸ Stephen Wellum, “Reflections on the Significance of Biblical Theology,” *SBJT* 20, no. 1 (2016): 7-8. For an argument that “culmination in Christ” is christotelic as opposed to being christocentric, see Abner Chou, “A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic,” *MSJ* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 113–39.

James Hamilton concurs with the need for focusing on the text as the biblical authors intended it to be understood on its own terms and connecting it to the whole Bible as the one unified perspective. He states, “Biblical theology is the attempt to understand and embrace the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors.”⁹ Hamilton's definition does not make connections to the storyline or Christ explicit. Perhaps he intends for students to focus on the text and connecting it to the textual-canonical¹⁰ context without bringing in the *a priori* conclusions at the outset. In light of the hermeneutical spiral, naming one's evangelical and biblical presuppositions up front—such as a unified storyline and focus on Jesus—is not only tolerable but helpful.¹¹ Since it helps in stating the presuppositions, it also helps to name these crucial conclusions when defining the biblical-theological task. Furthermore, Hamilton embeds application in his definition of biblical theology. It is the *attempt to understand and embrace* the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors. The interpretive perspective is to be applied to one's life.¹²

To summarize, biblical theology *applies* Scripture to one's life as it attempts to understand and embrace the text's meaning *on its terms* while considering the *historical progression of the storyline, its relation to all other parts of Scripture, and its*

⁹ Jim Hamilton, “Biblical Theology and the Pastor,” Preaching Today, accessed December 22, 2016, <http://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2016/september/biblical-theology-and-pastor.html>. For an unpacking of this definition, see chapter 2 of James M. Hamilton Jr., *What is Biblical Theology?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 15-23. The article remains the main citation because of the final element in defining biblical theology in the following paragraph.

¹⁰ Textual-canonical context focuses on the words of biblical texts as opposed to historical-canonical context focusing on the storyline.

¹¹ For a thoughtful defense of this see Graeme Goldsworthy, “‘Thus Says the Lord’: The Dogmatic Basis of Biblical Theology,” in *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to Dr. D. B. Knox*, ed. Peter T. O'Brien and David G. Peterson (Homebush West, Australia: Lancer Books, 1986), 25-40. See figure A1 in appendix 1.

¹² John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 8. Frame defines theology as “the application of Scripture, by persons, to every area of life.” D. A. Carson states that biblical theology will call men and women to knowledge of the living God in Andrew David Naselli, “D.A. Carson's Theological Method,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, no. 2 (Autumn 2011): 259.

*culmination in Christ Jesus.*¹³ One scholar touches on all five of these elements in his definition. In Brian Rosner's view, biblical theology is the "theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus."¹⁴

The Aims of Biblical Theology

The aims of biblical theology correspond to the definition of the discipline. If biblical theology is the study and application of Scripture using its own terms connected to the whole Bible with its storyline pointing toward Jesus Christ, then those five elements give us five aims: text, Bible, storyline, Jesus, application. The overarching aim of biblical theology is to connect the first four elements so that it can be applied by the church and any other student of the Bible.

Exegete the text. One must study the text on its own terms. So, one looks at the grammar, syntax, terminology, and macrostructure of the document. One should then relate it to its own context. Why? Because God tells believers to "be diligent" in "correctly teaching the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4 and Deut 8:3). Therefore, Christians must pay attention to the words written and use those terms to frame their thinking. G. K. Beale starts here: a biblical-theological approach to a particular text seeks

¹³ The "text" can be seen through a micro or macro lens. Hamilton's definition allows for this but does not make it explicit. If one is studying the biblical authors as only the human biblical authors, one may argue that you cannot study the interpretive perspective of the one divine biblical author as the author. Because Hamilton speaks of the "interpretive perspective" in the singular, it is covered but not explicit. There is one divine author. The canon is not only a library of books, it is one book and must also be studied as such.

¹⁴ Brian Rosner, "Biblical Theology" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 10.

to give its interpretation first with regard to its own literary context.¹⁵ Carson exhorts students to work “‘*inductively from the text—from individual books and from the canon as a whole.*’ Its task is ‘*to deploy categories and pursue an agenda set by the text itself.*’”¹⁶

Identify the text’s relationship with the rest of the Bible. The second aim is to relate the text to the whole Bible. The text can relate to other biblical texts in various ways: by concept, terminology, themes, types, or logic. All texts relate because there is one mind behind all of it—the divine author (2 Tim 3:16). All Scripture texts fit together logically and cohere because God cannot lie (Heb 6:18).

Locate the text in the Bible’s storyline. Though every Bible text is related because of the divine author, the student of Scripture must go one step further. The storyline of Scripture is a more specific, and may be *the* specific, way to discover how each part of Bible relates to every other part. All texts relate to the storyline of the Bible, so the Bible student must understand the overarching story. Some plot it out as creation, fall, redemption, restoration.¹⁷ Every text relates to one of these four stages of the story, and all four stages relate to each other.

Graeme Goldsworthy’s storyline differs to some extent. He has a three-stage structure after the prologue of Genesis 1-11 where the kingdom pattern is established. First is the kingdom, which is God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule, in national history from Abraham to David/Solomon (Gen 12-1; Kings 11). Next, the kingdom is revealed in prophecy from Solomon’s reign to the Judah’s exile and eventual return to the

¹⁵ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 9.

¹⁶ Andrew Naselli, “D.A. Carson’s Theological Method,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29 no. 2 (Autumn 2011): 258-9.

¹⁷ James M. Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 33-34.

land. Lastly, the kingdom actually comes in Jesus Christ. It is inaugurated in his incarnation, cross, resurrection, and ascension. It continues to show its inaugurated presence in the church as people are born again and enter into union with Jesus. In the end, Jesus Christ will return, and the kingdom will be consummated finding expression in the whole universe.¹⁸ There are other ways of plotting the storyline.¹⁹ Every passage relates to every other text, not only because there is one divine author but also because there is one overarching storyline.

Identify how the text points to Christ. The study of Scripture needs to relate to Jesus because the storyline culminates in Jesus Christ. Jesus said the Old Testament points to him, saying the Scriptures “testify about [him]” (John 5:39). He points out “things” in Moses, all the Prophets, and the Psalms, that concerned and were fulfilled in him (Luke 24:27, 44-45). Paul, speaking of New Testament ministry, says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” D. A. Carson explains: “What he means is that all he does and teaches is tied to the cross. He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross-centered.”²⁰ All of Paul’s letters relate to Jesus Christ and his cross. The gospel accounts, Acts, the general letters, and the Revelation all point toward Jesus Christ, as well. The biblical theologian must

¹⁸ Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 26.

¹⁹ Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 16. For example, Beale asserts, “The Old Testament is the story of God, who progressively reestablishes his new-creational kingdom out of chaos over a sinful people by his word and Spirit through promise, covenant, and redemption, resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this kingdom and judgment (defeat or exile) for the unfaithful, unto his glory. . . . Jesus’s life, trials, death for sinners, and especially resurrection by the Spirit have launched the fulfillment of the eschatological already—not yet new-creational reign, bestowed by grace through faith and resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this new-creational reign and resulting in judgment for the unbelieving, unto the triune God’s glory.”

²⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 38.

legitimately connect the text to Jesus Christ in some way.²¹

Clarify and communicate God's intended response from the readers. Upon hearing and seeing Jesus, one is privileged and obligated to respond. All Scripture must be understood, believed, and obeyed. All those made in God's image are not merely to analyze texts but also apply them. Theology is the application of one's idea of truth, God, and reality. Therefore, the goal of Christian theology is to apply Scripture, as John Frame reminds us. As the text is understood and connected to the whole Bible, the storyline, and to Jesus, it is to have divine effect on our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

A Method for Biblical Theology in Preaching

If pastors consistently aim to study and articulate Scripture's teaching using its terminology related to the whole Bible with its storyline pointing toward Jesus, then they must have an effective method of making connections between the whole Bible and their text. Expository preaching is preaching where the words and goal of the text(s) related to the whole Bible control the words and goal of the sermon *to a specific audience*.

Therefore, the preacher must focus on the text and then turn his attention to the specific audience when crafting a sermon or Bible lesson.

Focus on the Bible. Here are the steps: look at, look around, look back, look forward, look up, and look again. First, look at the text. Understand what the biblical author meant in his historical and literary context. Second, look around the text at the whole book and corpus to shed light on the text. Third, look back to antecedent theology: what was already written and understood and how does that clarify the meaning of the passage? Fourth, look forward to subsequent theology: what texts and truths follow this

²¹ There are not only biblical reasons but existential and situational reasons to point toward Jesus in every study of Scripture. Existentially, this is the Spirit's mission in our lives (John 16:14) and how he transforms us (2 Cor 3:18). Situationally, whether relating to non-Christians or Christians, pointing to Jesus (gospelizing) is the means to converting faith (Rom 10:17) and Christian maturity (Col 1:28-29).

passage in the storyline? Pastors should focus specifically on other biblical quotations and allusions for connections in these two steps.²² Fifth, look up to God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment, focus, and central figure of the Bible.²³

Focus on the audience. After getting a sense for the words and goal of the text, the preacher must focus on those to whom he preaches. Who will hear the message? For preachers it is often a church gathered. In most public Christian gatherings in the West, non-Christians also show up. So, how shall the preacher prepare? He should focus on his church context and his cultural context.²⁴ For the church context, he should look at his church's statement of faith (systematic theology) and their life together. He should know how to apply the text to their sins, temptations, struggles, victories, challenges, and trials, both corporately and individually, denominationally and in broader evangelicalism.

He should also have a good understanding of the culture of his hearers. What are the culture's symbols, stories, beliefs, behaviors, and customs? What is their

²² For definitions and criteria see G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 29-40.

²³ Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 9. Beale writes, "In this light, a biblical theological approach to a particular text seeks to give its interpretation first with regard to its own literary context and primarily in relation to its own redemptive-historical epoch, and then to the epochs preceding, and following it." Schreiner similarly states, "The first task of every interpreter is to read the OT in its own right, discerning the meaning of the biblical author when it was written. Further, as we argued above, each OT book must be read in light of its antecedent theology, so that the storyline of scripture is grasped. But we also must read all of scripture canonically, so that the OT is read in light of the whole story—the fulfillment that has come in Jesus Christ. We always consider the perspective of the whole, of the divine author in doing biblical theology and in the preaching of God's word. We read the scriptures both from front to back and back to front. We always consider the developing story as well as the end of the story." Thomas R. Schreiner, "Preaching and Biblical Theology" *SBTJ* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 28. James Hamilton lays out a similar methodology in "Biblical Theology and Preaching," in *Text Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2010), 200.

²⁴ Richard Lints, *Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 293. These horizons were a summary and extension of Lints's in a DMin Old Testament Theology lecture at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Summer 2016, by Dr. Oren Martin. If biblical theology's focus is on the textual, covenantal, and canonical horizons, application, preaching, and Christian ministry today takes those three horizons and integrates them with their confessional and contemporary horizons.

worldview?²⁵ Pastors should talk to non-Christian friends and neighbors, read widely, listen to media from different perspectives, and discuss the cultural worldview with pastoral colleagues in the same cultural context to compare notes.²⁶

The preacher should take the content and intent of the passage in light of the whole Bible and apply it to his hearers with sensitivity to their confessional and contemporary context. This means he should at some point connect the text to the storyline of the Bible pointing, toward Jesus Christ.

Familiarity with the Literature

The following is a survey of the literature necessary for an expository preaching sermon series on the book of Revelation in the aforementioned biblical-theological perspective. The resources are divided into two categories. The commentaries study Revelation's structure, words, grammar, and literary features in historical context. The theological resources analyze Revelation for its theology and its place in New Testament theology, or canonical theology.

Commentaries

Exegeting a book of the Bible for exposition requires attention to the original language, in-depth analysis of terms, grammar, and syntax, historical background, and theological accuracy. Commentaries that include theological syntheses will pleasantly surprise preachers. Revelation 2-3 is generally understood and applied in more agreement than Revelation 6-19 and the different interpretations of the millennium in chapter 20.

Among the commentaries that interact with the Greek text of Revelation, the

²⁵ James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 22-24. James Sire says their worldview perceives prime reality, the nature of external reality, nature of humanity, events after death, the possibility of knowledge, standards of right and wrong, meaning of human history, and personal life commitments.

²⁶ D. A. Carson, "Preaching that Understands the World" in *When God's Voice Is Heard: The Power of Preaching*, ed. Christopher Green and David Jackman (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003) 149-63.

most thorough is G. K. Beale’s commentary.²⁷ Beale interacts with all the major current scholarship at the time of his writing, wrestles with the Greek text, and excels in thinking through connections to the Old Testament. Beale co-authors a work with Sean M. McDonough commenting on the New Testament use of the Old Testament, which proves extremely valuable in making inner-canonical connections.²⁸ Robert Thomas, who takes a strictly futurist approach, pays close attention to the Greek syntax.²⁹ David Aune’s three-volume commentary effectively analyzes the Greek grammar and provides a wealth of information on the Greco-Roman political and cultural context of the day.³⁰ Grant Osborne’s commentary clearly lays out the various options and gives convincing reasons for his conclusions. He takes a more eclectic approach slanted toward futurism.³¹

The NICNT volume by Robert Mounce explains the text well and is succinct.³² Even if Richard Bauckham rejects that the Apostle John wrote Revelation, his short commentary is worth consulting because of his other excellent works on Revelation.³³ Colin Hemer’s work on the seven churches focuses on the historical setting with scholarship based primarily on ancient sources.³⁴ James Hamilton’s commentary is

²⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

²⁸ G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, “Revelation” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Carson and G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1081-1161.

²⁹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7 Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992).

³⁰ David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, in Volume 52A of *World Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 2014).

³¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

³² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

³³ Richard Bauckham, “Revelation,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1287–1306.

³⁴ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, New edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

helpful at applying the fruits of exegesis and biblical theology to the reader.³⁵ His sensitivity to the church, to non-Christians, and to biblical theology's climax in Revelation make this commentary a good comparison to this project. Other commentaries from an expositional and homiletical thrust will be consulted for this preaching project.³⁶

Theological Analyses

Additionally, many whole-Bible biblical theologies, New Testament theologies, and theological introductions will be consulted for this project. The whole-Bible biblical theology most crucial to putting the storyline together is Graeme Goldsworthy's *According to Plan*.³⁷ He clearly lays out the theme of the kingdom as God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing along the three-stage structure explained above. G. K. Beale's *New Testament Biblical Theology* also embraces the new creational kingdom as a central motif to guide one along the storyline.³⁸ Thomas Schreiner's work on biblical theology loosely connects the theme of the King revealed in his beauty as central to the Bible's story. He discusses some important biblical-theological themes of opposition, judgment, sovereignty, redemption, endurance, and the new creation in Revelation.³⁹ James Hamilton points out the new exodus theme in Revelation and the center of the book, which he proposes is God's glory in salvation

³⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

³⁶ Leon L. Morris, *Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); N. T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984); Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2000); Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001).

³⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*, Softcover edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002).

³⁸ Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*.

³⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

through judgment.⁴⁰

Schreiner's *New Testament Theology* covers the themes of God-centeredness, the storyline, and the already/not yet in the New Testament and Revelation.⁴¹ He also traces the Holy Spirit, sin, faith and obedience, salvation history, God's people, and the consummation throughout the New Testament in general and Revelation in particular. Leon Morris discusses God's glory, sovereignty, and people in his volume.⁴² I. H. Marshall looks at Revelation's story and themes in theological perspective before relating it to the Johannine corpus and the rest of the New Testament.⁴³ After looking at the contents and interpretive methods of Revelation, George Ladd looks at theodicy, wrath, and the coming kingdom.⁴⁴

Three monographs on the theology of Revelation are worth special attention. Graeme Goldsworthy wrote *The Gospel in Revelation* to expound the essential, contemporary message of Revelation to Christians.⁴⁵ As such, he looks at the gospel as the key to the book, the hope in suffering, the result of the Lamb's death, and other important themes of Revelation. Richard Bauckham makes the case for reading the

⁴⁰ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

⁴¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁴² Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁴³ I. Howard Marshall, *A Concise New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

⁴⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

⁴⁵ Graeme Goldsworthy, "The Gospel in Revelation," in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2001), 149-328. Two other helpful biblical-theological introductions to Revelation are Charles E. Hill, "Revelation," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 517-54 and G. K. Beale, "Revelation" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 356-63.

Revelation as prophetic, apocalyptic, and epistolary.⁴⁶ He notices the seven letters are concerned with truth, repentance or judgment, Christ's role as the true witness, the church mirroring the world, and end with eschatological hope and encouragement.⁴⁷ Paul Spilsbury's reader's guide to the book correctly emphasizes Revelation's intended effect of shaping the sacrificial kind of discipleship by the use of literary features.⁴⁸

How Does Biblical Theology Help an Exposition of Revelation?

Biblical theology aids the student to study and apply the book of Revelation using its own terms connected to the whole Bible with its storyline pointing toward Jesus Christ. Reserving the exegesis for the remaining chapters, the setting in the storyline and some biblical themes show the value of biblical theology in Bible exposition.

Revelation Set in the Bible's Storyline

Revelation is the last book in the canon, so it has a unique and prominent place in the larger framework of Scripture. It is in the commonly labeled fourth act of the Bible's story: consummation. It follows and completes the creation, fall, and redemption narrative. In Miles Van Pelt's covenantal structure of the canon, it is the covenant epilogue.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁴⁷ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 122-25.

⁴⁸ Paul Spilsbury, *The Throne, The Lamb, and The Dragon* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002).

⁴⁹ Miles Van Pelt, "Structure of the Christian Bible," Biblical Training, accessed on November 26, 2016, <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/structure-christian-bible/biblical-theology/van-pelt-blomberg-schreiner>.

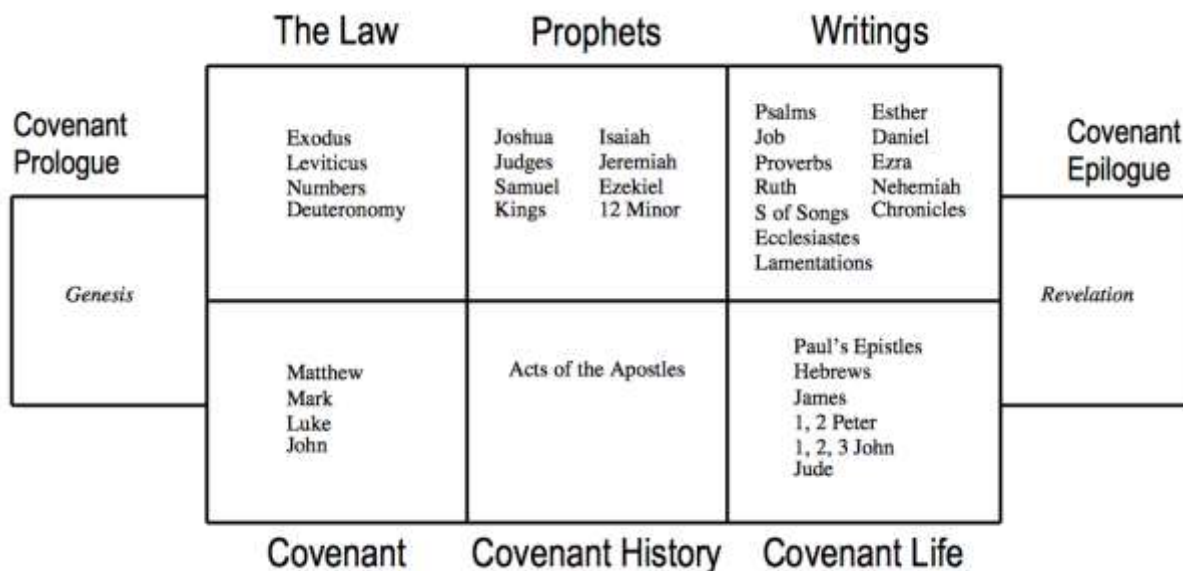


Figure 1. The covenantal arrangement of the Christian Bible⁵⁰

Revelation is the climax of the Bible's story. The Garden of Eden comes full circle in escalated fashion. Paradise was created and lost in Genesis. It is redeemed at the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Paradise is renewed and resurrected in cosmic proportion in the end. Ever since the curse and judgment handed down in Genesis 3, the creation was subjected to futility with groaning. In Revelation, we see this final redemption realized.

The good news was secured in Jesus Christ's first coming, and the redemption is consummated in the Revelation. In Jesus, God's wrath was propitiated. When Jesus rose from the dead, he was the first fruits of that resurrection. But the rest of the harvest is slowly coming in. The Spirit descended. The accomplishment of Christ's work is applied in the regeneration of the saints. But still, throughout the church's battle between the first and second coming, the redemption is only experienced in part. In the book of Revelation, the redemption is signified as consummated.

The Bible teaches an already-not-yet eschatological structure. Revelation clearly defines the not-yet against the background of the already. Chapters 2-20 display

⁵⁰ Miles Van Pelt, *Biblical Training*, accessed on November 26, 2016, https://www.biblicaltraining.org/sites/default/files/curriculum/BT_201_charts_VanPelt.pdf.

the overlap of the old and new age before the old is finally gone. The church is caught in a cosmic struggle against false doctrine, sin in the camp, and persecution from the outside. Revelation wraps up the canon's message to the church in battle by setting the struggle in the context of cosmic warfare against Satan, the beast, and the false prophet. In other words, behind the trials of sin, doctrine, and persecution is the enemy who seeks to destroy the people of God. It is a spiritual warfare. The New Testament letters testify to this in the background while the book of Revelation takes this element out of the background and foregrounds it.

Biblical-Theological Themes in Revelation

Since Revelation stands as the covenant epilogue wrapping up the loose ends of the Bible, several biblical-theological themes are embedded in the book, and the consummation pulls them together. Paradise was lost in Genesis 3 with man's sin. In Revelation 21-22 paradise is finally restored in escalated fashion. The Sabbath rest of God in Genesis 2:3, and pointed to in the Ten Commandments, captures the church's desires in Hebrews 4 where the church is encouraged to strive to enter that rest (Heb 4:9-11). The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world receives the fullness of his reward at the consummation—his people purchased (Rev 5:9). Now God's people can reflect God perfectly as his image bearers who reign with him without sin forever and ever (Rev 22:5) as originally created (Gen 1:26-28). Lastly, Satan—the great enemy—is finally, decisively, and completely defeated, never to tempt God's people again. He has been deceiving and attacking God and his people ever since the Garden of Eden (Gen 3). He will be thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented forever and ever (Rev 20:10).

This is the great hope of the consummated kingdom where God's sinner-saving, curse-reversing reign is comprehensively realized without exception in the universe. Revelation also communicates the fact that this sinner-saving, curse-reversing rule has already been inaugurated. The church is currently conquering before Jesus's

return (Rev 2-3). The church is redeemed already. They are blessed now (Rev 1:3). And yet, the church struggles to conquer in their lives before the consummation as they wrestle with sin, Satan, idolatry, immorality, false teaching, fear, persecution, opposition, the world, and a lack of love for God (Rev 2-3).

Overview of Revelation 2-3

It may be helpful to say a word about each church and summarize the idea of all of Revelation 2-3 (see Table 1).⁵¹ The Lord Jesus tells the church at Ephesus to repent from her coldness and return to passionate love so that they conquer and their lampstand is not removed (Rev 2:1-7). He calls the church in Smyrna to be courageous and faithful in the face of persecution and death, so that they receive the crown of life as conquerors (Rev 2:8-11). The Spirit sharply rebukes the church in Pergamum for having members who hold to false teaching, calling them to repent, so that they conquer and are not cut down by Christ's sword (Rev 2:12-17). The Son of God demands the church in Thyatira to repent of tolerating false teachers and to hold onto Jesus, so that they conquer instead of being thrown into God's affliction, having their children struck dead (Rev 2:18-29). He writes to the church in Sardis to repent of their hypocrisy and incomplete works in order to conquer, lest he come upon them like a thief with an unexpected judgment (3:1-6). The church in Philadelphia is encouraged to hold on to what they have, even against opposition, so that they conquer and keep their crown (3:7-13). Lastly, the Lord Jesus commands the church in Laodicea to seek him, commune with him, and repent of their self-reliance so that they avoid being vomited out of Jesus's mouth and can instead conquer (3:14-22).

⁵¹ The biblical-theological expositions of this project will focus on the seven sections summarized here and an eighth sermon summarizing the main message of Revelation 2-3.

Table 1. Distinctive features of the seven churches of Revelation 2-3

<i>Church</i>	<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Approval</i>	<i>Sin</i>	<i>Call</i>	<i>Threat</i>	<i>Reward</i>
Ephesus 2:1-7	Holds stars among lamp stands	Works, endurance; holiness; discernment	Left love they had at first	Remind; repent; return to first works	Remove lamp stand	Eat from tree of life
Smyrna 2:8-11	First/Last; risen one	Enduring trials and opposition	N/A	Fear not; be faithful to death	N/A	The crown of life; safety from the 2 nd death
Pergamum 2:12-17	Has sharp double-edged sword	Endures Satanic physical attack	Syncretism; stumbled; adultery; false teaching	Repent	Judgment by sword	Hidden manna and white stone
Thyatira 2:18-29	Son of God; fiery eyes; bronze feet; tests hearts & minds; repays for works	Works; love; fidelity; service; patience; better works	Tolerate false teaching; idolatry; adultery	Repent; hold on to Jesus	Great affliction; strike children dead	Authority over the nations, morning star
Sardis 3:1-6	Has the 7 spirits of God and 7 stars	N/A	Dead hypocrisy lacking works; not alert	Be alert; stabilize what remains; remind; keep; repent	Jesus will come upon them suddenly	White clothes; name in book life; claim before God
Philadelphia 3:7-13	Holy/true one; has key of David to open/close	Little power yet keeping Jesus's word and name	N/A	Hold on to what you have	Someone takes your crown	Recognized by false Jews; kept from testing; pillar in temple; Name on him

<i>Church</i>	<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Approval</i>	<i>Sin</i>	<i>Call</i>	<i>Threat</i>	<i>Reward</i>
Laodicea 3:14-22	The Amen; faithful & true one; originator of creation	N/A	Lukewarm; self- sufficient; arrogant	Buy resources from Jesus; be zealous; repent; commune	Vomit out of mouth	Sit on Jesus's throne

The churches in Asia desire to conquer and come out victorious in the end. They want to win in the name of Jesus, but the world and Satan oppose them with persecution, false teaching, and distractions. Deep down, some of the churches are fearful and doubting. Others are proud, cold, and merely keeping the outside appearance of vibrant faith and discipleship. If they fail to conquer, Satan will defeat them and neutralize their mission. So Jesus comes as a guide to remind them that he, too, faced sin and knows its sting through his death for sinners. He knows persecution and opposition. He is the Lord of the church, holding their stars and lampstands, holding the sword with his omniscient eye and powerful and holy love. He calls them to repent of their sins, to keep repenting, and to hold on to him. He calls them to repent of false teaching and immoral living and hold on to Jesus (churches at Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis), and to repent of coldness and hold on to Jesus (churches at Ephesus and Laodicea). And in whatever else they do, keep holding on to Jesus (churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia.). His final call is that they would hear and heed the Spirit who is speaking to the churches. The Spirit is speaking and moving. Will they listen, heed, trust, and obey? If they fail to listen, they will cower, quit, and die. But if they hear and heed the words of life, they will conquer and receive the eternal reward. Will these fledgling and distracted churches be wiped out? Or will they turn from their fledgling and sinning to conquering and communing with their Lord? What about the churches today? Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!

CHAPTER 2

REVELATION 2:1-7—REPENT FROM ABANDONING YOUR INITIAL LOVE

Many people think they know better. Not even God can correct them. In 1 Samuel 15 Saul thought he knew how to trust and obey God better than God did. Though God clearly commanded Saul to kill all the Amalekites and their livestock, Saul decided to save some money (livestock) and give it to God rather than obey the command. When the prophet Samuel called King Saul to repent, Saul made an excuse. So God rejected Saul as king (1 Sam 15:23).

Soon, David was also called to repent from what may be worse sins: adultery and murder. Yet when confronted by the prophet Nathan, David repented and was not removed from his kingship. God graciously forgave and restored him (2 Sam 12:13). Both had opportunity but only one repented.

How many second chances has the church and her members blown? How many times have they resolved to turn around, make a change, and start fresh? God gives the readers this opportunity once again as they meditate on Revelation 2:1-7.

Jesus tells John in verse 1 to “write to the angel of the church in Ephesus.” The angel may refer to a spiritual being representing the particular church, even though the letter is ultimately addressed to the churches (2:7).¹ Jesus addresses the church in Ephesus, a group of Christians bearing responsibility for one another’s discipleship, both collectively and individually.²

¹ See chapter 9, pp. 145-6, for discussion on “the angel.”

² Jonathan Leeman, “A Congregational Approach to Unity, Holiness, and Apostolicity” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan

Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire and a major center for commerce, politics, and religion. A temple to Artemis was built there over a sacred tree-shrine.³ The city served as an asylum for criminals. Paul planted the church and later warned the elders of the church about the challenges that would lie ahead in their pastoral ministry (Acts 19-20). The city was situated on a trade route between Rome and the East. Its many travelers made it susceptible to itinerant frauds coming through the church, similar to many false teachers and self-professed church leaders today who have opportunities to communicate to churches.⁴

Jesus gives three imperatives but only one is repeated twice: “Remember, then, how far you have fallen, *repent*, and *do* the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will remove your lampstand from its place, unless you *repent*” (2:5). The command to repent frames this pericope for several reasons. First, Jesus mentions repentance twice (2:5). Jesus is calling the church to repent. Second, the word “then” (οὕτως) in verse 5 indicates that the text preceding verse 5 gives a reason for the command. Third, although the command is threefold—remember, repent, and do—repentance is repeated as the only condition to avoid the consequence of their lampstand being removed. Fourth, in the larger context of chapters 2-3, repentance and endurance are the main commands.

Therefore, the main call of Revelation 2:1-7 is this: Repent from sin so that Jesus does not remove the local church. In this call, he gives them an opportunity to repent from their sin today. The four reasons this text leverages to turn hearts to repentance are because of (1) what you have done, (2) what you may lose, (3) what you will receive, and (4) who is calling.

Leeman (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 359-60. The local church should be defined as its members. The definition of the church is important to applying this passage.

³ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 44-7.

⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 68.

Repent Because of What You Have Done (2:2-5a, 6)

The first reason the church should repent is because of what they have done, stated in 2:2-4. Jesus introduces himself as the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands (2:1). The lampstands are the churches (1:20). The imagery signifies Jesus's familiarity and firsthand knowledge of the churches. Accordingly, it is not surprising for Jesus to say, "I know your works" (2:2). Jesus knows everything about the church at Ephesus—their thoughts, motivations, desires, intentions, and actions. In this passage he reminds them that he knows their good works, their sin, and the solution to their sin. Furthermore, Jesus comprehensively knows the churches today.

Jesus Knows Your Good Works (2:2-3, 6)

"I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people. You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars." (2:2). Jesus knows their deeds. He knew they were doers and not hearers only (James 1:22). God prepared good works for Christians to accomplish, and they should be encouraged when completing them (Eph 2:10).

Jesus knew the church was disciplined. They did not tolerate evil people who were unrepentant. They likely practiced church discipline unlike the churches in Pergamum (2:14-15) and Thyatira (2:20-23). Churches today can learn from this example to cultivate a culture of giving and receiving reproof and correction for the purposes of restoration (Matt 18:15-17). Discipline implies that a church must practice meaningful membership.⁵ Today, many churches practice neither responsibility for one another's

⁵ Church membership can be defined as "a mutually understood responsibility for one another's discipleship, both individually and corporately." See Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 39-45; Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). For practical steps to recovery, see Mark Dever, "Regaining Meaningful Church Membership" in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas

discipleship (e.g., through membership) nor church discipline. The churches that do, like the Ephesian church, are to be commended.

Jesus knew the church in Ephesus was also discerning, testing self-proclaimed apostles and finding them to be liars. “Apostles” probably refers to traveling Christians spreading the gospel and planting churches. Some of them were false teachers, probably teaching legalism like the Judaizers or lawlessness like the antinomians.⁶ The Ephesian church further displayed their discernment in hating the practices of the Nicolaitans (2:6). The church devoted themselves to the apostolic teaching and sniffed out error. They only affirmed true teachers teaching true doctrine. Today, churches should know their Bible, the story of the Bible, and the basic doctrines as confessed in their statement of faith. Typically, churches should have and teach statements of faith that proclaim and protect both the apostolic teaching of the gospel and the Christians who make up the church.⁷

Lastly, Jesus knew that the church was determined to follow him because they endured without burning out (2:3). They persevered and endured hardships, willing to die physically and die to themselves daily. It is likely they had to resist the imperial cult who would pressure them to confess Caesar as Lord.⁸ The Bible calls all Christians to expect suffering (2 Tim 3:12; Acts 14:22).

White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007) 57-60.

⁶ Some say the false apostles were traveling teachers subordinate to the twelve apostles. See G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 229 and Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 59. Still others, like Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 113-14, think they claimed the status of the twelve and Paul in their pride. It is harder to imagine false teachers claiming equality to the twelve in the twenty-first century compared to the first century. Osborne is probably correct, though the application today is essentially the same if one believed they were not claiming equality with Paul and the twelve apostles.

⁷ See Jonathan Leeman, “Confessions: Thick or Thin?” *9Marks Journal* (Winter: 2016): 27-32.

⁸ J. Scott Duvall, *Revelation*, TTCS (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 41.

Jesus Knows Your Sin (2:4)

The church in Ephesus was known for their good deeds, discipline, discernment, doctrine, and determination. But in light of such commendation, Jesus had something against them. They abandoned the love they had at first (2:4). What does Jesus mean by “first”? One may argue it is first in prominence, not chronology, like the “first” and greatest command (Mark 12:29-30). However, the commands to remember and to do the works they did at first have a time element. Therefore, Jesus does not mean first in priority only but also in chronology.⁹ Initially, they had love and now they have abandoned it.

Was the love they had at first a love for God, for fellow Christians, or for non-Christian neighbors? G. K. Beale believes that the love here is love for non-Christians evidenced in witness. He bases this conclusion on the connection to the lampstand.¹⁰ While shining light as a lampstand is certainly connected to love, it is not to be identified with love. The light is a result or goal of the love, but not its equivalent. Some say it is love for other people or fellow church members.¹¹ It may mean a love for God, since that is the greatest command (Mark 12:30). The Bible talks about loving truth (Pss 1:2, 119:97), but loving truth can miss the personal aspect of love with a hyper focus on doctrine (1 Cor 8:1).

⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 115. “[T]hat is, shortly after conversion. They had lost the first flush of enthusiasm and excitement in their Christian life and had settled into a cold orthodoxy with more surface strength than depth.”

¹⁰ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 230–231. “The idea is that they no longer expressed their former zealous love for Jesus *by witnessing to him in the world*” (emphasis his). He bases this claim on Jesus’s introduction as the one who walks among the lampstands and on Matt 24:12-14. There is a connection between love and shining light. Beale seems to take the light shining as the means or manner of love. It seems more accurate to see shining light as the purpose or result of love rather than the means or manner of the love. In other words, the initial love is not evangelism but love for God and others that leads to evangelism (among other good works).

¹¹ Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 72. Johnson claims the love abandoned is not for God because that is idolatry, which is rebuked in messages to Pergamum (2:14) and Thyatira (2:20). Also see Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 69.

The text does not explicitly answer the question. The silence may be strategic. The greatest command is to love God, and the second is to love neighbor (Mark 12:30-31). John does not define the object of the love but possibly leaves it open to include both.¹² Love for God is the source necessarily flowing out in love for people. Love for people must flow from the spring of love for God, or God will be marginalized and love will cease to be love. The church missed the whole point of the life of the church: love is the source, means, and goal of who we are and what we do. Following the command to love God (Deut 6:5), we learn that the reason you learn doctrine and test those claiming to be prophets is because God is testing your love for him (Deut 13:1-5). If the church is guilty of lovelessness while maintaining active expressions of faithfulness, what must the church do?

Jesus Calls You to Repentance (2:5a)

Jesus calls the church to repent. He says, “Remember then how far you have fallen, repent, and do the works you did at first” (2:5). Jesus commands the church to remember, repent, and return.

Remember. Jesus does not correct the church for merely lacking love, but for abandoning the love they previously possessed. The present tense of the verb communicates remembering must be a habitual practice. Christians do well to remember their sense of joy, peace, and relief that resulted from the forgiveness of sins. They should remember their sense of assurance that God loved them and favored them. Christians do

¹² Several authors make the point that it includes both love for God and others. “Their early love had grown cold and been replaced with a harsh zeal for orthodoxy,” Osborne, *Revelation*, 116. James M. Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 66-67, rightly gets to the core of abandoned love as a “lack of joy, faded fervor, just going through the motions.” Neither view necessarily eliminates the other, per Alan Johnson, *Revelation*, in vol. 13 of REBC, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 613. Leon Morris, *Revelation*, 65, says it is unclear: “It is not clear whether this is love for Christ (‘you do not love me now as you did at first’, GNB), or for one another (‘you have given up loving one another’, Moffatt), or for mankind at large. It may be that a general attitude is meant which included all three (‘you do not love as you did at first’, Phillips).”

well to ask themselves, What was my initial love for God spilling over to others like?

Our former church had one new convert who started bringing homeless people to church from Los Angeles to West Covina. Many of the more experienced Christians thought: “He’ll get over it and come down to normal Christianity. He’s on that ‘new Christian high.’” How wicked to think that way and belittle the initial love a new convert had for the Lord and for his people!

Loving God is finding all delight connected to, centered on, rooted in, and ultimately directed toward God. You love everything else because it gives you God. If anything detracts from loving God, you do away with it. You love people knowing it is a specific way to love God.

Repent. Secondly, Jesus commands them to repent.¹³ Repent from outward expressions of faithfulness without a self-conscious and vibrant love for God and for others. To repent and turn back from lovelessness is not to stop being faithful with deeds, determination, discipline, doctrine, and discernment (2:2-3), but to do them *from* and *for* a love for God and others.

Return. Jesus calls the church “to do the works you did at first.” The Ephesian church did works previously that came from their love. Therefore, we must return to the works we did before which were connected with love for God and love for others.

Application

Non-Christian. If you are not a Christian you might say, “The one reason I can never become a Christian is because Christians are hypocrites. They say one thing yet do another; they say they love God with a fake smile on their faces and then turn around

¹³ See chapter 9, pp. 150-1 for more on the theme of repentance in these seven messages.

and backstab you.” If you feel that, think about three things.¹⁴ First, it is true that Christians act hypocritically. On behalf of my church, we are sorry for sinning against you and being inconsistent with what we say. All Christians are sinners, but we cannot use this as an excuse and simply say, “Get over it.” Our sin and hypocrisy give us reason to repent and ask for forgiveness. Second, Jesus hates hypocrisy more than you do (Matt 23:13-32). The Bible talks about hypocrisy, so Jesus is aware that there are hypocrites and fake Christians, and that even true Christians can be hypocrites at times. You have a good partner in hating hypocrisy. Thirdly, Martin Luther King, Jr. was confronted with the hypocrisy of many European-American Christian pastors saying King, Jr. was wrong for fighting the way he was against racism. For Martin Luther King Jr., the answer was not to reject Christianity but to go deeper into true Christianity.¹⁵ Racist Christianity was just a false Christianity, or a fake expression of it. So, if you have been offended by hypocrites, that does not mean you should reject Jesus. It means they have been acting as sinners and need the solution only found in Jesus. You can find that solution too because one need not be Christian to be a hypocrite. You just need to be human.

Children. Children, God knows your heart and desires you to find your happiness in him. Beware of the lie to obey only because your parents are watching, or only out of obligation. Repent from loveless obedience. Obey and work because you love God and have been loved by him. He sent Jesus for you. He sent your parents and the church to preach Christ to you regularly.

Employee. Christian brother or sister in the workplace, work as unto the Lord and not for men (Col 3:23), because the Lord is loving you and giving you an opportunity

¹⁴ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008) 51-67.

¹⁵ For example, see Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 85-110.

to love him and love others through your tasks, responsibilities, and obligations. Repent from loveless compliance. All work is meaningful because every task is an opportunity to love God and others.

Jesus knows the church's good works, their outward righteousness of deeds, discipline, doctrine, and determination. But he rebukes their inward lovelessness. He calls the church to remember their initial love, repent from lovelessness, and return to the love they had at first. The first reason they are to repent, then, is because they have sinned subtly in the midst of commended obedience. There are three more reasons the text tells the church to repent.

Repent Because of What You May Lose (2:5b)

Jesus gives a second reason the church should repent of its abandoning its initial love: "Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." Jesus motivates the church to repent based on the threat of what they may lose when he comes in judgment, namely their lampstand.

Jesus Will Come and Judge

Jesus will come to the Ephesian church if they do not repent. He will come in judgment. Does this refer to the second coming or to an imminent coming to this particular local church? Some scholars argue that it refers to the second coming, because in the first three chapters "coming" refers to the second coming (1:4, 7, 8; 2:16; 3:10, 11).¹⁶ Others emphasize that this is a "conditional coming" as a "local intervention" during the church age. More specifically, those who see the threat as a present possibility see it as inaugurated eschatology.¹⁷ The emphasis should probably be on the present local

¹⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 118. He argues, along with Mounce's and Morris's point about the present aspect, there is a sense of imminence, though it is primarily eschatological. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 70, n. 1 and Morris, *Revelation*, 65.

¹⁷ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 233. Both Beale and Osborne seem to include the idea of inaugurated eschatology, so it seems to be an issue primarily of emphasis.

intervention, because the removal of the lampstand and its threat are a very real and present possibility that the church was to feel.

Jesus Will Remove Your Lampstand

Jesus clearly identifies the consequence of unrepentance: “I will remove your lampstand from its place.” What does it mean to have a church's lampstand removed from its place? The lampstands are the churches under the authority of Jesus (1:20). What is a church? A local church of Jesus Christ is a group of Christians lovingly taking heavenly responsibility for each other's discipleship corporately and individually in order to disciple their neighbors and the nations. If Jesus removes your church's lampstand, you cease to be an effective, actual, biblical, spiritual, heavenly church of the Lord Jesus for his gospel.¹⁸ This can mean the church can go extinct, or the church can continue in its operations but no longer be the people of God with the Spirit of God.¹⁹

For example, First Southern Baptist Church in Long Beach, California, planted our church, Bethany Baptist Church, on March 13, 1949. A few years ago, First Southern Baptist Church closed down and sold their building to Jehovah's Witnesses. Their lampstand was removed. Other churches, like the Roman Catholic Church, claim to be the true church of Jesus Christ, but in rejecting the gospel they cease to be true churches; thus, their lampstand is removed.²⁰

¹⁸ Contra Johnson, *Revelation*, 613, who sees it as merely a loss of light-bearing, and in agreement with Osborne, *Revelation*, 118-9, Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 231-3, and Morris, *Revelation*, 65.

¹⁹ Jesus warns others similarly in Matt 21:43. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 231, says this happened to Israel who was symbolized as a lampstand (Zechariah 4) but later rejected their calling as a light to the nations (Isa 42:6-7; 49:6). So, God removed them as his light-bearing people and transferred the call to the church. While wanting to blur the sharper distinction Beale makes between the old covenant Israel and the new covenant church, this truth communicates the gravity of the warning.

²⁰ This stance on the Roman Church is an application of the Cambridge Declaration in light of the Council of Trent. The Declaration states in thesis four: “We deny . . . that an institution claiming to be a church that denies or condemns sola fide can be recognized as a legitimate church.” Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, “Cambridge Declaration,” Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, April 20, 1996, <http://www.alliancenet.org/cambridge-declaration>.

Why This Consequence?

The church abandoned its initial love while excelling in deeds, doctrine, discipline, determination, and discernment. Why is the sin of lovelessness in the midst of great activity of outward faithfulness so serious that it threatens the church's very existence? Why is activity without love a big deal? Because it distorts truth, conceals light, and comforts decay.

Activity without love distorts the truth. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). Truth, doctrine, and discernment *without love* are like a cancer. “Cancer starts when cells grow out of control and crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should.”²¹ When the cells of doctrine and discernment grow uncontrolled by love, cancer develops in the church, moving the church to doctrinal arrogance and mistaken measurements of faithfulness, spiritual maturity, and ecclesial vitality. Without love, the church will distort the truth and go deeper in sin.

Activity without love conceals light. Jesus said the world will know we are his disciples by our love for one another (John 13:34-35). The light that helps the world distinguish Jesus's disciples from the rest of the world is love for each other. Jesus said, “I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me” (John 17:23). The unity of the church is grounded in God's love experienced—and reciprocated—by the church. This expresses itself in unity. Love-empowered unity is how the world will know that the Father sent the Son. In other words, the light of the gospel shines through the church's love-empowered unity. Without love, the lost will not

²¹ American Cancer Society, “What is Cancer?” The American Cancer Society, accessed on April 2, 2018, <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-basics/what-is-cancer.html>.

see light.

Activity without love comforts decay. The church in Ephesus had much to commend, in which they easily found comfort and confidence before God. Their doctrinal integrity, consistent activity, membership purity, and endurance of extreme persecution tempted them to assume that everything was acceptable. As the church was decaying and drifting from its initial love, the constant activity falsely assured the church that nothing was seriously wrong.

The one requirement Jesus demands of his church is love, biblically defined and practically cultivated, expressed, and exercised. Without love, a gospel-preaching, ordinance-administering “church” will eventually cease to be a church. True faith in Jesus is “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). Hearers must listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Application

Repent from lovelessness or else your church’s lampstand will be removed. Dear Christian and church family, know the mark and distinctive of the true church: heavenly love for God, for each other, and for neighbors (1 John 4:7-13, 19). Christians looking for a church should look for one that has or can potentially cultivate such love.²²

Repent Because of What You Will Receive (2:7)

Third, a church must repent because of what the church will receive, namely eternal life. Each of the seven messages to the churches in Revelation 2-3 describes the eternal reward from a different aspect. In 2:7 the conqueror will receive fruit from the

²² I say “potentially” because there is a need for loving and joining dying churches in need of revitalization. Rev 2-3 is largely Jesus calling for church revitalization. See Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize* (Grand Rapids: 2017), 13-18, 30-38; Bobby Jamieson, “The Bible's Burden for Church Revitalization,” *9Marks Journal* (Nov-Dec 2011): 21-24 and Matt Schmucker, “Why Revitalize?,” *9Marks Journal* (Nov-Dec 2011): 25-28.

tree of life in the paradise of God.²³ The one who does not repent will not conquer but forfeit this eternal reward.

The Tree of Life

Jesus promises to give the right to eat from the tree of life to the one who conquers. Colin Hemer argues that the tree evokes the idea of the cross based on the Greek word used.²⁴ Though possible, it is more likely tied to Greek and Jewish theology. The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was built on the site of an ancient tree-shrine. A tree symbolized Artemis or Ephesus as well.²⁵ Associating the tree with divine presence in Ephesian Greek mythology is like the true tree, the tree of life in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2) and the New Eden (Rev 22:2, cf. 22:14, 19) where God resides.

Paradise of God

The tree is in the paradise of God—the true paradise—unlike Ephesus back then or Las Vegas today. Why? In this paradise, the reader's sins will not be counted against them. There will no longer be any curse (Rev 22:3). Criminals will be pardoned, but not like in Ephesus.²⁶ The Ephesians practiced criminal immunity where the consequences for sin were not justly required. Ephesian immunity is not the same thing as salvation for a repentant sinner freed from sin and the curse. Criminals running free without transformation and repentance thrusts people back into the broken and fallen world again and again. Only repentant and transformed sinners can be allowed in true paradise.

But who is this life, tree, and paradise for? To whom does Jesus give the right

²³ See chapter 9, pp. 141-4, where the idea of the conqueror is developed.

²⁴ Hemer, *The Letters of the Seven Churches*, 42-4.

²⁵ Hemer, *The Letters of the Seven Churches*, 44-47, and Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 236.

²⁶ Hemer, *The Letters of the Seven Churches*, 51.

to eat from the tree of life in the Paradise of God? Jesus gives the tree of life and Paradise to the one who conquers. The conqueror overcomes the sin of lovelessness and Satan himself. Conquering implies a battle. Jesus does not offer the tree to the church corporately, but to the *one* who conquers. Jesus rewards the individual, not the church as a whole. In other words, one is not saved because most in his church are saved. One is not a conqueror by group affiliation. One is a conqueror by trusting Jesus, turning from sin, courageously following Jesus, and in this case, repenting of leaving his initial love for God and others.

Children are not born Christian because their parents are Christian. They are Christian if they personally trust in Jesus, God's Son who came to live, die for their sins, and rise from the dead, and turn from their own sin and goodness.

Church members are called to conquer. They are called to courage. They are called to fight and conquer sin, sin in the churches and in the world. They are called to conquer Satan, the Beast, and all demons who would tempt them and those around them. So, conquer. Trust Jesus. And do it in partnership with your church family.

Why is Eternal Life at Stake Here?

The one who conquers by remembering how far they have fallen, repenting, and doing the works they did at first (2:5) will eat from the tree of life (2:7). If one does not repent and conquer, then they will not receive eternal life in the paradise of God. Why is eternal life at stake in repenting from abandoning one's initial love?

Love for God is essential for Christian life and discipleship. Without love, there is only curse, loss of life, and a false knowledge of God. The Apostle Paul teaches the necessity of love: "If anyone does not love the Lord, *a curse* be on him" (1 Cor 16:22). Jesus taught that "The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Anyone who

finds his life will *lose it*, and anyone who loses his life because of me will find it” (Matt 10:37-39). Love comes from God and must be expressed in his people: “[L]et us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8; cf. 4:9-21).

Why is loving God and others a necessary expression of truly possessing eternal life? John says one reason loving others is tied to truly knowing God is “because God is love” (1 John 4:8). Thinking in terms of narrative fills out this idea of why love is necessary. N. T. Wright asserts how one’s metanarrative controls one’s theology. If you get the narrative wrong, you will inevitably get the theology wrong as well.²⁷

In Ephesus, they could have believed the story of faithfulness is more primary than the story of love. If one took the story of faithfulness as primary, it would perhaps begin with a creator who creates a world to perfectly reflect him. Instead, his creation rebelled. So he sends his messiah-king to subdue sinners, change their direction in life, and restore his kingdom. Before leaving, the king subdues and turns former rebels into servants who then devote their lives to telling other rebels to submit to the king and convert more rebels, even at the risk of their own lives. The king eventually returns and sets up the fullness of his kingdom and rewards all his faithful servant-messengers.

Everything in this story is biblically true. There is just one problem in this story: love is not essential to the character of God or his servant-messengers. God is merely a ruler, a king, and a lord. To ignore or neglect a more central narrative is not merely to ignore it but distort it into something it is not. If you have part of the truth and believe it is the whole truth, then you believe a lie that will have consequences in faith

²⁷ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992), 76–77. “It was, at a much more fundamental level, a controversy about different tellings of the story of Israel’s god, his people, and the world. And it is in principle possible to plot these different tellings on grids such as those we have just used, to lay out in detail the ways in which the stories were being told, and so to grasp what was really at issue in the first century.”

and practice. Muslims can largely embrace this story of faithfulness.

God is not only Creator but even more fundamentally Father. Before God created anything, from all eternity, he is God. “Who is God? God is the Father, loving and giving life to his Son, in the fellowship of his Spirit. God is in himself love.”²⁸ What would the story of love look like in contrast to a story of faithfulness?

The Father loves and rejoices in his Son in the fellowship of his Spirit. They overflow with joy to create a universe to display this joy and to unite image-bearers in this love and joyful celebration. He places man in the garden of paradise to give him the opportunity to trust and obey God and enter a final state of permanent paradise. Man sins and deserves death. But God promises his covenant love.

He promises covenant love to Abraham in a great nation, Israel. He places Israel in a Promised Land of milk and honey to trust and obey God. But they sin, break their law-covenant, and are exiled from God and the land of paradise as well. The Father sends the Son to live, die in exile, and rise for sinners in their place and then unite them to him that they might be restored to a greater design than originally experienced. The Father adopts sinners into his family to be his heirs to reign with his Son. The Son sends and accompanies his servant-siblings to make the gospel known that more might share in this love. The Son returns to fulfill the promise of love so that servants enter the joy of their master.

This is the more central story (love) with God's more central identity (Father). This is the true story. This is our story. Therefore, to claim to follow Jesus and be his body, church, and lampstand while leaving your initial love is to deny the reality of the true God and replace him with a distorted version of God, who looks like a different god. The loveless church then communicates a different God. If still unrepentant for loveless

²⁸ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 38.

activity, the church might as well stop shining and calling themselves a church. Whether they stop or continue calling themselves a church, Jesus will stop empowering them to be such a church.

Repent Because of Who is Calling You (2:1)

We must repent from the sin of abandoning our initial love, because of what we may lose and what we will receive. The last reason we must repent is because of the person who is calling the church to repent. Who is calling them to repent?

In verse 7 the Spirit is to be heard, so he must be speaking. In verse 1 Jesus is identified as speaking. The two are one.²⁹ The way Jesus identifies himself to Ephesus serves as a specific reason for heeding his call. Jesus describes himself as “the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand.” He holds the churches under his control. He is Lord over the churches. He can command the churches as he pleases. He is also the one “who walks among the seven golden lampstands.” Jesus is present with the church and is aware of what is going on in the church. Repent from leaving your initial love because Jesus is your Lord, Lord of the church, the one who is present and aware of what is going on in the church’s midst.

Everyone is called to love God and people as their overwhelming priority. But people have not and cannot do this on their own strength. Their hearts are weak, hard, distracted, and prone to wander. They cannot love as they ought to love. Even Christians cannot sustain the initial love they had consistently on their own. Consequently, they deserve to be cut off from this love, favor, and blessing and to be cursed in the coldness and exile from God’s warmth and love. They deserve to have their lampstand removed. They deserve to be cut off from the tree of life in the paradise of God because they have not loved as they ought to have loved.

²⁹Richard J. Bauckham, "The Role of the Spirit in the Apocalypse," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (April/June 1980): 75-6. See chapter 6, pp. 87-8 for a biblical-theological sketch of the Spirit.

But there is someone who did love as he ought to have loved. There is one who loved God perfectly and loved others consistently. He even loves Christians presently (Rev 1:5). Yet he was cut off from the land of the living (Isa 53:8). Though he was the light of the world, he hung in darkness under God's judgment on the cross (Mark 15:33-34). Jesus did this so that people can know and receive God's love, forgiveness for their sins, eternal life, and power to love him and love others. God loves people.³⁰

If one is not a Christian, he must receive God's saving love today. He must believe the gospel and repent from his sin and be adopted into God's loving family. Christians will not grow in love by focusing on their love. They grow in love by focusing on what is truly lovely. Therefore, let them not look to themselves. Instead, let them focus on Jesus (Heb 12:2). May they meditate on Revelation 1 and look at Jesus and his great love for them.

Church family, we must love one another and feed Christ's sheep by speaking Christ to one another (Col 1:28). Let them press the goodness of God in Christ into the current experience of fellow members, other Christians, and even those who are not yet Christian. Let them pray with one another for their love to grow for God, for one another, and for their neighbors and the nations.

Conclusion

The church seemed to heed Jesus's call to repent. Jesus's call to the church is

³⁰ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 97. "God is actually offended when we belittle his love, and this belittling of his love would seem to be the source of our lovelessness. The Father is the source of all the love we see in Christ, and so we are not to think of him as aloof and uncaring. In fact, Owen argued, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is to refuse to believe that he loves you: 'You can no way more trouble or burden him.' He has adopted us and is our Father." See also, C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 23. "God's love is the sweet and good center of God's interaction with humanity. One must face the fact that all the talk about His love for men, and His service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures, whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; He is full and flows over."

clear: repent from leaving your initial love because (1) you've obeyed without love, (2) your lampstand may be removed, (3) you will eat from the tree of life, and (4) Jesus is the Lord over you and your church.

If one fails to repent, his neighbors will grow in delusion thinking all is well because of his doctrine, deeds, discipline, determination, dying to self, and duty, not knowing that he is actually growing in pride and hardness of heart. Jesus will remove the unrepentant sinner's lampstand, and he won't experience the joy of helping others follow Jesus. His neighbors will misunderstand and continue to reject Jesus in response to his dark and misleading witness. Worst of all, he will miss out on the tree of life and show that his initial faith in Jesus Christ and repentance from sin was not real.

However, if the sinner remembers, repents, and returns, his love will increase as his doctrine, discipline, determination, dying to self, and duty find their true motivation, expression, and goal. The repentant sinner will shine with his church for Jesus to one another, their neighbors, and the nations so that they encounter Jesus. He will eat from the tree of life and live in eternally increasing joy in God with his people on the New Earth after Jesus returns. Therefore, let the hearer repent from lovelessness and return to joy in his Lord Jesus.

CHAPTER 3

REVELATION 2:8-11—FINISH LIFE FEARLESSLY AND FAITHFULLY

The Voice of the Martyrs wrote,

A Christian woman in North Africa has been repeatedly beaten recently by family members and religious leaders after her conversion to Christianity. “Safa” has suffered severe bruising and nausea as a result of the beatings. Local mosque leaders have told her that they will continue the beatings, in an attempt to drive out the “Christian demon,” until she returns to Islam. Please pray that Safa will remain strong in faith and that the beatings will stop.¹

People publicly identify themselves as Christians through baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

They obey the obligation to profess faith in Jesus as Lord. Those who secretly and privately profess faith but never make it public contradict Jesus’s call (Mark 8:34-38).

True Christians trust Jesus enough to publicly profess to the world their allegiance to the Lord Jesus.

Satan and the world he influences, on the other hand, desire to silence Christians. He uses persecution in general and slander to neutralize them. Christians should not be surprised. Jesus said, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

The biblical metanarrative tells the story of this cosmic conflict. God told the serpent that he would put hostility between his seed and the woman’s (Gen 3:15). Initially, hostility erupted when Cain murdered his brother Abel. Though they were brothers ancestrally, one was the seed of the woman spiritually while the other was the seed of the serpent. Later, the spiritual seed of the serpent, Pharaoh and Egypt, treated the

¹ The Voice of the Martyrs, “Pray for ‘Safa,’ Beaten for Converting to Christianity,” ICommitToPray.Com, February 17, 2017, <https://www.icommittoprayer.com/request/519/safa>.

descendants of Israel with great hostility. Then Israel battled against the Philistines and others in the land of Canaan. Eventually Israel was exiled and ruled over by foreign kingdoms. Herod attempted to kill the promised seed of the woman, Jesus, by murdering all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Then Satan directly attacked Jesus in the wilderness, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross. After Jesus ascended to heaven, the serpent (dragon) and his beasts pursued the church (Rev 12:12-13:17).²

Are Christians prepared to speak God's truth in love when the world is hostile toward the message? Jesus calls Christians to follow him and be prepared to die for him (Matt 10:32-33; 2 Tim 2:12). Similarly, Paul said, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). Christians will inevitably and necessarily suffer some opposition for Jesus.

I confess that I am scared to suffer and die for Jesus. Are we scared to speak up for Jesus because we are ashamed? Does slander or awkward relationships for Jesus scare you? Christians want to know that their faith is real, not fickle. How do we live and die fearlessly as all true followers are commanded to here?

Only Jesus can make Christians faithful and fearless. Jesus's emphasis and goal for the church is clearly stated in 2:10: "Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful to the point of death." Therefore, Jesus's main goal for readers today is this: finish your life fearlessly and faithfully so that you enjoy your eternal reward. Later in Revelation, Christians are designated faithful (17:14) and called to faithfully endure (13:10). In this passage Jesus reveals three reasons why Christians must finish fearlessly and faithfully: because Jesus knows, controls, and rewards the church's suffering.

² Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 61-63, 280-2; G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 219-20.

Finish Life Fearlessly and Faithfully Because Jesus Knows the Church's Suffering (2:9)

Loneliness exacerbates suffering. But loneliness is an illusion for the Christian. Jesus accompanies his people and expresses his presence in his intimate knowledge of the church's situation. Jesus knows their affliction, poverty, and true identity.

Jesus Knows the Church's Affliction (2:9)

Jesus says, "I know your affliction" (2:9). The word $\theta\lambda\tilde{\iota}\psi\iota\nu$ can be translated "tribulation." John is the church's partner in the tribulation (1:9). Remember, the biblical narrative traces the affliction from the hostility the seed of the serpent extends toward the seed of the woman. The hostility is seen in the Exodus from Egypt and signified in the dragon and the two beasts' attack on God's people (12:3). Now the hostility is aimed at the church (12:12-13:17; cf. 7:14).³

Jesus communicates his knowledge of their tribulation by saying some of the church in Smyrna will face imprisonment (2:10). Today, Christians should realize that "suffering for Jesus" refers to all pain that comes to us on the path of following Jesus.⁴ The tribulation aims to extinguish the flame of Christ-grasping faith in our souls.

Christians should find encouragement since Jesus knows their pain, struggle, and afflictions. He understands it more intimately and comprehensively than the sufferer does, especially since they are often dazed and confused by the pain. Therefore, Christians sing,

Jesus what a strength in weakness!
Let me hide myself in him.
Tempted, tried, and sometimes failing,

³ Richard Bauckham, "Revelation" in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1296-1298; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 633, 678.

⁴ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 25th anniversary reference ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2011), 256-57.

He my strength, my vict'ry wins.⁵

Jesus Knows the Church's Poverty (2:9)

As a port city, Smyrna was a wealthy and affluent city. On the way up to Mt. Pagus, there was a street of gold lined with beautiful buildings, a few impressive temples, and the top of the hill had temples along the perimeter designed to look like a crown.⁶

Though the city was rich, the church was poor financially. So, Jesus says, “I know your poverty” (2:9). The church failed to impress the world because they were poor. The poverty is not due to sloth, or Jesus would have reproved them. The church was presumably small in number, low on finances, and relatively powerless in Smyrnan society.⁷

Why were they poor? It was possibly due to their persecution and isolation by the wider society. It would not only be the Jews who were persecuting them (see next section), but it was the way they would not submit to the society's norms. They disregarded what the city idolized. John communicated the conflict in his vision of the second beast, “And he requires everyone—small and great, rich and poor, free and slave—to be given a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark: the beast's name or the number of his name” (Rev 13:16-17). Like cake shops recently fined for refusing to bake a wedding cake for so-called gay weddings, Christians in John's day lost social and economic capital. The world will always, in some way, be antagonistic to genuine Christianity. Jesus understood their

⁵ John Wilbur Chapman, “Jesus, What a Friend for Sinners,” *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), Hymn 185.

⁶ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 73; Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 59-60; Steven J. Lawson, *Final Call* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 93.

⁷ Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 129; Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 35-36.

poverty.

Jesus Knows the Church's True Identity (2:9)

Jesus not only knows the church's poverty and affliction, but also their true identity. Though the world considers them poor, they are rich. Though the Jews slander them, they are truly God's people.

Though poor, they are truly rich. Jesus said, "I know your poverty but you are rich" (2:9). The church was poor financially and in terms of worldly goods due to the persecution from Jews and pagans.⁸ In Christ's eyes, however, they were actually rich. They were not rich by their spiritual status alone, since the church at Laodicea had the same spiritual status yet Jesus called them poor and rebuked them for claiming to be rich. The Laodicean church suffered from an attitude of self-sufficiency, failing to sense their need for Christ (3:17). In contrast to the Laodiceans, the Smyrnan Christians were not exhorted to buy refined gold to *become* rich (3:18), implying their sense of need for Christ made them rich. Even though Jesus affirmed their spiritual richness, he roots their identity in more.

Though slandered by the Jews, they are true Jews. "I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan" (2:9). Jews in Smyrna had a legal right to worship their "god." Some may have even used the Jewish exemption and lit the incense to Caesar with the declaration that Caesar is Lord, not as a sign of worship but of civil obedience. The Christian sect came up within Judaism, and so some confused Christians for Jews until some Jews made distinguished themselves,

⁸ Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 68. According to Duvall, *Revelation*, 47, "this could refer to exclusion from local trade guilds which provided work but often promoted pagan religious activities that caused Christians to compromise their faith." Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 74, writes, "In an antagonistic environment it would be difficult for the Christian to make a living, and thus many were economically destitute. They may also have been victims of mob violence and looting (cf. Heb 10:34)."

expelling Christians from synagogues and advancing the persecution of Christians.⁹

Jews would “slander” Christians as not being true Jews, allegedly rejecting the God of their Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁰ Jesus reminds the church that the Jews persecuting them “are not” Jews, namely the true people of God worshiping the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. They have rejected Jesus as the Jewish and prophesied Messiah. In cursing and rejecting Christians, these Jews rejected Jesus, God, and the Abrahamic blessing (Gen 12:3). These Jews unwittingly sided with Satan (e.g., Acts 24:5; 28:22).¹¹

Jesus identifies his church as God’s true people by calling the hostile Jews’ actions slanderous, denouncing them as Jews, and calling them a synagogue of Satan. Similarly, Paul writes, “For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter” (Rom 2:28-29).

Christians, beginning with the Jewish apostles, are the true heirs of Abraham, Israel, the remnant, and the prophets who were God’s people. They are true heirs and the true people of God because they are united to Jesus, the true remnant.¹² In contrast, Stephen recounts the history of how the “Jews,” who were not truly God’s people, persecuted those who were truly God’s people (Acts 7:2-53). Filling out the story of hostility between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman above, even Israel

⁹ Leon Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 68; Bauckham, “Revelation,” 1291.

¹⁰ The term βλασφημία is generally defined as speech that denigrates or defames (BDAG).

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 17.

¹² Tim Chester, *From Creation to New Creation* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003), 59-64. Contra Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 165-6, who takes “true Jew” as those physically descended from Israel and circumcised in heart, and in agreement with Hamilton, *Revelation*, 79; Osborne, *Revelation*, 72; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 75-6; Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 66-67; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 241.

was hostile to Israel. For example, Hananiah was a “prophet” speaking against the prophet Jeremiah. They both claimed to be true messengers of Yahweh and differed in their interpretation and application of Jeremiah’s yoke (Jer 27-28). Jesus differed strongly with the Jewish leaders on who was truly following Yahweh (Matt 23:1-35). The counterclaims of who God’s true people are extended to Jews and the church (Rev 2:9; 3:9). Even Paul reminded Timothy that those within the church can be captured by the devil to unintentionally do his will (2 Tim 2:24-26; 4:3-5).

Jesus’s words must not be used to excuse sinfully oppressing Jews verbally and socially because of their Jewishness. Jesus speaks the hard truth in love in order that the Jews may actually repent and realize they are opposing God (cf. John 8:44; Acts 9:1-5; 2 Tim 2:24-26). The first reason to finish life fearlessly and faithfully is because Jesus knows your suffering and situation. Jesus gives his hearers two more reasons.

Finish Life Fearlessly and Faithfully Because Jesus Controls Your Suffering (2:10)

Jesus continues to give strong and overwhelming foundations for suffering fearlessly and faithfully. “Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death” (2:10). The Lord Jesus controls your suffering. He controls the future, the devil, the purpose, and time.

Jesus Controls the Future

As the now ascended and glorified Lord (John 17:5), Jesus knows what the devil is “about to” do. He knows the future and can declare the end from the beginning. God fulfills his sovereign will in Jesus. “In him we have also received an inheritance, because we were predestined according to the plan of the one who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:11). Beyond the future, Jesus also controls the devil.

Jesus Controls the Devil

Jesus foretells what the devil was about to do. The devil was going to throw some of the Smyrnan Christians into prison. The devil would use the civil authorities to imprison Christians, sometimes a punishment in itself and other times a holding period before capital punishment.¹³ Like God allowing Satan to tempt Job (Job 1:9-12; 2:4-6) or the apostles (Luke 22:31-32), Jesus allows and controls the tactics of the devil.

Jesus Controls the Purpose

Though the devil may use the local authorities to imprison Christians, Jesus uses the devil and his schemes for the ultimate good of Christians (cf. Rom 8:28). When Jesus says ἵνα πειρασθῆτε, he is indicating his divine and benevolent purpose in and through the devil's evil agenda and aim.¹⁴ The term πειρασθῆτε can be translated “tempt,” revealing the devil's goal of sin and destruction of faith in Jesus (cf. Luke 22:31-32). The term can also be translated “test,” revealing God's purpose of building endurance and maturity (cf. James 1:2-4) for filling up Christ's afflictions (cf. Col 1:24).

Could both God and the devil's purposes coincide in this verse? Yes. Like Jesus sent by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matt 4:1)¹⁵ or David being tested by God and tempted by Satan with the census (2 Sam 24:1; 1 Chron 21:1), the demonic imprisonment is utilized by Jesus for his holy purposes.

¹³ “Imprisonment is not the primary affliction threatening some of the Smyrnan Christians, since typically in the Roman world imprisonment was the prelude to trial and execution of sentence, although sometimes it was merely a place of temporary detention (cf., e.g., Acts 16:23–40; 2 Cor. 11:23). The end of v 10 (‘become faithful unto death’) makes clear that the trial in mind is mainly that of capital punishment.” Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 242. Also see Leon Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 68; Hemer, *The Letters of the Seven Churches*, 68; Osborne, *Revelation*, 133.

¹⁴ This is a purpose “Iva clause focusing on the intention of the action of throwing them into prison. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 472.

¹⁵ Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 72. Also see Hamilton, *Revelation*, 80.

Jesus Controls Time

“Look, the devil is about throw you into prison to test you, and you will have affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death” (2:10). Jesus controls the length of the imprisonment and limits the duration to ten days. Is this literally ten, twenty-four-hour periods? It is unlikely ten literal days, but rather a short period of intense and difficult trial that may end in death.¹⁶

Jesus limits pain. The Bible repeatedly teaches life’s brevity. If life is vapor, then Christian suffering is quicker. Time flies. Parents blink, and their children are adults. Paul and Peter both communicate the relative quickness of suffering in the perspective of Jesus and eternity: “For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor 4:17) and, “You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials” (1 Pet 1:6).

Application

What does fearlessness and faithfulness look like in the local church? Members of the local church must help each other trust God’s control in difficulties. Christians should pray for each other, be present with another in pain, and encourage one another.

Secondly, Christians should realize that Jesus’s standards of church commendation differ from the world’s. Churches may use finances, attendance, or influence to measure its fidelity. Notice in this message Jesus does not rebuke this church, unlike five of the other six churches in Revelation 2-3. “It is more important to be

¹⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 168-71. Robert Thomas takes the ten days literally since he does not consider this section of Revelation apocalyptic but epistolary, and the OT example of Daniel cited is a literal, not symbolic, ten days. It seems more likely that John alludes to Daniel 1:11-16 and their testing to compromise in idolatry and sinful submission to the king, agreeing with Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 242. The whole book is filled with symbolism, and taking a literal ten-day example from Daniel does not eliminate the allusion to be used symbolically like the seven fiery torches representing the seven spirits of God (Rev 4:6) alluding to the literal seven fires on the lampstand of Exod 25:31-37. Thus, most commentators take the ten days symbolically. Hamilton, *Revelation*, 80; Duvall, *Revelation*, 48-9; Osborne, *Revelation*, 134; Hemer, *The Letters of the Seven Churches*, 69-70; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 76; Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2016), 48.

faithful than to be powerful.”¹⁷ Christians should measure church health by demons opposing compassionate and pure peacemaking in this sinful and hostile world (cf. Matt 5.9-12).

Jesus calls his church in Smyrna to finish life fearlessly and faithfully because he both knows (2:9) and controls their suffering (2:10). Jesus gives his hearers one more reason for fearless faithfulness.

Finish Life Fearlessly and Faithfully Because Jesus Rewards the Church's Suffering (2:8, 10c, 11b)

When tempted toward fearfulness and renouncing faith in Jesus, remember that Jesus rewards Christians for their faithful suffering. Jesus rewards his people, the conquerors, with the crown of life and safety from the second death.

Jesus Gives the Church the Crown of Life (2:10c)

Jesus promises his people, “Be faithful to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life.” The word στέφανον is translated “crown,” identifying the wreath the victor of an athletic competition was awarded, in contrast to a διαδῆμα, which is a royal crown. The one who is faithful to the point of death, who finishes his life faithfully, receives a trophy, a medal, a championship ring, a crown. It is a symbol of victory.

When Jesus says “crown of life,” he means the crown that is life.¹⁸ The life Jesus speaks of is eternal life, partaking of the tree of life (2:7) in the New Jerusalem where the faithful reign with God forever and ever (Rev 22:1-5). Elsewhere, John defines this eternal life as knowing God the Father and Jesus his Messiah (John 17:3). Jesus gives another clue that he was speaking of eternal life by his promise at the end of 2:11.

¹⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 129.

¹⁸ ζῶης is an appositional genitive stating the meaning of the metaphorical head noun στέφανον. See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 95-99.

Jesus Fully Protects the Church from the Second Death (2:11b)

After calling all readers and hearers of all churches to hear what the Spirit is saying (2:11a), Jesus promises “the one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death” (2:11b). The second death is the lake of fire (Rev 20: 14; 21:8). It is the place where “the devil, the beast, and the false prophet . . . will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev 20:10). Everyone whose name is not written in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire to be harmed by the second death for the rest of eternity (Rev 20:15). The second death is eternal death and damnation, the consequence for sin (cf. Rom 6:23). Jesus promises to keep the conqueror from experiencing even the smallest pain of the second death.

Reasons Jesus Can Promise (2:8)

Why is Jesus the only one who can give eternal life and protect sinners from the second death? Jesus calls himself “the first and the last, the one who was dead and who came to life” (2:8). Jesus alludes to Isaiah 44:6 where Yahweh says, “This is what the LORD, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the LORD of Armies, says: I am the first and I am the last. There is no God but me.” When Jesus takes the title “First and Last,” he is identifying himself as God (cf. Rev 1:8, 22:13; Isa 41:4, 48:12). Jesus has the power to give life and protect from eternal damnation because he is God.

Jesus goes on to say he is the one who was dead (2:8). Jesus died as the slaughtered lamb who purchased sinners from the second death by his death and shed blood (Rev 5:9). Jesus is the propitiation for sinners (1 John 2:2). In a sense, Jesus was harmed and subjected to the second death so that those who trust in him and are faithful to him would never be harmed by it. Jesus did not remain dead; he is “the one who was dead and came to life” (Rev 2:8). Because Jesus rose from the dead, he is alive forever and ever and he holds the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18). He defeated death once for all and took up his own life so that all who trust in him and finish life fearlessly and

faithfully would also enjoy this eternal-resurrected life (cf. John 10:17-18; 14:19).

Jesus, the first and the last, the one who was dead and came to life, calls his people to suffer faithfully as he powerfully holds out the promise of eternal life and reward. This empowers Christians who rest in him to suffer well. Therefore Christians sing,

Christ the sure and steady anchor,
As we face the wave of death;
When these trials give way to glory,
As we draw our final breath.
We will cross that great horizon,
Clouds behind and life secure;
And the calm will be the better,
For the storms that we endure.¹⁹

For non-Christians considering Jesus's words, the good news is that they do not have to go to hell and experience the second death. Though all humans deserve death because God is holy (Isa 6:3) and punishes sin justly (Rom 6:23), Jesus died for sinners so that all who repent from their sins and trust Jesus alone can have forgiveness, acceptance with God, eternal life, and Jesus's power to help them finish life fearlessly and faithfully trusting him.

Christians must face the tribulation and finish faithfully and fearlessly because Jesus knows their suffering (2:9), controls it (2:10), and rewards them for it (2:8, 11). As Christians in America consider the prospect of martyrdom, it is easy to feel unprepared and fearful. If confronted with renouncing my faith to save my children from suffering, I feel weak and unable. But God's grace is sufficient for us in our trials and moments of need (2 Cor 12:9; Heb 4:16). If, by his grace, we continually fight to live for Christ fearlessly and faithfully in our current trials, then we can be confident that we will also be able to do it in bigger trials if God orders such suffering for us. We must suffer well now as preparation for later suffering.

¹⁹ Matt Papa and Matt Boswell, "Christ the Sure and Steady Anchor," Matt Papa, accessed July 29, 2019, <https://www.mattpapa.com/lyrics-to-christ-the-sure-and-steady-anchor-by-matt-papa>.

The church must remind one another that they are not in this battle alone. They must support one another and not be surprised by Satanic attack and pressure. The church is a community who faces the fight together to finish faithfully and fearlessly.

Christians must conquer, not cower. Those are the only two options for the professing Christian. God himself says, “The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he will be my son. But the cowards . . . their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev 21:7-8). Jesus shared this sentiment: “[E]veryone who will acknowledge me before others, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven” (Matt 10:32-33).

Conclusion

Jesus calls the readers and hearers of Rev 2:8-11 today to fearlessly and faithfully profess faith in him, testify about him, and live for him. If the hearer refuses, he will make shipwreck of his faith, be enslaved by lesser fears, controlled by earthly comforts, and eventually condemned to the second death. But if the hearer completely entrusts himself to Jesus, he will be faithful to Jesus, experience joyful boldness for the Christian cause of love, and receive the crown and reward of life. Polycarp famously exemplified fearless and faithful living and dying for Jesus when facing execution:

Whereupon the proconsul said: “I have wild beasts here and I will throw you to them, except you repent.” But he said, “Call for them, for the repentance from better to worse is a change not permitted to us; but it is a noble thing to change from that which is improper to righteousness.” Then he said to him again, “If you despise the wild beasts, I will cause you to be consumed by fire, unless you repent.” But Polycarp said: “You threaten that fire which burns for a season and after a little while is quenched: for you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will.”²⁰

²⁰ J. B. Lightfoot, trans., “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” rev. Richard Neil ShROUT, Early Christian Writings, accessed November 1, 2018, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/polycarp-smyrnaeans.html>.

May all the churches face conflict and finish faithfully and fearlessly. They are in a cosmic battle where fear and failure are real. Jesus gives himself to them so that they finish faithfully and fearlessly to experience eternal life.

CHAPTER 4
REVELATION 2:12-17—REALIZE COMPROMISE
AND REPENT

Most drivers have experienced driving the wrong direction on a freeway. I made this mistake once and did not realize I was going the wrong direction for twenty minutes. Losing not only the time but having to make up lost ground going to my destination greatly frustrated me. In a similar way, people also go the wrong way spiritually. Perhaps the greatest Christian fear is meeting the Lord Jesus in judgment and being told one is not really saved from sin:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord!” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, “Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?” Then I will announce to them, “I never knew you! Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!” (Matthew 7:21–23)

Charles Spurgeon communicated this fear:

[Jesus] turns the sword against those within the church who had no right to be there. It is no trifling thing to be a church member. I could earnestly wish that certain professors had never been members of a church at all, for if they had been outside the church, they might have been in far less peril than they are within its bounds. Outside their conduct might have been tolerated, but it is not consistent with an avowal of discipleship towards Jesus. I say this with deep sorrow. O false professors, you may go down to hell readily enough without increasing your damnation by coming into Christ’s church with a lie in your right hand.¹

Consequently, Christians ought to fear the possibility that some fellow members may be deceived and face judgment partially due to the church's neglect to take responsibility for their discipleship (Heb 12:15).

On judgment day Jesus will separate the sheep to his right from the goats on

¹ Charles Spurgeon, “Holding Fast the Faith,” Spurgeon Gems and Other Treasures of God's Truth, accessed November 9, 2018, <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols34-36/chs2007.pdf>.

his left (Matt 25:31-34, 41, 46). Sadly, some church members will find themselves on the wrong side of that judgment. Some churches are dangerously going the wrong way without realizing it. This presumption can cost the hearer or his loved ones their eternity. In light of the coming judgment, churches must realize they are not playing games as they pursue church health. Church health is not a way to compare one's church with other churches to secure a sense of accomplishment and status. Instead, reforming a church is a matter of heaven and hell for its members and the neighbors they engage.

Each of the seven letters concludes with a call to listen to the Spirit. Each letter describes the reward for the conqueror after telling Christians how to conquer. In this message, readers learn to conquer by repenting. The main goal of this passage is for the hearer to realize and repent of the sin of holding morally compromising teaching so that they avoid the surprise of being judged by Jesus. Jesus threatens his church that he will come at some of them with a sword. If the church does not repent, they will be surprised on that day of judgment like the goats Jesus separates from the sheep (Matt 25:41-46).

The messages of Revelation 2-3 teach that Christians must repent to conquer. Why specifically, according to this passage, should the church repent? Jesus gives four reasons that empower the church to repent and avoid having their members judged. The hearer should repent because (1) they have already endured Satanic assault, (2) sin stealthily entered through the side door, (3) they will avoid judgment, and (4) they will receive their eternal reward.²

² Ken Davis, *Secrets of Dynamic Communication* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 29-47. Davis teaches that public speaking should answer the question why or how. In following this advice, the sermon in Rev is structured around why the hearers must repent rather than how, because the imperative in 2:16 is preceded by the logical connector οὐν, revealing that Jesus is primarily giving reasons rather than the means or manner of repenting. For the inferential conjunction οὐν, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 673-74.

Repent Because You Have Endured Satanic Assault (2:13)

Jesus says, “I know where you live—where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death among you, where Satan lives” (2:13). Jesus calls them to repent of their compromise (2:16) since they have already endured Satanic assault. They must not let their suffering to this point be in vain by refusing to repent. The significance of the assault is illumined by their location and persecution.

Location

The church at Pergamum lives where Satan lives, “where Satan’s throne is.” There were many gods worshiped there. Asclepius was prominently featured as the god of healing. His sign was a serpent. Additionally, Zeus had a throne-altar in the city. In Revelation the throne is a prominent theme, but its focus is on God who sits there (1:4; 3:21; 4:1-5:13; 6:16; 7:9-17; 8:3; 11:16; 12:5; 13:2; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4-5; 20:11-12; 21:3-5; 22:1-3). In contrast, the saints at Pergamum are in a place where Satan is on the throne, where Satan reigns. More generally speaking, John reminds readers that the whole world is under the sway of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Satan’s rule may be carried out by the beast who sits on a throne and has a kingdom (Rev 16:3) since Satan gives the beast this authority (Rev 13:1-5). The throne likely refers to the emperor cult expressed particularly in Pergamum’s temple built to a living emperor in 29 BC, the first in the whole empire.³

³ Tim Chester, *Revelation For You* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2019), 40. The debate is whether the throne refers to either some specific architecture, like Zeus’s throne altar, the acropolis, a particular temple (Asclepius or Roman emperor), or the judge’s tribunal, or to the emperor cult, religious idolatry, or Christian persecution. See Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 82-5; Grant Osborne, *Revelation, BECNT* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 141; David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 2014), 182-4; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7 Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 182-5. The majority of the discussion turns on whether one takes the throne of Satan as unique to Pergamum or a description that can be applied to other cities as well. Because 13:2-8 seems to describe the nature of Satan’s throne-produced activity and the effect of Satan’s presence resulting in pressure to deny Christ’s name to the point of death in 2:13, it seems best to take “Satan’s throne” as a description that is true for Pergamum but not necessarily unique to it among other cities.

Pergamum was probably consistent in burning the incense and calling citizens to declare the emperor as *kurios*. Emperor Domitian (ruling from AD 81-96) demanded people confess him as "*dominus et deus*."⁴ Emperor idolatry is a seedbed for persecution.

Persecution

Since Satan dwelt in Pergamum, the church could expect persecution. Jesus shows his awareness of the church's danger by indicating knowledge of Antipas's death. Despite the tragedy, the church held onto Christ's name in the face of opposition. Later in the book John signifies Satan's hostile activity through the symbol of a dragon and his first beast waging war on and conquering the saints (Rev 13:6-10).

How did the church respond to the persecution of Satan through the beast? Jesus said they were "continuing to hold onto [his] name and did not deny the faith in [him]" (2:12). They obeyed the call to endure persecution. They, like Antipas, were continuing to not love their lives to the point of death as they held onto the gospel (Rev 12:11). They kept God's call to be faithful to the "point of death" (cf. Rev 2:10; 13:10).

Persecution and the threat of death constantly accompanies Christians to this day. For example,

In February (2017) a Hmong Christian, Brother "Nou," was confronted at his house by a relative with a gun, a knife, and the intent to kill him. Brother Nou has been persecuted by family members repeatedly since coming to faith in Jesus Christ two years ago. After their attempts at persuading him to deny Christ failed, they turned to anger and threats. When the relative showed up at his house last month, a neighbor prevented the relative from shooting Brother Nou, but the relative was still able to pull a knife out of his bag and injure Brother Nou. He was taken to the hospital for treatment.⁵

⁴ Colin Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 86; Paul Spilsbury, *The Throne, the Lamb & the Dragon: A Reader's Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 26.

⁵ The Voice of the Martyrs, "Pray for Nou, Whose Family Tried to Kill Him," iCommitToPray.com, March 10, 2017, <https://www.icommittoprayer.com/request/529/nou/>.

Application

Brother Nou suffered where Satan lives by facing the beast who wages war, persecutes, threatens, intimidates, and insults outspoken Christians. Corporately, Christians should reflect together on the grace of God that has enabled them to stand against Satan's opposition. The church expresses this through their continued existence, gatherings, confession of faith, and public teaching. Their teaching opposes significant values in every culture, whether it is the exclusivity of Christ and sexual morality in western culture or the deity of Christ and the honoring of women in Islamic culture.

Christians should be encouraged that they are still personally enduring trials. Christians initiate and engage in hard conversations, making awkward statements to speak the truth in love. They love people in deeds and words, even when those words are initially offensive. Christians even offend family members at times out of faithful love (cf. Matt 10:32-39). Single Christians often endure the temptations from a sexually immoral culture as they follow Jesus in sexual morality.

Non-Christians may think, "Christians are deluded. They are extreme in their devotion to Jesus." In response, they must realize Christians are not crazy but convinced that Jesus is their life. If non-Christians come to Jesus, they can know this life too. The world must realize that they cannot force convictions out of true Christians because Jesus knows their endurance (Rev 2:13), calls them to endure (Rev 13:10), and will sustain them by his blood (Rev 12:11).

Since the saints have endured Satanic assault already, it makes no sense to stop repenting from sins and capitulate now. This is the first reason. Christians then and now must continually repent when confronted. Jesus gives a second reason for repentance, namely because sin unwittingly crept in through the back door.

Repent Because Sin Came through the Back Door (2:14-15)

The Lord Jesus specifically calls the church to repent in 2:16 from the sin

identified in 2:14-15. Before a church self-consciously repents it must specifically identify the sin. Therefore, Jesus identifies where the sin is and what the sin is.

After commending the church for their endurance, Jesus says, “But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (2:14-15).

The sin is not outside the church in the culture or city. The sin Jesus confronts is among the church family. Jesus says to the church, “You have some there” (2:14) and “you have some” (2:15). Sin within the camp, within their ranks, threatens their faithfulness to conquer. The sin is among the members of the church at Pergamum.

What is the sin some among them are guilty of? If one answers “idolatry” or “sexual immorality,” then one would need to look again. The sin in the first instance is not idolatry or immorality but “holding to the teaching of Balaam” or “the Nicolaitans” which leads to idolatry or immorality. *Holding* to false teaching in this church goes further for the church in Thyatira who was deceived into *committing* idolatry and immorality (2:20) though there is a sense that holding to the teaching of itself is the first step of actually committing idolatry.⁶

What is the teaching of Balaam they held to? Moses tells the story in Numbers 22-25. Balak, Moab’s king, felt threatened by the Israelites traveling through his territory. He hoped to curse Israel through the prophet of Yahweh, Balaam (Num 22:1-7). God prevented Balaam from cursing Israel but rather caused Balaam to pronounce oracles of blessing (Num 23-24). Balaam could not directly invoke God to curse the Israelites.

Consequently, Balak discovered a sneaky way to derail Israel. He used the

⁶ G. K. Beale sees an allusion to Numbers 25:1-3 with the initial reference to spiritual idolatry. G. K. Beale, *We Become What we Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 237. God promised to remove idolatry in Zechariah 13:2 and John calls the church to live according to such a promise and priority (1 John 5:21).

women of Moab to seduce the men of Israel. Though the Israelites would not curse Yahweh or reject him directly, they indirectly compromised with forbidden women. This compromise led to sexual immorality and indirect idolatry against Yahweh. In response, God burned in anger against Israel and sent a plague. Sin entered through the back door.

Where did Balak get this sneaky plan? The source of the idea is not stated in Num 22-25. The reader later learns when Moses and Eleazar rebuked the officers of Israel: “[The women], at Balaam’s advice, incited the Israelites to unfaithfulness against the LORD in the Peor incident, so that the plague came against the Lord’s community” (Num 31:16). Balaam’s advice and teaching ensnared Israel through the back door of moral compromise.

So, when Jesus reproves the church for some who hold to the teaching of Balaam, what is he referring to? Is he referring to church members holding to the morally compromising teaching of being seduced by Midianite women like Israel of old? Not quite. The teaching of Balaam is the morally compromising teaching that one could serve God and simultaneously serve idols or indulge in sexual immorality. It is unsuspected idolatry in otherwise faithful churches. Some of the church members functionally believed this false teaching, which left them vulnerable to committing idolatrous and immoral activity. “Sexual immorality” could refer to spiritual adultery, but it should not be limited to spiritual reality. Physical sexual immorality is a form of spiritual adultery (James 4:4). Though certainty is difficult in identifying the teaching of the Nicolaitans, whatever it is, it seems to subtly subvert true Christian discipleship.⁷

⁷ For teaching of Balaam see Hemer, *The Seven Letters to the Churches*, 87-91. The teaching of the Nicolaitans mentioned in 2:15 and 2:6 is nearly impossible to specify with certainty. Thomas generalizes, “The teachings of this group were an attempt to reach a compromise between the Christian life and the cultural customs of the Graeco-Roman Society,” Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 194. Possibilities for Nicolaitan teaching include spiritual liberty and compromise with paganism. See Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 71; Hemer, *The Seven Letters to the Churches*, 91; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 233. Other possibilities include a teaching leading to immorality and idolatry. See James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 88-90; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 149.

Illustration Today

Deceptive teaching does not content itself to the Pergamum church in the first century. The particularly prevalent and plausible false teachings threatening churches varies depending on the church's historical and cultural context. What are some sneaky false teachings that threaten churches today in western culture? Teachings on sexual immorality, love, and race are some compromising many churches today.

Homosexuality and LGBTQ thinking invades the minds of many churches and their members. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 confesses, "Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography." Yet this has not kept the false teaching outside the minds of their church members.

One high school student who grew up in the church and Christian schools thinks the church is "judgmental" because of its stance that homosexual activity is sinful. She holds to the teaching of the LGBTQ community on this issue that Christians and those who think homosexuality is sinful are bigots, anti-gay, hate-filled, judgmental, discriminatory, unjust, and pro-inequality.

Many in America today believe and teach that divorce is not sinful, sex outside of marriage is commendable, and that pornography, self-stimulation, and unchecked lustful thoughts are acceptable because sexual desire is natural.⁸ Consequently, churches are tempted to tolerate these sinful ideas by their accepting or avoiding these topics in preaching, teaching, and personal conversation.

Some define love as doing and supporting whatever makes other people feel happy.⁹ Therefore, those who correct sin and humbly call others to repent are unloving,

⁸ Megan Brenan, "Birth Control Still Tops List of Morally Acceptable Issues," Gallup, May 29, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/257858/birth-control-tops-list-morally-acceptable-issues.aspx>.

⁹ Jonathan Leeman, *The Rule of Love: How the Local Church Should Reflect God's Love and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 27. See 25-40 for Leeman's analysis of other distorted cultural views of love today.

mean, and judgmental. But Jesus “rebukes those he loves and disciplines” (Rev 3:19).

Love seeks what is *ultimately* best for the beloved, and therefore opposes sin.

The tense debate on racial reconciliation among Christians today also exemplifies false teaching. The race issue presents a “massive problem” in our American culture and among these churches today.¹⁰ Every American neighbor functionally assumes either the existence or non-existence of an unjust “cumulative effect” of pressure on the African American community.¹¹ When one assumes an unjust systemic pressure does not exist, it leads to sinful actions and incomplete Christian discipleship, and specifically love without discernment (Phil 1:9). Therefore, the Together for the Gospel conference confesses,

We acknowledge that the staggering magnitude of injustice against African-Americans in the name of the Gospel presents a special opportunity for displaying the repentance, forgiveness, and restoration promised in the Gospel. We further affirm that evangelical Christianity in America bears a unique responsibility to demonstrate this reconciliation with our African-American brothers and sisters.¹²

The list of sinful idolatries produced by holding to false teaching while trying to confess Jesus as Lord overwhelms the concerned church member. Christians may hold to false teaching producing sexual, romantic, political, economic, national, ethnic, relational, familial, religious, or cultural idolatry as they ultimately worship power,

¹⁰ Albert Mohler, “Albert Mohler–Q & A Session,” video, 45:26, September 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsXTuWi4zUA>. Also see, Albert Mohler, “The Briefing: Wednesday June 24, 2020,” podcast, June 24, 2020, <https://albertmohler.com/2020/06/24/briefing-6-24-20>.

¹¹ John Piper, “Structural Racism: The Child of Structural Pride,” *Desiring God*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/structural-racism>.

¹² Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, C. J. Mahaney, and R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Together for the Gospel Affirmations and Denials (2006)” in *Preaching the Cross*, ed. Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and C. J. Mahaney (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 167. This particular issue applies Rev 2:14-15 by calling readers to reflect on whether they have tolerated false trains of thought that will lead to sinful results. The heightened division on this issue proves the point that false teaching has snuck in among confessional and theologically thoughtful evangelicals. Even if one disagreed with my stance on the existence of an unjust ethnocentric oppression, the point still stands that a false way of thinking has snuck into the church bearing sinful fruit. The only difference is that I would be the one who is sinfully mistaken.

approval, comfort, or control. All of these marginalize the Triune God.¹³

Application

It is not enough to hold to true teaching. Christians must eradicate false teaching in the church. Christians should counter the false teaching with truth. To accomplish this, Christians must meditate on Scripture, receive correction, learn from other Christians, and ask God to reveal ways they and their churches are straying.

Churches must realize they are the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim 3:14ff). Christians should listen to one another and get a sense for the deception and idols that wage war on our souls. Christians ought to apply the gospel to one another daily and share what God has been teaching them in his Word (Heb 3:12-13). Corporately consider what is being said and taught in schools, the workplace, in the media, and how we can engage and respond.

Those who are not Christian should realize they will never successfully secularize true Christians. Christians cannot compromise with Jesus at the points the world pressures them. Jesus stands forth calling the church to repent and beware of letting anti-biblical teaching in their churches and among their people.

Christian parents must model repentance and faith as they teach their children biblical and theological basics and exemplify how to apply and communicate the truth in their lives. Children should be teachable and realize that parents and church family are not against them but against sin and foolishness. Therefore, rather than being defensive when corrected they should learn and thank those who take time to help them.

Repent Because You Will Avoid Judgment (2:12, 16)

The third reason the church should repent is to avoid judgment. Jesus

¹³ Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Viking, 2009), 203n119.

introduces himself to those in Pergamum as the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword (2:12). Jesus threatens the unrepentant church members with the sword of his mouth (2:16; cf. 1:16 and 19:15). Interestingly, while Jesus aims his sword at the individual members who hold false teaching, he calls the whole church to repent for having these members.¹⁴

Jesus calls the whole church to repentance, even though only some of the members hold to the teaching of Balaam or the Nicolaitans because the church is corporately responsible for each member's discipleship. God is not only Savior but Father. If one thinks of God only as Savior, then he will only think of himself as saved.¹⁵ As long as one is personally safe one might rest content. However, if God is the church's Father, then the members of the church are now brothers and sisters. They are not merely saved individuals but God's family. The Christian is her brother's keeper. Jesus calls for corporate repentance because he presupposes collective responsibility.

Churches turn a blind eye and deaf ear toward immorality and idolatry. When Christians fail to confront their own immoral and idolatrous thoughts and actions with God's grace, they naturally hesitate to help others. Consequently, the church fails to disciple her members to observe everything Christ commanded. Still, God commands Christians, "Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception" (Heb 3:12–13). He expects and commands Christians to have an informed confidence about the

¹⁴ Jesus calls for repentance with the second person plural verb, "you must repent," (μετανόησον) and threatens the particular members with the third person, "them" (αὐτῶν).

¹⁵ Thoughts about God and oneself are inseparable. "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he 'lives and moves' [Acts 17:28]." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 of The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 35.

spiritual state of their fellow members by saying, “Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many. And make sure that there isn’t any immoral or irreverent person like Esau, who sold his birthright in exchange for a single meal” (Heb 12:15-16).

Jesus will judge the Christian’s fellow members with the sword of his mouth (2:12). This judgment implies these members are not truly Christian nor sealed as one of God’s people.¹⁶ John later reveals that the sword is used for condemnation and judgment: “A sharp sword came from His mouth, so that He might strike the nations with it. He will shepherd them with an iron scepter. He will also trample the winepress of the fierce anger of God, the Almighty” (Rev 19:15).¹⁷ Jesus’s sword threatens execution to those holding false teaching in contrast to Satan who threatens death to those holding the truth (2:13).

Application

Each local church family must repent corporately when they fail to uphold their congregational responsibility. They must cultivate and maintain a heart of repentance for the local church and for oneself as a member of the church. Each church member must responsibly encourage one another so that the church does not have members who cultivate an evil, unbelieving heart causing them to fall away from God. Christians are responsible to encourage each other daily. Therefore, challenge each other in meaningful conversations. Ask tough and necessary questions for Christians to kill sin. Be a gospel-prickly Christian in the way Jesus calls.

Each person must recognize that the seedbed for compromising and

¹⁶ They would not be part of the 144,000. The identity of the 144,000 is debated. But contra the view that this is literally 144,000 ethnic Israelites physically descended from Jacob (Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 473-8), it likely refers to all of God’s people, because of (1) the symbolic nature of the book, (2) the hear-look pattern for the one object in Rev 5:5 paralleling Rev 7:4-9, (3) the unlikelihood of all of the 144,000 being male virgins, and (4) the contrast between those with the mark of the beast and the seal of the lamb (Rev 13:16-14:5). See Thomas Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 112-3.

¹⁷ Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 85.

syncretistic teaching is within themselves. Therefore, readers need to keep repenting of it, exposing it, and being encouraged away from it until we die. Christians are always tempted to compromise teaching when they justify sinful desires the way Balaam sought to obey God on the outside, though his heart was already compromised for earthly riches (cf. Jude 11). Heresy and apostasy often come through ethical compromise, not ideological contradiction. Examine yourself for false teaching and compromise.

The good news for non-Christians and Christians is that Jesus took the sword of justice for wrongdoing (Rom 13:14) by dying for sins and bearing God's wrath, so that if anyone repents from their sin, trusts in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and receives him as Lord and Savior, they will be saved. Jesus invites the reader now. The threat of the sword pushes people to repentance. The fact that the church has already endured Satanic assault and has been confronted with specific sin motivates repentance. Lastly, Jesus holds out the hope of reward to inspire repentance.

Repent Because You Will Receive the Reward (2:17)

Jesus closes his message with an imperative: "The one who has ears must listen to what the Spirit says to the churches."¹⁸ He follows with a promise of the reward, saying, "To the one who conquers I will give to him the hidden manna and I will give to him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is written which no one knows except the one who receives it" (2:17).

The reward for each of the seven churches extends for all professing Christians who are actually conquerors (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21), not cowards (21:8). The reward is described as the hidden manna and the white stone. After the Israelites left Egypt, God miraculously provided manna to feed his people traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land (Exod 16:11-18). The hidden manna may refer to this manna stored in the Ark of

¹⁸ See section in chapter 9, pp. 146-7, on the Spirit calling the churches.

the Covenant that was to be revealed with the Messiah in the new temple (Heb 9:4). It may refer to spiritual or heavenly bread that is hidden from the rest of the world. Or perhaps it refers to Jesus himself, who is the bread of life coming down from heaven (John 6:41-49). Though certainty is unlikely, the point of each suggested meaning is the same: God will satisfy the deepest longings and needs eternally for every true Christian who conquers through Jesus, not through idols (cf. John 6:35; Jer 2:12-13).¹⁹

The white stone may also refer to one of two possibilities.²⁰ It may portray the idea of access via a ticket. When someone was victorious in a competition, he was given a white stone as a ticket to a feast for all the victors of the games. Perhaps Jesus is encouraging the reader with a ticket to his marriage feast (Rev 19:9). Alternatively, a white stone was used in expressing a not-guilty vote in a trial, while a black stone was used to express a juror's vote as guilty. In this case, Jesus is encouraging the hearer that the conqueror will be declared righteous and not guilty at the final judgment. Because of the future feast of Rev 19:19, it seems slightly more likely that it refers to a ticket for the feast. Regardless of which view is precisely intended, the main idea is that God accepts the conqueror and grants him access to himself in the new creation.

The new name inscribed on the stone may refer to the personal name of the recipient whose name is in the book of life (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; cf. Isa 56:5; 62:2). On the other hand, it may point to Jesus's name. It is his name written on his people (3:8; 14:1; 19:13; 22:4). Furthermore, Jesus is the one with a "new" name (3:12) that no one knows (19:12). It seems to be the latter, but either way, the point is that God accepts every true Christian personally and eternally.

¹⁹ See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 251-2; Osborne, *Revelation*, 147-8; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 198-9; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 82; Hamilton, *Revelation*, 91; Hemer, *The Seven Letters*, 94-5; Duvall, *Revelation*, 54.

²⁰ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 252-3; Duvall, *Revelation*, 54. For several more unlikely views, see Osborne, *Revelation*, 148-9; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 199-201; Hemer, *The Seven Letters*, 96-102; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 82-3.

Application

Christian, relish your personal relationship with Jesus. He knows each of his own and makes himself known to them now and in the end. They will feast with him and dwell with him forever after the final judgment. Remind other Christians of the final reward and the true nourishment and satisfaction for their thirsty souls. Do not merely live for family or retirement. Do not place hope in romance or career accomplishments. The mind should be set on things above and moving one's relationships toward these things. Non-Christians should examine what they are truly living for. What are they looking forward to? Whatever it is, it will not endure or and it will repeatedly fail to satisfy the deepest longings. They are invited to come to Jesus.

Conclusion

Let the reader realize and repent of allowing tricky and compromised teaching to creep into his church community. They must realize and repent of compromised thinking because (1) they have endured satanic assault (2:13), (2) they have been tricked into compromised teaching through the back door (2:14-15), (3) they will avoid judgment (2:16), and (4) they will receive the eternal reward (2:17).

I had a friend who served faithfully at our church when a subtle teaching from a professor at his Christian college questioned the authority of Scripture. The suspicion lodged itself in my friend's mind. Eventually he could not affirm if anything was true, and that sent him to deny the exclusivity of Christ for salvation, leave the church, later commit adultery and break up another woman's marriage, and now he is undergoing a gender transition. In the past no one would have guessed this member would end up where he is. Conversely, I have also seen a church where members given over to fornication repented and returned to walk with the Lord, some at stage two of restorative discipline (Matt 18:16), some at stage four of restorative discipline (Matt 18:17). Repentant and responsible churches help Christians keep to Christ.

If Christians do not repent, they may see some of their dear church members

on the wrong side of the final judgment. Tremble at this potential tragedy. Conversely, as Christians realize their sin and repent, they are refreshed in spiritual power to strengthen their brothers, speak the truth in love, and disciple their neighbors and the nations.

May Christians realize the compromised teaching that Satan uses to tear down the church, and may they repent together as a church family as they seek to conquer Satan, the world, and their sin by the message of Jesus Christ in Revelation 2:13-17.

CHAPTER 5

REVELATION 2:18-29—REPENT OF SINFUL TOLERANCE AND RETAIN WHAT YOU ARE HOLDING

Joshua led the Israelites to miraculous victory against Jericho by God's promise and power. The battle was a smashing success with no fatalities. To his surprise, when Joshua led a smaller group of three thousand soldiers against the smaller and less threatening town of Ai, Israel was routed and fled. Thirty-six of their men were killed. Joshua was devastated, so he and the elders of Israel fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord. As Joshua inquired, the Lord said to Joshua, "Stand up! Why have you fallen facedown? Israel has sinned. . . . The one who is caught with the things set apart must be burned . . . because he has violated the Lord's covenant and committed an outrage in Israel" (Josh 7:10-15). God called them to take care of the sin in their community.

The church in Thyatira and many churches today face a similar situation. God calls the church in Revelation 2:18-29 to get up, repent, and take care of their responsibilities within the covenant community in order to conquer the dragon, the beast, the world, and their own sin. Churches help Christians conquer Satan. When Christians sin, God disciplines them (Heb 12:6-11) and even allows sickness because of sin (James 5:14-16).

Believers ought to be rightly concerned that God may be disciplining their fellow members due to the church's sinful negligence. Though Christians aim to be a blessing to their church family, they may find themselves a partial cause of God's discipline on their fellow members. How does this unintentionally happen? It happens as church members simply go through the motions of church life without stopping to

thoughtfully care for the spiritual health of others in the church. They are too overwhelmed with their own burdens to bear the burdens of others.

In Revelation 2:18-29, Jesus refocuses the church so that they are able to conquer. The main point of this passage seems to be Jesus calling his visible church to repent from sinfully tolerating false teaching and to retain the things of Christ so that they conquer the dragon and receive their eternal reward.¹ In other words, the reader is expected to be convicted of sin, to turn from the sin, and to hold on to Christ and the grace already received. Jesus calls the church to repent from sinful tolerance (2:19-23) and retain what they are holding onto (2:24-28).

Before examining the message to the church, it is wise to observe the description of the sender and the exhortation to the recipients (Rev 2:18, 29). Jesus refers to himself as the Son of God, alluding to his Davidic kingship (2 Sam 7:14; Psalm 2). The title may secondarily contrast in the church's context with the claims of "Emperor Caesar, son of the god Julius."² His eyes are like a fiery flame (cf. Dan 10:6; Rev 1:14; 19:12). The eyes probably refer to Christ's knowledge, and the fire may refer to his judgment based on his knowledge (cf. Rev 2:19, 23-24; 5:6).³ His feet like fine bronze may refer to the strong feet that fight and crush his enemies.⁴

¹ James Hamilton's main point of the message is too narrow. "The main point of the letter to the church in Thyatira is that they need to exclude unrepentant Jezebel." James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 94.

² David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 201-202, citing J. Reynolds, *Aphrodisias and Rome* (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1982), 101. Also see Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 92; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1999), 259-60; Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 111-17. Thomas Schreiner is also correct theologically, that the title also refers to Jesus's deity. Thomas Schreiner, *Revelation*, in vol. 12 of *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. by Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 581.

³ Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 60. When connecting the eyes with Rev 1:4 and 5:6, the eyes allude to Zechariah 4:10 as one with perfect understanding endowed with the fullness of God's Spirit.

⁴ Schreiner, *Revelation*, 564, 581.

Jesus calling John to write implies that Jesus desires people to read and learn what is written (Rev 2:19). In commanding those who have ears to hear, Jesus intends for hearers not only to hear the words but to heed them (2:29). Jesus says the Spirit is speaking to the churches, so the hearer does well not only to hear the words as a Christian, but as a member hearing it with his church community. The Spirit personally addresses each church member. The church must listen. Even if the rest of one's church goes astray, the hearer must personally receive the Spirit's call to repentance and retention.

Repent from Sinfully Tolerating False Teaching (2:19-23)⁵

Commendation (2:19)

Before calling the church to repent, Jesus identifies clear markers of grace and faithfulness in the church (2:19). He knows their works, specifically their love (unlike Ephesus, Rev 2:4). They were faithful to God and served to meet the needs of others. Their service and love were not short-lived but endured in a way that was constant, consistent, dependable, and tested. Jesus also acknowledges their growth: "I know that your last works are greater than the first" (2:19).

Pastors and members should acknowledge the evidences of God's grace in their churches. Jesus models the wisdom of honest commendation before critique and correction. Churches, pastors, and commentators do well to acknowledge grace in the midst of correction. Churches and members ought to be encouraged that Jesus knows their love, faithfulness, service, and endurance, even when others do not see or acknowledge the works.

⁵ Rev 2:26-28 discussed below also grounds the call of 2:20-23 to repent from sinful, undiscerning tolerance.

Correction (2:20-23)

Yet the church in Thyatira sinned. Jesus specifically identified what he held against the church corporately: “You tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and deceives my servants to commit sexual immorality and to eat meat sacrificed to idols” (2:20). Like the Old Testament prophets, “sexual immorality” most likely symbolizes spiritual adultery and idolatry, though it often finds literal expression in the people accused (Rev 17:1-6).⁶

One must keep in mind the historical context to understand this sin. Thyatira was a commercial town about forty miles southeast of Pergamum. The city was known for its trade guilds, each guild with its own patron deity. Church members working in the city were expected to participate in these pagan temple activities that often included idolatry and immorality. The expectation pressured Christians to comply with the superstitious belief that these activities would benefit the trade guild.

Jesus reproves the church for tolerating a woman who seems to be a self-proclaimed prophetess. Jesus calls her Jezebel, which is probably not her real name, alluding to the Jezebel in the Old Testament who drove her passive husband to plunge Israel into unprecedented idolatry and immorality of Baal worship and sorcery (1 Kings 16:31-32; 21:25-26). Israel compromised in worshipping Yahweh and Baal (1 Kings 18:21). Similarly, church members in Thyatira following their Jezebel “worship[ed] Jesus on Sundays but participate[d] in the imperial cult on Mondays.”⁷

This Jezebel tried to influence people through her self-identified role. She taught what appeared to be biblical truth but deceived the servants of Christ to idolatry and immorality. Perhaps she advocated the practice of worshiping Jesus with the church while at the same time participating in the immorality and idolatry of the trade guilds for

⁶ Leon Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 71; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 250.

⁷ Tim Chester, *Revelation for You* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2019), 42. Also Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 117-20.

cultural and societal acceptance. In tolerating Jezebel, the church permitted sinful compromise to enter their community. This sin went one step further than the Pergamum church (Rev 2:14-15). Not only did the Thyatiran church have members who were compromising like Pergamum, they even allowed an outspoken member to openly teach these things and deceive some members. The active deception in the church was an expression of the second beast deceiving the world to receive the mark of the beast (Rev 13:11-18).⁸

Jesus held this sinful tolerance of Jezebel's impenitence against Thyatira for three reasons. First, they tolerate Jezebel's procrastination to repent. The Lord has given her time to repent, presumably after correction, but she refuses. Instead, she comfortably proceeded in her ways (2:21). Second, they tolerated her audacity in the face of divine threat. Jesus threatened sickness and great affliction, yet she had not repented (2:22). Third, the church's sinful tolerance would lead to the death of Jezebel and other unrepentant members who followed her (2:23; cf. Acts 5:5, 10; 1 Cor 11:29-30; James 5:1).

From the beginning, the Bible reports a repeated occurrence of how sin tolerated in the camp weakens the covenant community. Adam should have blocked the serpent as he attacked and tempted Eve (Gen 3:5-6). Moses and Joshua tried to put out the sinful unbelief of the people after hearing the report of the ten spies (Num 14:5-9). Israel's failure to discern Achan's sin inhibited their conquest of Canaan (Josh 7:6-12). During the return from exile under Nehemiah's leadership, they continued to compromise maritally (Neh 10:6-31). The church in Corinth had a man sleeping with his father's wife

⁸ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 261-2. "To allow these false prophets to continue would be to allow the satanic beast access to devour God's people through deceptive doctrine. John later portrays those who engage in prophetic deception as a beast and 'false prophet,' whose master is a devilish beast, in order to give the Thyatirans a true, heavenly perspective of the real character of these false teachers. . . . Hopefully the connection would impress on them the gravity of the situation and shock them so that they would be impelled to take disciplinary action against the heretical teachers." Also see Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 126-7.

while their church was arrogant (1 Cor 5:1-11). Juxtaposing tolerating sexual immorality with arrogant spiritual boasting highlighted the degree of blindness in the hypocrisy. John addressed a community where their church leader sinfully exalted himself to the detriment of the church (3 John 9-11).

What is the ultimate reason Jesus provided for the church to repent of this tolerance and change course? Jesus said, “I will give to each of you according to your works” (Rev 2:24). Jesus reminded the church in Thyatira that he will prove that his eyes are indeed a flame of fire and he will examine minds and hearts (2:24). The church should repent from sinfully tolerating Jezebel because Jesus will judge each member of the church according to his or her response (cf. Rev 20:13).

Application

For local churches today, Christ calls them to recognize (Rev 13:18) and repent of sinful toleration.⁹ When churches have pastors, teachers, or outspoken members who are teaching doctrine or ethics that cause people to compromise in idolatry, then the church must righteously react. To passively stand by or ignore the compromise is to sinfully tolerate the compromise. Christians should know their confession of faith and Christian ethics so well that they can identify when doctrine or practice is leading to spiritual compromise and subtle sinfulness. Whether one is teaching out of sinful motivation or ignorance, the church must lovingly, firmly, and faithfully respond in reproof and correction. Churches may err by trying to discern the motives when the clear markers are the teaching and the ethical consequences the teaching produces.

Christ is calling churches to repent of their failure to faithfully exercise corporate responsibility for any Jezebel they have and the damage she produces. The

⁹ The sinful toleration Christ rebukes differs from the “tolerance” today that refuses to definitively declare that some opinion may be wrong. For more on postmodernism’s effect on the way the term “tolerance” is used today, see D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 105, 107. Carson rightly asserts, “The exalted Christ criticizes the church in Thyatira for tolerating false prophet Jezebel,” and, “Christ himself can berate a church for being too tolerant of false teaching.”

Thyatiran church should have pursued Jezebel's restoration through corrective church discipline. The whole church should be confronting the outspoken member who deceives others to compromise, and each member should be sent to call her to repent (cf. Matt 18:17).¹⁰

How must each member confront sin and end sinful toleration? First, identify the sin according to the Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16). Second, investigate whether the member is sinning. When convinced, the confronting member should read Scripture, define the sin clearly, remind the one confronted of God's grace in Christ, then call her to repentance. In short, the church should discern the sin, confront the sinner with truth in love, and call the sinner to repent through each stage of church discipline (Matt 18:15-17). At the same time, each Christian must be careful to guard their own heart against sinful self-righteousness (Gal 6:1; Matt 7:1).¹¹

For the non-Christian reader, God calls them to repent as well. Jesus loves them and gives them time to repent as they consider his message to Thyatira. In the same way as Jezebel, judgment is coming for the non-Christian too. God is their creator who made each one to enjoy him (Gen 1:1; 26-28). God is also the judge who righteously condemns all sinners for their sin (Rom 6:23). The good news is God sent his Son Jesus to save his people from their sin (Matt 1:21) and pay their penalty (Rev 5:8). Therefore, they should repent from sin and trust in Jesus Christ, because God kindly promises that he will forgive and receive those who come to him (Rev 22:17).

Retain What You Are Holding (2:24-28)

Jesus does more than reprove the whole church for sinfully tolerating an

¹⁰ Andrew M. Davis, "The Practical Issues of Church Discipline," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. by John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 173-82.

¹¹ Mickey Connolly, "The Art and Care of Correction," in *Why Small Groups? Together Toward Maturity*, ed. by C. J. Mahaney (Gaithersburg, MD: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1996), 61-75.

outspoken, self-professed prophet. He addresses a portion of the church who have not succumbed to the deception or to sinfully tolerating it. He gives this group, and by implication the whole church, an exhortation followed by the motivation.

Exhortation (2:24-25)

Jesus turns and speaks to a portion of the church: “I say to the rest of you in Thyatira” (2:24). The subset of the church he addresses is the group who does not hold to the “teaching” of Jezebel, “the so-called secrets of Satan.” They recognized and rejected her teaching. They were not fooled by what some would call deeper or real teaching. Though Jezebel’s teaching may have been pitched as “the secrets of God,” it was not true to the biblical, prophetic, and apostolic teaching. These false teachers, like later Gnostics, may have passed off their teaching as the deep thoughts of God (cf. 1 Cor 2:10).¹² Perhaps they deceived members into thinking that their superior knowledge allowed them to participate in engaging in the idolatry of the various trade guilds in the workplace. Though called secrets of God, they are actually the “so-called secrets of Satan.”¹³

Satan twisting God’s words to deceive God’s undiscerning people is not a new strategy. It is as old as the Garden of Eden when the serpent gave the woman the deep and secret teaching God allegedly withheld—that she would be like God and know good and evil, and God is against her (cf. Gen 3:4-5). Compromised teaching and ethics

¹² Gnosticism in the widest and non-technical sense may refer to a general dualism between the physical and spiritual and the need for secret knowledge. One powerful form of this developed into a Gnosticism faced after the close of the NT. For more on later, post-NT Gnosticism, see Irenaeus of Lyons, “Irenæus against Heresies,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 315–334.

¹³ The teaching may have distorted Paul’s view of eating food offered to idols (1 Cor 8-10). See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 265–266, and Tim Chester, *Revelation for You* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2019), 41. Additionally, the “secrets” may also have included a separation of the material world from the spiritual world, or an encouragement to immerse oneself deeply in the sinful culture as proof of spiritual strength. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 266; George R. Beasley-Murray, “Revelation,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. by D. A. Carson, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1430.

accompanies the covenant community at every turn. Abraham thought he could lie about his wife and still honor God (Gen 12:11-19). The Israelites sought to worship Yahweh in Moses's delay by crafting a golden calf (Exod 32:1-6). Saul believed he pleased God in not killing all the Amalekites and by making sacrifices that were prohibited (1 Sam 15:13-15). Peter thought he could follow Jesus and avoid the cross. While thinking he was following God's concerns, Jesus called him Satan (Matt 16:22-23)! Therefore, one should not be surprised that the church in Thyatira thought they could participate in the immorality and idolatry at the workplace while faithfully honoring Jesus at home and in the church community.

Do churches and Christians face the temptation to compromise while thinking they are faithfully pleasing Jesus today? Christians are tempted to compromise with Christ under the threat of being fired from work if they share the gospel. If they speak the truth in love, the salesperson may lose the sale. If they do their work the right way before God, it may cost them a raise or put them in tension with their boss. Workers cut corners on company policy while avoiding honesty and accountability. Parents excuse impatience and impenitence with parental authority and responsibility. Church members gather and engage in small talk hoping to get through another gathering without the necessary hard conversation for correction and reconciliation. Churches may compromise by waiting to practice church discipline. Their intended patience turns to passivity and neglect. The goal of growing in love morphs into settled patterns of hypocrisy.

Jesus commends this subset for resisting the teaching that compromise is acceptable. He does not put any other burden on them. He passes up the opportunity to give them a new task. He simply repeats an old and implied expectation: "Only hold on to what you have until I come" (Rev 2:25).

Christ calls the church to retain what they already have. They already have the love, faithfulness, service, and endurance. They have growth in their works (2:19). They only need to continue on as they hold on to Jesus. And, presumably, they need to hold on

to their responsibility to continue calling out compromise and false teaching even when the church as a majority tolerates it. Jesus is coming soon (Rev 3:11; 22:20). Jesus defines the conqueror as the one “who keeps my works to the end” (2:26; cf. 1 Cor 15:58). They need to hold on to Jesus and hold on to these works of ministry firmly to the end.

How does this passage apply today? God calls churches to hold on to the truth in love congregationally. Churches today need to act, and continually maintain their ability to act. Churches must practice congregationalism faithfully, teaching their members their responsibility and expecting their members to exercise their responsibilities.¹⁴ Specifically, churches should be careful who they take in as members and how they disciple these new members as they join the covenant community. This is important for the church, as a church body, to obey their head. Having a constitution and bylaws that wisely enable the church to act, and teaching the members how to obey within such rules, will strengthen churches to turn from and stamp out sinful tolerance.

Individually, Christians are called to hold on to Christ and his truth. They are to hold on to testifying about Jesus (cf. Rev 12:11). They need to seek to reform their church toward meaningful membership and consistent discipline, so that the majority does not tolerate sinful teaching and compromise of the truth. In this Thyatiran church, it looked like only the minority was faithful, so they were unable to discipline the self-professed prophet. Christians who may be in the minority in their churches should recognize that the fight is just for a season. Life is a vapor. Jesus is coming soon. Satan, the flesh, and the world will be overcome when Christ returns. This is not the time to cower but to conquer.

¹⁴ Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 171-83. On the decline of church discipline in the contemporary church, see R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. by Mark Dever (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2001), 43-56.

Motivation (2:26-28)

What is the motivation for holding on to what the church has? Jesus gives the motivation and reason in 2:26-28. To summarize, Jesus promises his reward for all Christians who conquer. Like the other six messages to the churches in Revelation 2-3, the offer to the conqueror is to every Christian reader who hears what the Spirit is saying to the churches (2:29). The eternal reward offered is the reward summarized in Revelation 21:1-22:5.

Specifically, Jesus promises to give the conqueror and keeper of his works “authority over the nations” (2:26). Revelation repeatedly points to this authority and reign. It is called a kingdom (1:6), the right to sit on Christ’s throne (3:21), authority to judge (20:4), and eternal reign (22:5). The authority of God’s people is alluded to elsewhere in Scripture as the design of creation (Gen 1:26-28) and redemption (1 Cor 3:21-23). Christians will reign over the nations and possess the kingdom forever. No one can imagine a better future and eternal situation than the one God has prepared for those who are in Christ.¹⁵

Jesus develops the idea of his reign. The conqueror will rule (shepherd) the nations with an iron scepter and shatter them like pottery. The iron scepter symbolizes the judgment and authority of the conqueror over the nations. Jesus alludes to Psalm 2:9 where the messiah, the Davidic king, is addressed by God. Revelation applies Psalm 2:9 to Jesus at his second coming (Rev 19:15) and identifies the son of the woman as the one who has the iron scepter (12:5). How can Psalm 2:9 be applied to Jesus and his people when it clearly seems to point only to Jesus? The answer seems to be that Jesus willingly shares his reign with his people as the Father shared his reign with the Son (3:21).

Interestingly, the vision of Daniel 7, where the Son of Man is given authority over the

¹⁵ The history God ordained and the Lamb unfolds is the best of all possible worlds for God’s people when the whole picture from eternity to eternity is taken into consideration, contra John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 170-71, and pro Jonathan Edwards, “Concerning the Divine Decrees in General and Election in Particular,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 542.

nations from the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:13-14), is interpreted as the kingdom being given to the holy ones (7:18, 22, 27).¹⁶ This seems to coincide with Revelation's vision of Jesus and his people wielding the iron scepter.¹⁷

Jesus also describes the reward he gives as "the morning star." Though views vary, it seems best to understand the morning star as Jesus himself.¹⁸ Jesus called himself the bright morning star (Rev 22:16). It is worth noting that Balaam prophesied of both a star and scepter arising from Israel to rule and strike down Moab and the Shethites (Num 24:17). For Jesus to give the conqueror the morning star is for Jesus to give himself. Jesus himself is the eternal reward, motivation, and reason for Christians to hold on, repent, and endure in order to conquer.

Why would Jesus give authority to church members to rule with him? They do not deserve this authority. They deserve to be shattered like pottery under Christ's iron scepter for their sin, their sinful toleration, and their passivity toward the sins they should have dealt with in their church. Christians do not repent from sin nor retain what they have as they ought. And yet Jesus gives them his rule. Why?

The reason is that though Jesus is God with all authority, he was willingly

¹⁶ Brian Tabb rightly sees the scepter applied to the conqueror through corporate solidarity, Tabb, *All Things New*, 92. For an extended explanation of corporate solidarity in Daniel 7, see G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 191-93. For a similar application of the one to the many without corporate solidarity, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *With the Clouds of Heaven: The Book of Daniel in Biblical Theology*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 32 (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2015), 209-210.

¹⁷ In light of the conquerors imitating Jesus's coming reign, it is difficult to concur with Tim Chester, *Revelation for You*, 43. Chester takes the authority given in Rev 2:26 as authority presently possessed to (1) proclaim Christ's name in discipling (Matt 28:19) based on the authority of Christ (Matt 28:28) and (2) overcome the nations through our suffering (Rev 12:5; 10-11).

¹⁸ The morning star may be tied to Venus, the Roman goddess of victory. N. T. Wright leans in this direction on the basis that Venus is brightest before dawn like the church's witness is to be before the consummation. Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (London; SPCK, 2011), 27-28. It seems unlikely Jesus will give the conqueror the pre-dawn star after the dawn. Beale rightly rejects the mutual exclusivity of the morning star referring to Jesus and to the victory symbolized in Venus. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 268-9. Also see Schreiner, *Revelation*, 584; Chester, *Revelation for You*, 43; Beasley-Murray, "Revelation," 1430.

stripped of his authority in becoming a man (Phil 2:6-7). Jesus repented for his people when he identified with sinners in John's baptism of repentance (Matt 3:11-16).¹⁹ The sinless Jesus retains the truth he was given by being obedient to the point of death (Phil 2:8). He was placed under the iron scepter. He was shattered like pottery. His body was given for his people. He became sin for them so that Christians who are sinful, slow to repent, passive, sinfully tolerant, and ready to release what Christ has given them would never be crushed under God's scepter and shattered like pottery (2 Cor 5:21). Amazingly, they are given the scepter, the authority, and the judgment over the nations. They are even given Jesus, the bright morning star himself. Even those who are not Christian, reading Christ's offer of reward, may have this authority if they would just turn from their sin in repentance and trust in Jesus (22:17).

Christians today need not worry about ruling now or having everything in their lives go their way. Even in the church, members must not doubt God's goodness as the majority of their members keep the church in sinful tolerance. God is in control. He will restore every conquering Christian to rule with Jesus soon enough. Then they will be fully given the greatest gift of all—the morning star, Jesus Christ himself.

Conclusion

Let everyone who reads and hears repent from tolerating sinful teachers and retain what they have in Christ, so that they conquer the dragon and help fellow members conquer in light of the judgment to come. In the Los Angeles Southern Baptist

¹⁹Carson, *Matthew* in *Matthew and Mark*, in vol. 9 of REBC, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 136-7, argues that this baptism is for Jesus identifying with his people. While accurate, he does not address the reason why this identification must be done in a "baptism of repentance." As one NT scholar put it, "Jesus is fulfilling his role as the obedient Son of God by practicing the required righteousness of submitting to God's will to repent (i.e., to live in the world wholeheartedly devoted to God)," Jonathan Pennington, "Why Did Jesus Need to be Baptized?" *The Gospel Coalition*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus-need-baptized/>. Mark Dever said, "He's no more out of place being baptized than he is dying. He's no more out of place in the Jordan than he is on Golgotha." in "Jesus' Debut" *Capitol Hill Baptist Church*, September 10, 1995, <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/jesus-debut/>.

Association, a pastor of one of the churches was teaching that homosexuality was not a sin. He left space for his church members to disagree on the issue and tried to position his church as a neutral third way, neither for nor against homosexuality. Though it was not an explicit denial of the gospel, it was an important error that disabled the preaching of the gospel to those committed to homosexual sin (1 Cor 6:9-11). It was necessary for fellow pastors and their messengers in the association to confront the false teacher and publicly disassociate from the pastor, and even his church, if they refused to repent. The pastors and churches, in obedience to Jesus, refused to tolerate the sinful teaching and faithfully held onto Christ and his Word.²⁰

Jesus calls the church as a congregation to repent from sinful tolerance. He calls each member of the church to retain what they have in him. If they fail, then some of their members will face God's discipline and judgment, sinful compromise will spread in the church, and Jesus will hold against the church their negligence and sinful toleration. But if they repent from sinful tolerance and retain what they have, the members will be warned, some will repent, sin will stop spreading, Jesus will be pleased by the repentance and faith, and the conqueror will reign with Jesus forever.

²⁰ “‘Third Way’ Church May Face Expulsion,” *Baptist Press*, August 1, 2014, <http://www.bpnews.net/43080/third-way-church-may-face-expulsion>.

CHAPTER 6

REVELATION 3:1-6—WAKE UP AND STAY UP

What if you were in danger and did not know it? Imagine being on the Titanic and being told that danger was imminent, but you ignored the warning. Perhaps you would have survived if you prepared after being warned, but since you shrugged off the warning your death was inevitable. When reality sets in you would be overwhelmed with regret.

Currently, many live without understanding the pending doom. Those who are not Christian have ignored, never heard of, or minimized the coming disaster. The Christian, on the other hand, may be trapped by overconfidence that dulls one to the real possibility of judgment for them or their loved ones. Everyone wants to be alert and ready for the coming judgment. Christians want to keep others alert.

Life is busy, though. Matters seem to be manageable. “Things are not that bad,” they say. Such sentiments lull Christians from the alertness they desperately need. What if you were in danger and did not know it? Will Satan trick the readers and the churches into snoozing? Or will they hear Jesus sound the alarm and pay attention?

Christians and churches need not be caught off guard. They can be ready. Jesus sends his message to the church at Sardis to prepare them for judgment day. The main burden is given in two complementary commands: “Be alert and strengthen what remains” (3:2). The main homiletical point of Revelation 3:1-6 is for the church to wake up and stay up, so that they conquer Satan and receive their eternal salvation.¹

¹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) 104. “Jesus . . . calls the church in Sardis to wake up and strengthen what remains.” In contrast, Beale summarizes the main point as, “Christ condemns the church in Sardis for its lack of witness and its compromise and exhorts it to overcome this in order to inherit the blessings of salvation,” in G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing

Wake Up (3:1-3)

“Wake up” is a way of summarizing the five commands in verses 2 and 3. Jesus commands the church to be alert, strengthen what remains, remember and keep what they received and heard, and repent. Alertness entails strengthening, remembering, keeping, and repenting of neglecting to strengthen, remember, and keep. The text gives four reasons to wake up in keeping the quintet of commands. Christian, you must wake up, because Jesus sees through your reputation (3:1b), what remains is about to die (3:2), your works are incomplete (3:2), and Jesus will come in judgment (3:3).

Because Jesus Sees Through Your Reputation (3:1b)

Sardis was a city of incomplete works, despite its high reputation. The city of Sardis was proverbially impenetrable. Most thought the city was impossible to attack because so many of their cliffs were made of friable material that would all break away, and they were so steep.² Despite this reputation, Sardis was historically taken twice. What good is the reputation of impenetrability when your city has been successfully penetrated twice? In a similar way, the church in Sardis is in danger of thinking themselves impenetrable, healthy, and impervious to real danger. The city had a reputation for being wonderful, much like the church, though it was in enormous danger.³

The church’s reputation became a detriment to their health and mission because they rested on it. The church at Sardis needed to wake up because Jesus saw through their reputation. He knew their works and their reputation for being alive, while

Company, 2015), 78. Beale identifies the incompleteness as lack of witness and compromise. The exhortation to overcome fails to distinguish the point of this message from the other six, unlike the call to “wake up” or “be alert.” Akin is an improvement in stating the main idea as Christ “calling the spiritually lethargic and compromised back to faithfulness and life.” Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation*, CCEC (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2016), 79.

² Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 129.

³ D. A. Carson, “Revelation—Part 6,” in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016); Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 100.

at the same time Jesus also knew they were actually dead (3:1b). The church seemed to have had a good reputation among other Christians and churches.⁴ Jesus saw through their reputation and the face Christians may put on each Sunday. A good name is worthless before God if that good name is just a façade. If all one has is a good reputation, one has nothing. It is better to be truly well than to be well thought of. Though their reputation is one of life, vitality, and health, their church was dead, unhealthy, and dying. Jesus knows this, sees this, and exposes it.

The reader should trust Jesus's claim to see through their good reputation because Jesus has the seven stars. He holds the angels of the churches (3:1). Verse one not only reminds the reader that the glorified Jesus has the angels of the churches—the stars—but also reminds him of chapter 1 where they were told he walks among the golden lampstands—the churches (1:13, 16, 20).

The reader should wake up to his empty reputation and incomplete works which are about die, because Jesus sees through the reputation. Churches must realize that a good reputation among one another or among other churches fails to relieve their accountability to Jesus for their incomplete works. Jesus gives a second reason to wake up.

Because What Remains is About to Die (3:2)

Jesus calls them to wake up, be alert, and strengthen what remains, because what remains is about to die (3:2). The church has some good things, but those things are about to die. Jesus encourages them by identifying some grace in their lives after making the harsher statement in verse 1, where he calls them dead in order to wake them up.

⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 174. Jesus is not addressing a false church that did not preach the gospel, otherwise Jesus would have confronted their teaching like in Pergamum or Thyatira (Rev 2:14-15, 20). The church had a correct confession. This text should not be seen as directly applying to a false church but irregular and unhealthy churches. For true and false versus regular and irregular churches, see Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), xxvii, 95n12.

Verse 2 nuances the statement by saying that they are not completely dead, but what remains is “about to die.” There is still a little bit of life.

When my wife and I travel out of town, we check our refrigerator for anything that may spoil. Our milk has an expiration date. This date directs our actions to either drink it, dump it, or keep it. If the expiration date is close, then alertness prompts one to either drink it or dump it. One takes action. But if one is not alert, the thought of milk almost being expired may cross one’s mind without leading to the necessary action. The milk would just spoil in the refrigerator. Like a near expiration date, Jesus calls the church to wake up and take action because what they have is about to die.

Readers should trust Jesus’s assessment on church death because he also has the seven spirits of God (3:1). The seven spirits of God are the Holy Spirit (Rev 1:4-5).⁵ The Holy Spirit throughout Scripture is the one who gives life. He hovered over the face of the waters causing life to spring up. God breathes his Spirit into Adam to give him life (Gen 2:7). “Some” of the Spirit was taken from Moses and placed on the seventy elders of Israel (Num 11:24-29). The Spirit enveloped Gideon, empowering him to judge Israel (Judges 6:34; cf. 3:9-10). The Spirit came powerfully on David to empower him as king of Israel (1 Sam 16:13). In light of Israel’s exile from the Promised Land, Ezekiel was given the vision of the valley of dry bones. After prophesying, God put his Spirit in the

⁵ D. A. Carson slightly leans toward the seven spirits referring to “seven angelic beings who are peculiarly commissioned in a variety of important ways, who are quick to do God’s command, and who are bound up with the churches.” D. A. Carson, “Revelation—Part 8,” in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016), Rev 4:5–11. Carson does not provide a defense of his position. Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 100, says one may think it refers to angels because it seems odd to speak of Jesus “having” the seven spirits of God, though he disagrees with that position. The “seven spirits of God” seem more likely to refer to the Holy Spirit given the trinitarian introduction to the book in Rev 1:4-6. J. Daryl Charles, “An Apocalyptic Tribute to the Lamb (Rev 5:1-14),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 4 (1991): 468; Richard J. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 110-115; Richard J. Bauckham, “The Role of the Spirit in the Apocalypse,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (April/June 1980): 75-7; Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 6-7; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997) 56, 245. For a reflection and application of the teaching on the Holy Spirit as the seven spirits before God’s throne, see J. Scott Duvall, *The Heart of Revelation: Understanding the 10 Essential Themes of the Bible’s Final Book* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 67-81.

bones and gave them life (Ezek 37:14) as an illustration of the promise of the Spirit for life and obedience in the preceding chapter (Ezek 36:25-27). Then the Lord Jesus only starts his public ministry after getting baptized and having the Spirit descend upon him (Matt 3:16). After Jesus ascends, the disciples sit in fear until the Spirit descends and the cowardly disciples become bold and powerful to preach life (Acts 1:8. 2:3).

The Spirit still gives life today. How did members of churches today believe, get saved, and receive life and power to walk in God's ways? By the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gave life to the church at Sardis. They were born of the Spirit. In a jarring contrast, the church being almost dead with incomplete works makes no sense. If one sleeps like he is dead, he is living as if he does not have the seven spirits of God whom Jesus has and gives to his people for their life, vitality, and power. Jesus tells the church to wake up, recognize that Jesus has the Holy Spirit and gave him to his churches, so that they are awake, alert, strengthening what they have, and are not falling asleep on their duty in God's missionary enterprise.

How do churches get empowered by the Spirit? Listen to the Spirit speaking and receive his words (3:6; cf. Gal 3:1-6).⁶ Understand his words. Believe his words. Obey his words to receive more and more of the Spirit. The church should wake up because Jesus sees through their reputation and because their works are about to die. A third reason to wake up is because their works are incomplete.

Because Your Works are Incomplete (3:2)

Though the city found confidence and security in their reputation, the city had a significantly incomplete work. The church needed to wake up because they, too, had left their works incomplete. The church's contentment with incompleteness reflected

⁶ Michael Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit: God's Perfecting Presence in Creation, Redemption, and Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 261-3, and John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), 279-84. Contra Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 244-5, and Graham A. Cole, *Engaging with The Holy Spirit: Real Questions, Practical Answers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 99-113.

Sardis's culture of shallow contentment. Sardis had one of the two great temples to Artemis in the Roman Empire. It was not known to be as great as the temple of Artemis in Ephesus because Sardis's temple was incomplete.

Jesus rebukes the church and not the city for incompleteness. Readers must identify what Jesus found incomplete about the church's works. Though certainty seems unlikely, G. K. Beale suggests that the church has failed to witness to non-Christians based on Christ's self-description as the one who has the seven stars and the seven Spirits of God, indicating the supernatural help needed for their witness from angels and the Spirit.⁷ Others' suggestions complement Beale's thought. Hamilton sees the incompleteness as a failure to confess the Lord's name publicly, while Morris sees the incompleteness as a "lack of aggressiveness and positive Christianity." More generally, Thomas suggests it is the overall incomplete quality of their deeds.⁸

Whatever the specific works, the goal of all of those works would be to rebuild the temple, which in the New Covenant is the local church serving as the end time witness until Christ returns (Eph 2:20-22). There are two reasons for why the incomplete works may be the incomplete temple. First, the city of Sardis did not complete the temple to Artemis.⁹ Second, John may be alluding to Zechariah 4:8 where Zechariah speaks of Zerubbabel, the Davidic descendant, rebuilding the temple and completing it by God's Spirit (Zech 4:6).¹⁰ Zechariah 4:10 speaks of the seven eyes of the Lord, which in Revelation are the seven Spirits of God (Rev 5:6). In this particular message to Sardis,

⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 275.

⁸ Hamilton, *Revelation*, 107; Leon L. Morris, *Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 75; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 250.

⁹ J. Scott Duvall, *Revelation*, TTCS (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 65; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 85-86; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 94.

¹⁰ Duvall, *Revelation*, 65.

Jesus identifies himself as the one who has the seven spirits of God (3:1). Furthermore, the church at Sardis is “dead” and “about to die,” and the one who gives life is the Spirit of God (Rev 2:7; 22:17).

Every church must ask if they are working hard to make the church complete and faithful, despite the culture’s pressure to compromise. What are incomplete works of the churches today? How shall a church intentionally move to complete their works in building up the new covenant temple?

Some ways churches can complete these works in communities like Bethany Baptist Church include:

1. Preaching the gospel and Scriptures (Acts 6:4; 1 Tim 3:2) and teaching and faithful, biblical, and systematic theology (Acts 2:42).
2. Practicing speaking the gospel and applying it to non-believers and believers.
3. Practicing a mutual responsibility for one another’s discipleship (meaningful membership).¹¹ Meaningful membership includes practicing loving, courageous, and restorative church discipline (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5).
4. Meeting each other’s needs for growth in Christ (Acts 2:43-47).
5. Having a biblical leadership structure.¹²
6. Praying (Acts 2:42).
7. Loving neighbors (Mark 12:31).

¹¹ The Southern Baptist Convention, “On Regenerate Church Membership and Church Member Restoration,” Southern Baptist Convention, June 11, 2008, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/1189/on-regenerate-church-membership-and-church-member-restoration>. Also, “What is Meaningful Membership?” 9Marks, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.9marks.org/answer/what-meaningful-membership/>. Some think that meaningful membership is optional and not necessary to complete the works of Christ in the church because it is not essential to the gospel message. Though I agree one can hold the gospel and be a true church without meaningful membership, bloated rolls or Christians who are not responsible and held responsible for the church's discipleship would make the work in the church incomplete.

¹² Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority? Elders in Baptist Life* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2006). Similar to the previous footnote a biblical structure of leadership in a mature church is not essential to the gospel or to a church being a true church, but it is necessary in completing the works Christ calls churches to as they teach others to observe *everything* he commanded (Matt 28:20).

8. Cooperating with other churches to intentionally engage in world missions (Matt 28:19).
9. Working toward the good of their societies.¹³

Jesus calls the church to wake up because Jesus sees through their reputation, they are near death, their works are incomplete, and Jesus will come to judge them.

Because Jesus will Come in Judgment (3:3)

The Sardis church needed to wake up because Jesus threatened to come to them in judgment. This threat is captured in the apodosis of 3:3b: “If you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come upon you.” The response of staying asleep is a surprise visit from Judge Jesus.

What does it mean that Jesus will come like a thief upon the church at Sardis? Some say it refers to the second coming of Jesus.¹⁴ Jesus coming upon the church may include the second coming,¹⁵ but not necessarily so, because the threat is based on a condition: “ἐὰν οὖν μὴ γρηγορήσῃς.”¹⁶ It seems like Jesus is primarily referring to a judgment on the church that can occur before the consummation, since other passages in Revelation seem to verify this view. Jesus similarly speaks of coming like a thief in Revelation 16:15, declaring the alert ones blessed in contrast with those who will “go around naked and people see [their] shame.” This threat seems to be similar to the threat of discipline given to the church in Thyatira (Rev 2:22-23). The church at Ephesus is

¹³ Jonathan Leeman, Review of *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes us Just*, by Timothy Keller, *9Marks Journal* (Nov-Dec, 2010): 6-11.

¹⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992) 254-5.

¹⁵ Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 102; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 86-7.

¹⁶ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 275-6; Duvall, *Revelation*, 66-7; Morris, *Revelation*, 76.

threatened with a coming of Jesus that is distinct from the *parousia* (2:5). Furthermore, this threatened *pre-parousia* judgment upon the Sardis church may include eternal condemnation like the threat to the Pergamum church (2:16).

Jesus judges Christians and non-Christians. He judges churches and wipes them out (Rev 2:5). Some Christians even get sick and die because of their sin and sleepy unrepentance (cf. Acts 5:9; 1 Cor 11: 29-30). In our passage, Jesus threatens to come upon those who are sleepily incomplete in their works toward him. The assembled Christian readers and hearers should feel the real and present danger of Christ's threat given his words and their inability to know when he will return.

Application

Jesus gives five commands in this passage: (1) be alert, (2) strengthen what remains, (3) remember what you have received, (4) keep it, and (5) repent (3:2-3). Be alert and wake up to the church's actual predicament. Be aware of danger, the task at hand, and the goal the church moves toward. Strengthen what remains (3:2b) by identifying the current good works and focusing on following the works through to the completion of building up the churches. Remember what you received (3:3a) by recalling the circumstances of conversion toward trusting the gospel in spite of opposition (cf. 1 Thess 1:6; 2:13-14). Keep what you received (3:3a) by believing and obeying the gospel and Scripture every day as you believe and repent (3:3a) from incomplete works and resting on reputation. All of these commands require the power of the seven spirits that Jesus has.

The non-Christian reader must also wake up because judgment is coming to him as well. John 3:36 says, "The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him." God is patient toward the reader to give him this message, but judgment will unexpectedly come to him as well (cf. Heb 9:27). God calls non-Christians to wake up and trust Jesus

who died for sinners and rose from the dead to save and eventually restore his people in a new creation.

Stay Up (3:4-6)

Though the Lord Jesus calls the church at Sardis to wake up and repent in 3:1-3, not every member of the church has failed in this way. Jesus reminds the church that they “have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes” (3:4). For the undefiled members, and the Christians now waking up, the Lord Jesus implicitly encourages them to stay alert and conquer all the way to the end.¹⁷ Jesus gives three incentives to stay up and alert: they will walk with Jesus in white (3:4), they will secure their name in heaven (3:5a), and Christ will acknowledge their name in the final judgment (3:5b).

Because You will Walk with Jesus in White (3:4b)

The Lord Jesus promises that those who have not defiled their clothes “will walk with [him] in white.” To appreciate this promise the reader must understand the significance of the color of the clothing, what clothing itself represents, and the worthiness of the recipient.

First, what does the whiteness of the clothes represent? Some suggest purity, righteousness, and victory.¹⁸ The clothing may represent purity because they are purified of sin and defilement by the work of Jesus Christ. Revelation 7:13-14 says, “Then one of the elders asked me, ‘Who are these people in white robes,’ . . . Then he told me: These are the ones [who] washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

¹⁷ The endurance “to the end” is not in the message to Sardis explicitly but is clearly a theme for conquering and enduring in the messages to the seven churches (Rev 2:10-11, 24-26; 3:10-12; cf. 13:9-10).

¹⁸ Tim Chester, *Revelation For You* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2019), 44; Morris, *Revelation*, 76. Robert Mounce sees the white clothes as signifying they are part of the multitude in Rev 7:9-10. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 95.

The whiteness may be due to the washing by Christ's death.

In another sense, the white clothes may represent the good works of the saints.¹⁹ In Revelation 19:8, the vast multitude declares like loud thunder, “[The bride] was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure. For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints.” If the white clothing John writes of in 3:4 is the righteous acts of the saints, then it may be their acts of staying alert, not resting on their reputation, and working hard to complete the works of Christ in building the church as they repent from sin and hold to Christ and his truth.

Second, what might the clothing itself represent? According to D. A. Carson, the clothing refers to the reward for victory from the competition. They raced naked in those days and the winner was given white raiment.²⁰ In 3:5 Jesus promises the one who conquers and is victorious that he will be dressed in white clothes. The white clothes as a prize for victory is similar to the crown mentioned in 2:10 and 3:11.

Why will Jesus give the undefiled members of the church in Sardis the honor of walking with him in white? “Because they are worthy” (3:4). Jesus is not saying they are worthy in the sense that they are sinless, but in the sense that they are faithful to trust Jesus, live for Jesus, and conquer Satan and sin. Jesus promises those who stay up and alert that they will walk with him in white clothes. Jesus gives a second promise and reason to stay up.

Because You will Secure Your Name in the Book of Life (3:5)

The second reason Jesus gives the reader to stay alert, repentant, and holy is

¹⁹ Duvall, *Revelation*, 67.

²⁰ D. A. Carson, “Revelation—Part 6,” in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016). “Note the reference here in the text to white raiment that was given to the conqueror, the one who won the races. They raced naked in those days. So the winner in Christian forms here is given white raiment. The symbolism is the same.” Also see Osborne, *Revelation Verse by Verse*, 87; Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 146-7.

because he will secure their names in the book of life. Jesus says of the one who conquers, “I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels” (3:5). Jesus will deliver on this promise by having the reader’s name in the book of life, promising to never erase it, and acknowledging his name before God.

The book of life. The Hellenistic world had a citizen-register for its people. There was also a synagogue-register for the Jews.²¹ Jesus promises that the names of the conquerors will be in the book of life. Negatively, the book of life contains the names of everyone who will not be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). Positively, the book of life contains the name of everyone who will enter the holy city Jerusalem that will come down out of heaven from God (Rev 21:27). Taking the thought one step further, one’s name will not only be in the book of life but will never be erased.

Never erasing the name. Erasure from the citizen-register happened before execution. The curse of Minim for the synagogues read, “May the Nazarenes and the Minim suddenly perish, and may they be blotted out of the book of Life and not enrolled along with the righteous.”²² In Christ’s kindness, the conqueror has a promise that Jesus will never erase his name from the book of life. The idea of erasing a name may have come from Moses’s prayer in Exodus 32:32-33, which reads, “Now if you would only forgive their sin. But if not, please erase me from the book you have written. The Lord replied to Moses: ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will erase from my book.’” Does God erase names from the book of life? He did not erase Moses’s name, nor did he remove the Apostle Paul’s name when he asked a similar request (Rom 9:3).

If Jesus promises to never erase the conquering Christian’s name from the

²¹ Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 148-9.

²² Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*.

book of life, does Jesus “erase” the names of the cowardly Christians or the compromising Christians (21:8)? In other words, can you lose your salvation? David seems to pray with the expectation that God does respond with erasing names from the book of life (Psalm 69:28). Still, the bible is clear that one cannot lose their salvation (Rom 8:29-30).²³

Other than verses like Revelation 3:5 and Psalm 69:28, there is no indication that God erases the name of anyone who’s name is eternally chosen for salvation. Given the genre of the Psalms and Revelation, one may suggest that the imagery of erasing a name from the book of life communicates denying someone salvation and rendering that one condemned, and not necessarily the idea of having salvation and then losing that salvation. That seems to press the image too far in such a way that would violate the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.²⁴ The imagery of a name being erased may also communicate that the person “erased” was a name included on the list of the church’s membership but is actually not regenerate. His condemnation can be seen as one who was thought to be saved but was later “erased” from the list.²⁵

Jesus incentivizes staying up and alert with a victorious walk with him in white clothes and a promise for the reader’s name to be written permanently in the book of life.

²³ John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God’s Grace*, (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2013), 68-69.

²⁴ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 97, wisely suggests, “It is hermeneutically unsound to base theological doctrine solely on either parables or apocalyptic imagery. Better to allow the text, even when theologically awkward, to present its own picture.” This is better than John F. Walvoord, *Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1989), 82, saying that God writes all humans in the book of life and erases those apart from Christ. Mounce’s view is also better than G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (1966; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 49-50, who proposes “a conditional predestination” because the “decrees of God are not irreversible, but wait on the acceptance or rejection of man,” and Richard Bauckham, “Revelation,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. by John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1292, saying, “This reference shows that the predestination implied is not absolute. Christ can delete names because it is his register (13:8; 21:27) of those with whom he shares his eternal life.”

²⁵ In systematic theological terms, one would say the person was part of the visible church but not the invisible church.

A third incentive to stay up and alert is because Jesus will confess the reader's name in heaven.

**Because Jesus will Confess
Your Name in Heaven (3:5)**

Jesus promises to “acknowledge [the alert one's] name before [his] Father and before his angels” (3:5). One may grasp the significance of this confession by understanding the importance of the name and the acknowledgement before the Father.

The importance of a name. Jesus will acknowledge the conqueror's “name.” What is in a name? The name is particularly important in this message to the churches. The “name” is first used as the reputation the church has among others on earth (3:1). Later, the “names” are the names of the few who are undefiled among the members of the church at Sardis (3:4). In verse 5, the “name” is written in the book of life, and the “name” is acknowledged before the Father and angels. Jesus seems to be contrasting the reputation/name people have on earth, even among churches, with the true name they have before God as undefiled (3:4), living (3:5), and acknowledged before him (3:5). The name is who the reader is before the omniscient God as one who is either faithful or unfaithful to Jesus.

Acknowledgement before the Father and angels. Jesus promises the one who stays up and alert that he will acknowledge his name before the Father in heaven and before his angels. As the only one worthy to take the scroll and enact God's plan of redemption (Rev 5:2-7), and the only one who was slaughtered to purchase people for God from every ethnic people group (Rev 1:6; 5:9; cf. Mark 8:31; 10:45), Jesus must acknowledge the name of the sinner before the Father in heaven or else the sinner will lose his life (Mark 8:36-38). The promise of acknowledgement guarantees the reader that if he endures, his salvation at the final judgment is secure (Rev 20:11-15). The reader

must stay up and alert because he will walk with Jesus in white, his name will be secure in the book of life, and his name will be confessed by Jesus in the heavenly judgment.

Application

Christian, do not let the rest of the world pull you down. More specifically, do not let contemporary church around you cause you to fall asleep. If others defile their garments by sleeping on sin, compromise, and incomplete works, then you must continue to repent from sin, pursue holiness, and complete the work God calls you to in building his church.

Local churches must keep moving collectively in the correct direction of affirming new members through baptism and membership and then continuing to encourage those members. Discipling members toward maturity in Christ moves the whole church toward Christ and his commission as the collective and corporate aspect of discipleship is considered and cultivated.²⁶

If the reader is not a Christian, he must understand that Jesus will give him the power to stay up if he will repent and trust Jesus today. Jesus is the one who has the seven spirits, the Spirit of God, and he sends the Spirit to help and guide those who repent and trust in him.

Conclusion

Jesus calls Christians to wake up and stay up. The churches should wake up because the Spirit is speaking to them and they are required to listen (3:6). They should wake up because Jesus sees through their reputation, their works are about to die, their works are incomplete, and Jesus will come in judgment. They should stay up and alert because they will walk with Jesus in white victorious clothing, their names will be secure

²⁶ Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 117-132.

in the book of life, and Jesus will acknowledge them at the final judgment.

Wake up and complete the works you started as a church and as an individual member of your church. Stay up on following through on works in purity until the Lord Jesus comes. If you do not, you will weaken your church and move it toward death. You will be deceived by your reputation, leading to judgment for many in your church. But if you wake up and stay up, you will move your church toward life and vitality. You will be confident that you are doing what the Lord wants you to complete and accomplish. You will enjoy the eternal reward of wearing white robes and walking with Jesus forever.

Jesus tells the parable of the five foolish virgins who were not ready and the five wise ones who were (Matt 25:1-13). The foolish ones did not take oil with them and were not ready for the endurance in waiting that would be required. The wise ones took their oil flasks and were prepared to be alert for the duration of the wait. The foolish ones ran out of oil and had to go and buy some. When they went to buy oil, the groom came and let the guests into the banquet. The wise ones went into the banquet with the groom while the foolish ones were shut out. The Master denied having known the fools (25:12). Jesus then applies the parable: “Therefore be alert, because you don't know either the day or the hour” (25:13).

If the Christian reader is honest, he fails to stay alert frequently and falls asleep too easily. The disciples fell asleep on Jesus in his greatest moment of need in Gethsemane (Matt 28:38-43). But Jesus was awake and alert and not defiled in the garden of Gethsemane. Meanwhile, all his disciples—like us—were lulled into sleep, temptation, and sin, running away from Jesus rather than walking with Jesus to the cross. We deserve to die. But Jesus died instead.

Jesus was stripped of his clothes on the cross so we would be clothed in white forever. Jesus's name was temporarily, in a sense, “erased” on the cross for those three hours so that our names would never be erased from the book of life. Jesus was forsaken by the Father on the cross so that he would successfully represent us as acknowledged

before the Father in the judgment to come. Jesus gives us his life, this message, and his Spirit so that the readers wake up and stay up.

CHAPTER 7

REVELATION 3:7-13—CLING TO CHRIST JESUS

Why are Christians so stubborn and closed-minded? Jesus's answer in Revelation 3:7-13 will help those who are not Christian understand why Christians are so committed to their worldview. For Christians, this passage will help them understand why some who seemed to follow Jesus devoutly are no longer following him. I knew a church's song leader who seemed to be a faithful member. However, when his wife died of cancer, he withered spiritually, left the church, married a Roman Catholic, and left the Christian faith. One might multiply such stories like this with other church leaders, preachers, counselors, disciple-makers, teachers, and members. Faithful churches are able to recall members they have excommunicated.

Christians face seasons of uncertainty as to whether they will endure to the end. Jesus said the love of many would grow cold (Matt 24:11-12). How do Christians make it to the end and not get uprooted by Satan, discouraged by their sin, hardened by their pain, distracted by their pleasures in the world? Jesus gives the solution with the command in Revelation 3:11: "Hold on to what you have." What do they have? They have Jesus's word and his name (3:8). In other words, they have Jesus. Additionally, they have an open door and a future hope from Jesus (3:8). In this passage, therefore, Jesus calls believers to cling to him amid the tumult of an antagonistic world, even oftentimes an antagonistic church. Revelation 3:11 commands what the book will call for later: "If anyone is to be taken captive, into captivity he goes. If anyone is to be killed with a sword, with a sword he will be killed. This calls for endurance and faithfulness from the saints" (Rev 13:10) and, "This calls for endurance from the saints, who keep God's commands and their faith in Jesus" (14:12).

The command is to cling to Jesus and hold onto what they have by his grace. Like a man clutching a coin with someone trying to pry it out of his hand, the church was to hold their grip as long as they were on earth. The pressure of the world led by the beast, combined with the pressure of the church deceived by the second beast, pushes Christians to let go of what they have (Rev 13:5-10; 14-15). Christians must be aware of the pressure to compromise. At the same time, they must have strong convictions to withstand the pressure.

How can churches practically obey this command to hold on? For churches in the twenty-first century, they must resolve to hold to the faith and doctrine delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Churches often express this in a confession of faith, grounded in Scripture and informed by historical theology. Church confessions must never be a formality only, but functionally used for regular review, rejoicing, proclamation, and application. For churches practicing congregational polity, the members must speak up and thoughtfully participate in the members' meetings, speaking the truth in love and thoughtfully engaging in the deliberations for church decisions. Churches hold onto Jesus and his gospel by explaining the gospel, trusting the gospel, and enjoying God through faith in the gospel. Members should speak the truth to one another and expect each other to hold to Jesus in the face of opposition, complacency, and crafty tricks (cf. Gen 3:1-6).

If members will endure, they must maximize the ministry-equipping opportunities provided by their pastors and teachers (cf. Eph 4:11). They must go beyond merely attending a Sunday morning gathering to meaningfully sharing their lives with other members as they mutually care for one another. Meaningful fellowship always goes beyond the scheduled Sunday morning meeting. Christians should meditate on Scripture daily and not rely on the previous meditations (cf. Psalm 1:2). They should strive to keep learning fresh, every day. Furthermore, even if the church goes astray, whether it is a minority or majority of the members or even their pastors, the Christian who conquers must hold to Jesus.

The main homiletical point of the passage is: *Cling to Jesus for the rest of your life in an antagonistic world so that you conquer the dragon and receive your crown.*

Though the imperative in 3:11 is not preceded by an inferential conjunction like ἄρα, διό, or οὖν, this is the logical sense of the pericope.¹ In this passage Jesus gives five reasons why Christians must cling to him in this pressure-filled life: opportunity, validation, safety, return, and reward.²

Cling to Christ Because He Opens a Door for You (3:7-8)

The first reason the text gives for Christians to cling to Christ is because Jesus opens a door for his church. Anyone can claim to open doors of opportunity, but Jesus is particularly qualified as seen in his identification (3:7). Consequently, a church does well to pay attention to his action on their behalf.

Jesus Identified (3:7)

The introductions to each message are meant to bolster faith in the one identified and therefore compel them to respond.³ Jesus calls himself “the Holy One, the true one.” In Revelation, God is *the* holy one (Rev 4:8). Jesus applies this prestigious adjective unto himself as one uniquely related to the one who sits on the throne. As the true one, Jesus cannot lie or fail. Like God, he also is true (John 17:3) because he actually is truth (John 14:6).

¹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2102), 112, 118. James Hamilton essentially asserts the same hortatory point that “we must keep the word of Jesus,” even though he presents the other parts of this pericope as coordinate relationships and not necessarily being used as reasons for the command (see next footnote).

² The first four of these reasons are “grounds” for holding to Christ. The last reason is a purpose for holding to Christ. For the way these logical relationships form the argument of a text, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 104-6.

³ Hamilton, *Revelation*, 112.

Jesus claims he is “the one who has the key of David.” David is the greatest king of Israel. He was given the amazing and pivotal promise that he would have a descendant who would establish his kingdom, and this kingdom and throne would be established forever (2 Sam 7:11-16). Jesus fulfilled this promise in fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa 9:1-7; Matthew 4:12-17).⁴ Ezekiel even calls this future descendant God’s servant, “David,” who would shepherd God’s people, even as it is only God himself who will shepherd them (Ezek 34:22-24).

Jesus tells the church in Philadelphia that he has the “key of David.” What is this key? The phrase alludes to Isaiah 22:20-22 where the key is taken from Shebna and given to Eliakim: “I will place the key of the house of David on his shoulder; what he opens, no one can close; what he closes, no one can open.” Isaiah prophesied that Eliakim would be given the authority to lead the government of Israel in his day.⁵ Centuries later in John’s day, Jesus tells the churches that he is the ultimate successor of David with the key, which represents authority of the kingdom and kingly rule. Therefore, Jesus claims the power to open and close doors for this kingdom as he pleases (cf. Matt 16:16-19). What does Jesus do with these keys?

Jesus Acts (3:8)

As the one who has the key of David and of God’s kingdom, Jesus has authority to open and close. With this authority Jesus opens a door for the church in Philadelphia that no one has the power or authority to close. Many assert differing opinions on what the open door actually is. Some say the open door is for ministry (cf.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in *Matthew and Mark*, vol. 9 of REBC, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 51-3, 145.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 2, trans. William Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 136–137. For an extended meditation on Isa 22:22 in Rev 3:7, see G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 133-48.

Col 4:3). Christ certainly gives unique opportunities to churches for faithful application of biblical ministry in particular situations.⁶

It seems more likely that this is an open door for final salvation, for entering the consummated kingdom.⁷ First, this is the implied call and invitation at the end of each of the seven messages to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, as well as the call at the end of the book.⁸ Second, the Bible uses the analogy of the door elsewhere to refer to salvation (John 10:9; Acts 14:27). Third, the apostles—and later the churches—exercise the keys of the kingdom on earth, referring to the binding and loosing tied to the gospel and salvation, not ministry (Matt 16:19; 18:17-20).⁹ For a church doubting they will enter God’s kingdom, Jesus reassures them of their direction toward the kingdom (cf. Acts 14:22).

Why does Jesus open the door for the church in Philadelphia? Jesus gives them three reasons. They have little power, so Jesus wants to supply what they lack. They have kept Christ’s word and testimony, a frequent theme of Revelation (1:2, 9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4). This word includes his message, the gospel, the truth, his

⁶ William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 297. “Philadelphia, therefore, was the keeper of the gateway to the plateau; but the door had now been permanently opened before the Church, and the work of Philadelphia had been to go forth through the door and carry the gospel to the cities of the Phrygian land.” On ministry application, see Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 110. Another less likely view is that Jesus is the door (cf. John 10:9), but Jesus opens the door in Rev 3:8.

⁷ Richard Bauckham, “Revelation,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1292; Leon Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 91.

⁸ Refer to chapter 9, pp. 146-7. Also see Rev 21:7-8; 22:10-17.

⁹ Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 176-94; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 625-27. Probably correctly, both Hemer and Beale see the primary reference as a door to Christ’s kingdom that has immediate implications for missionary opportunity. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 162; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 285-86.

commands, and even his mission. Third, they have not denied Jesus's name. They have endured pressure and opposition, continuing in boldness and courage as they continue to conquer. Jesus knows their works.

Application

Jesus also knows the works of every gospel-preaching church today. He pays attention to them and cares. He sees their faithfulness, despite their little power. Through this passage Jesus encourages all churches that there is an open door for the kingdom presented to them. No one can shut it.

Though the open door does not primarily refer to an open door for ministry, an implication of the door of salvation opened to them is their exercise of ministry to call and help others enter through that door. This is the "charter" of the local church and, therefore, it is their unique ministry in the world until Christ returns.¹⁰ Churches and Christians must cling to Christ in a challenging world and compromised "Christian" culture because Jesus opens the door of his kingdom for them.

Cling to Christ Because He Will Validate You (3:9)

The second reason Jesus gives for his church to cling to him for the rest of their lives in this antagonistic world is because he will eventually validate them. He strengthens their resolve to endure by identifying the church's opposition as Satanic and by contrasting that identity with the final validation promised to his people.

Jesus Identifies the Opposition

Jesus uses the demonstrative particle ἰδοὺ to grab the attention of the readers, though the word is not imperatival in force. He wants them to realize that those who are claiming to be Jews are not actually Jews. They are lying. They are "the synagogue of

¹⁰ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 169-228.

Satan.” The church’s opponents probably did not call themselves the synagogue of Satan. These opponents believed they were a synagogue faithful to the Torah and the God of the Hebrew Bible, the one living and true God, and that this God did not send Jesus as the Messiah.¹¹

These self-identified Jews claimed they were the true people of the Hebrew Scriptures, not the church in Philadelphia. They argued, therefore, that Rome should not protect these heretics but should instead see them as “anti-Roman troublemakers.”¹² These Jews disassociated the church from their Jewish community. They claimed to be the ones waiting for the kingdom of God promised to David as a fulfillment of the global blessing promised to Abraham in a cursed world.

Jesus reassures his churches that they are the true people of God as they identify with him, and the Jews who oppose them and Jesus as the Messiah are the ones who are actually against God. Jesus warned his disciples of antagonism before he ascended into heaven:

When the Counselor comes, the one I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me. You also will testify, because you have been with me from the beginning. I have told you these things to keep you from stumbling. They will ban you from the synagogues. In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God. They will do these things because they haven’t known the Father or me (John 15:26-16:3).

Jesus Promises Vindication

In contrast to the synagogue of Satan, Jesus loves his church. They are the true people of God, and Jesus promises that they will be vindicated in the end. He reminds his people to recognize their status as those in the true messianic kingdom because he holds

¹¹ Hemer draws upon a tradition Rabbinic writing, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia in Their Local Setting*, 149. The curse of Minim at the time said, “May the Nazarenes . . . suddenly perish, and may they be blotted out of the book of Life [*sic*] and not enrolled along with the righteous.” It is unclear if this was written in the first century or if it is a later assertion.

¹² J. Scott Duvall, *The Heart of Revelation: Understanding the 10 Essential Themes of the Bible’s Final Book* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 5-6.

the key of David. Furthermore, he wants his people to see their opponents' damning error.

Jesus promises that these opponents will come and bow down at the feet of his church. They will acknowledge the royal reign of the church (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). The promise of bowing down to the church probably alludes to Isaiah 49:22-23.¹³ In the context of Isaiah 49, the servant who would bring Israel back to Yahweh and be a light to the nations (49:5-6) would feel like he labored in vain while still trusting that his vindication is with God (49:4). God promises that though his servant is despised, the royalty among the Gentiles will bow down to him (49:7). Isaiah takes the servant's pattern of rejection and exaltation and applies it to Zion, God's exiled and eventually restored people (49:14-26). In this restoration of God's people, God promises that the Gentile kings and queens "will bow down to you with their faces to the ground and lick the dust at your feet" (49:23). Jesus applies the promise of exalting God's people to his new covenant community in a way that those who reject him as messiah were not expecting.

Additionally, Jesus also promises their validation to identify the church as the people that God's messiah loved (Rev 3:9). Revelation ties the messianic love for the church to the redemption accomplished by Christ's death (Rev 1:5). The opponents think they are on God's side and are serving him, when in reality God and his messiah loves his church in Philadelphia.¹⁴ The opponents' rejection of the church is a damned error because it brings the curses of Genesis 12:3, which read, "I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you." The church is blessed. The church will be exalted as royalty to

¹³ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000) 160-1. Hemer is likely correct in suggesting an allusion to Isaiah 60:14 as well.

¹⁴ One of the most devout Jews who opposed the churches, Saul of Tarsus, came to realize that he was opposing Jesus by opposing God's people before the final judgment (Acts 9:5-6; Phil 3:4-6).

reign. Those in Christ are citizens of the true, heavenly, biblical, prophesied, eternal kingdom. They are loved by God himself. They are on God's side—the right side—in a world that presses them to doubt their identity and favor with God.

The claim and counter-claim of those who are the true people of God, or even true church, is a constant battle. In January, 2019, pop singer Lady Gaga challenged one claim to Christianity with her own:

To Mike Pence, who thinks that it's acceptable that his wife works at a school that bans LGBTQ, you're wrong. You're the worst representation of what it means to be a Christian. I am a Christian woman, and what I do know about Christianity is that we bear no prejudice, and everybody is welcome.¹⁵

Regardless if the debate is over whether true Christianity affirms the LGBTQ agenda or any other modern or ancient debate, the church must cling to Christ's word and name. They must not live for the current culture's approval. Christians should not worry about what others think about them, even other religious adherents, if they can know from Christ and Scripture that God accepts and approves of them. Because they are accepted by Jesus they need not prove themselves to others.¹⁶ The text calls the church to cling to Christ in a crazy world and "church" because Jesus opens a door for them (3:8), and he will validate them (3:9).

Cling to Christ Because He Keeps You through the Test of Judgment (3:10)

A third reason to cling to Christ is because Jesus will keep his church from the test of judgment. Jesus knows their works and is compelled by their obedience. Consequently, he promises protection. As Christians trust in this protection they will no

¹⁵ Cydney Henderson, "Lady Gaga slams Mike Pence as the 'worst representation of what it means to be a Christian,'" *USA Today*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2019/01/21/lady-gaga-slams-vice-president-mike-pence-christianity/2636241002/>.

¹⁶ Tim Chester, *You Can Change: God's Transforming Power for Our Sinful Behavior and Negative Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 89-94.

longer be hindered by fear. Instead they will be given strength to hold on to Jesus.

Jesus Is Compelled by Their Obedience

Up to the point of the writing of Revelation, the church in Philadelphia has kept Christ's command to endure. They proved their endurance by "keeping his word" and "not denying his name," while the "Jews" denounce and oppose them religiously and the threat of Roman culture presses on them. Despite their little power, they found a way to continue (3:8).

The command to endure is characteristic of Christians in Revelation (1:9; 2:2-3, 19; 3:10). God's people are described as those who hold to God's commands and the faith and testimony of Jesus (Rev 12:17; 14:12).¹⁷ Jesus taught that his true people would endure trials from the world and even from those who profess to be for God. He told his disciples, "You will be hated by everyone because of my name, but the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13). In the parable of the sower, he describes the good ground as those "who, having heard the word with an honest and good heart, hold on to it and by enduring, produce fruit" (Luke 8:15). As the final book of the canon, Revelation develops the profile of one who endures as those who endure religious, economic, cultural, and demonic pressure to give up and let go of Jesus.¹⁸

Jesus Promises to Keep Them

Jesus promises to keep the church from the hour of testing. To grasp and live by this promise, one must understand two co-dependent questions: (1) How will he keep his church at Philadelphia from the hour of testing, and (2) what is the hour of testing? Answering either question strongly impinges on the other.

¹⁷ Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 224. "Revelation thus has 'has [*sic*] an ultimate ethical aim' and, in keeping with the biblical prophetic tradition, summons God's covenant people to hear and heed the divine Word."

¹⁸ See chapter 9, pp. 141-51, Profiling the Conqueror and His Call.

How will he keep them from the hour of testing? Some teach that Jesus keeps them from the hour of testing by taking them out of the world, while others teach that Jesus will keep the church *through* the testing while they remain on earth. More specifically, those of the former view suggest that Jesus keeps them from the hour of testing by taking them out of the world through a rapture preceding a seven-year tribulation. Robert Thomas argues for this view because it fits with the context that they have already kept God’s command to endure and it allows for “the hour of trial” as a future period and not their current trial.¹⁹ It seems more likely that Jesus will keep them through the hour of testing once the hour of testing is identified.

The bigger issue is to define what the hour of testing is. If that is accurately identified, the solution to the previous issue will be clarified. So, what is the hour of testing? Thomas takes the hour of trial as the great tribulation after the church is gone, citing Daniel 12:1, Joel 2:31, Mark 13:14, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, and Revelation 7:14, 14:7.²⁰

The test is more likely a test of judgment because those “who live on the earth” always refers to those rebelling against Jesus and God (Rev 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8). It is a test of whether some in the world will turn in decisive belief toward the truth as the dragon deceives the world and they experience temporal judgments for their belief in lies. The true believers will be kept from this test and from being handed

¹⁹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7 Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 286-7. Thomas also argues (1) that the preposition ἐκ fits better with taking out, and ἐν or διὰ would have more likely been used if Jesus meant to preserve them through the trial, (2) how the language of John 12:27 points to his view and (3) why the John 17:15 parallel of verb-preposition (τηρεω ἐκ) should not be used as a parallel. Interestingly, John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, in *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1999), 125, unsuccessfully argues for why John 17:15 points toward a pre-tribulational rapture.

²⁰ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 115, 287-9; MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, 124, adds, “The hour of testing is Daniel’s Seventieth Week (Dan. 9:25–27), the time of Jacob’s trouble (Jer. 30:7), the seven-year tribulation period.”

over to the judgment of further deception (cf. 2 Thess 2:9-12).²¹ Though the world is judged and deceived, they will still refuse to repent and, therefore, fail the hour of testing (Rev 9:18-21; 16:9-11).

Application

Christian, Jesus will keep you from the test of the judgment accompanying deception, so hold on to Jesus. Churches should exercise collective responsibility for each other by calling their members to hold to Christ and to hold the church members accountable to hold to Christ in the context of church discipline. For the reader who is not Christian, do not be deceived! Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one is kept from judgment except through trusting in Jesus (cf. John 14:6). Jesus calls the non-Christian reader to come to him (cf. Rev 22:17). Cling to Christ amid a crazy world and “church” because Jesus opens a door for you, and he will validate you and keep you from the testing of demonic deception the world receives.

Cling to Christ Because He is Coming to Get You Soon (3:11a)

A fourth reason to hold onto Jesus is because he promises that he is coming soon. The temporal aspect of the promise is important. Some scholars understand this coming to occur before the final, consummative coming, much like the coming of judgment threatened to the church at Sardis (3:3). The difference for Philadelphia is that Jesus is coming to strengthen and encourage the church in trial, carrying out the promise of keeping in verse 10.²²

²¹ Leon L. Morris, *Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1987), 79. Furthermore, Rev 7:3 and 9:3-5 seem to refer to the saints going through the testing on the world. For more reasons on why believers go through the hour of testing, see Thomas Schreiner, *Revelation* in vol. 12 of *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. by Iain M. Duguid and James M. Hamilton Jr., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018) 591-2; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 289-92; and Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 193-94.

²² Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 293; so also G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (1966; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 54.

While agreeing with the stance that the temporal comings of Christ in Revelation are connected to the final bodily return of Jesus, it seems that the emphasis of this verse is on the final bodily return and hope for the suffering church. That is how Beale understands 22:7 and 20, which records the exact same phrase.²³ The final hope the book ends with is the hope for the whole church to enjoy the eternal state which encourages and incentivizes holding on.

When Jesus comes he will accomplish the final victory and raise his people from the dead (Rev 19:11-21; 20:4). Describing this coming, the Apostle Paul teaches that the dead in Christ will rise, all in Christ will meet him in the air, they will receive incorruptible bodies (1 Cor 15:52-54), and they will always be with him to reign (Rev 20:6; 22:5). The church has always prayed, regardless of their earthly tongue, “Maranatha!” They must continue to look to his coming, pray for his coming, and even sing of his coming:

Now redemption, long expected
See in solemn pomp appear;
All His saints, by man rejected,
Now shall meet Him in the air:
Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
See the day of God appear!

Yea, Amen! let all adore Thee,
High on Thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the power and glory,
Claim the kingdom for Thine own;
O come quickly! O come quickly! O come quickly!
Hallelujah! Come Lord come.²⁴

Cling to Christ amid a crazy world and “church” because Jesus opens a door for you, will validate you, keep you from the testing of demonic deception, and come

Osborne sees an “inaugurated thrust” in the first instance and the final coming secondarily. Osborne, *Revelation*, 194-5.

²³ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1127.

²⁴ Charles Wesley, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” Hymnary, accessed April 7, 2020, https://hymnary.org/text/lo_he_comes_with_clouds_descending_once.

soon for us.

Cling to Christ Because You Will Receive the Reward (3:11b-12)

Jesus gives his final reason for the church to hold on to what they have, namely, so that they may receive their reward. In verses 11 and 12, the final reward is described in three distinct ways: their final crown, their eternal participation, and their divine association.

Their Final Crown (3:11)

Jesus explicitly states the purpose for holding to him: “so that no one takes your crown.” The word crown (στέφανόν) does not refer to a royal crown but a crown given to the victorious contestant in an athletic competition.²⁵ Philadelphia, like Smyrna, was famous for their athletic games. Jesus promises honor and victory to maligned believers facing fierce opposition and potential death (cf. 2 Tim 4:6-8; James 1:12).

In the Philadelphian church, like churches today, there are some professing Christians who are not real Christians. They will not hold on to Jesus as King and Savior. They may profess that they do, but functionally they do not confess the lordship of Jesus as their testimony or hold to the Word of God. True conquerors will hold firmly to the “testimony” of Jesus (Rev 1:2, 9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4). For these “cowards” who do not conquer by holding on, their crown will be in a sense, “taken away” from them.²⁶ To clarify, a true Christian cannot lose her salvation. Those who are truly saved

²⁵ Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, “στέφανόν,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 943–944.

²⁶ See Rev 21:8, on which Morris describes the cowardly: “In the circumstances in which John’s readers found themselves, courage was very important, all the more so in that he is speaking now of final realities. To be cowardly before the enemies of God at the last is finally to lose the things of God. John is not speaking of natural timidity, but of that cowardice which in the last resort chooses self and safety before Christ, and fears the threats of the beast rather than trusts the love of Christ.” See also Morris, *Revelation*, 235.

hold onto Jesus as their Savior and King all the way to the end and not just during their childhood or some previous season of their lives.²⁷

Their Eternal Participation (3:12)

Besides speaking of their final crown, Jesus promises the one who conquers by clinging to him eternal participation in God's dwelling: "The one who conquers I will make a pillar in the temple of my God and he will never go out again" (3:11). The conqueror will be an eternal pillar because he will never go out again. The promise of stability resonated with those from Philadelphia, since in AD 17 the city suffered a devastating earthquake. The promised temple shines in supremacy over the pagan temples felled by the earthquake and even the Jerusalem temple destroyed in AD 70. The conqueror will never be excluded from joy in God's eternal dwelling (Rev 21:2-4).

Their Divine Association (3:12)

The third aspect of their final reward is Jesus's promise of divine association. After the city was devastated in the earthquake of AD 17, the city took Caesar's name, Neocaesarea. In contrast, Jesus promises that their identity will be with the name of God, the name of the New Jerusalem, and the name of Jesus himself. The New Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven (21:2) is identified with the bride herself (21:9-10).²⁸ Revelation separates humanity into two groups of people, contrasting the name of God on his people and the mark of the Beast on those who are not his people (13:17-14:1; cf. 22:4).

²⁷ See chapter 6, pp. 95-6 on the erasing of names in the book of life and eternal security.

²⁸ Revelation also identifies God's dwelling with God's people in Rev 13:6. The beast is said to blaspheme God's dwelling, which is the people who dwell in heaven. Contra the KJV and NIV, most other translations correctly translate "those who dwell in heaven" as epexegetical to God's "dwelling," since God's dwelling and those who dwell in heaven are not separated by the connective particle καί.

Conclusion

To summarize the homiletical point and reasons to obey: Cling to Christ amid a crazy world and “church.” because Jesus opens a door for his people and will validate them, keep them from the testing of demonic deception the world receives, come soon for his people, and give them their reward.

As Christian hearers reflect on Christ’s message, they may wonder what would happen if they succumbed to Satan’s pressure from the world and a compromised church culture. Along the journey of this cosmic war, Christians will fail to cling to Jesus at various moments. The grip will slip. What happens then?

Unlike imperfect and failing Christians, Jesus held on to the Father’s word to the end. For the joy set before him he endured the cross and held to what he had, so that he now sits at the right hand of the Father (Heb 12:2). Though he held on, his kingly crown was taken and he was given a crown of thorns, so that no one would take the victorious crown of the conquering Christian. On him was written the name, “sinner,” (Isa 53:12) so that God’s name, God’s new city, and Christ’s name would be written on Christians. His body was the temple that, instead of being honored as holy, was desecrated and destroyed, given for sinners so that they could be made a pillar in God’s final temple. He was crucified outside the gate so that as they go to him and hold to him outside the camp bearing his disgrace, they will never go out from God’s temple again (Heb 13:12-13).

Jesus calls the reader to hold on to what they have, to hold on to him despite the pressures of difficulty and the distractions of prosperity. If the reader lets go, they will lose assurance of their Christianity, will continue to be crushed under the burden of worldly pressure, and will end up a coward instead of a conqueror. But if they cling to Christ despite pain and worldly pleasure, they will find confidence from Christ to hold to him as they continue to disciple their church and neighbors.

So, in the face of opposition, distraction, and different teachings and deception,

let the reader cling to Jesus. Let these closing words feed their faith in him:

When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast;
When the tempter would prevail, He will hold me fast.
I could never keep my hold / Through life's fearful path;
For my love is often cold / He must hold me fast.
He will hold me fast, He will hold me fast;
For my Savior loves me so, He will hold me fast.²⁹

²⁹ Ada Habershon, "He Will Hold Me Fast," Getty Music, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://store.gettymusic.com/us/song/he-will-hold-me-fast/>.

CHAPTER 8
REVELATION 3:14-22—REPENT OF LUKEWARM
LIVING

Why did Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus said, “It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Jesus came for the sick and needy. He did not come for those who thought they were well or righteous.

Complacency and a feeling of self-sufficiency are delusions that have tempted humanity from the beginning. God put Adam in the garden and called him to obey him by not eating the fruit. Later, God put Israel in the promised land and warned them to not let their hearts become proud and forget their God who redeemed them when their wealth overflowed (Deut 8:12-14).¹ Eventually in Jesus’s day, the Pharisees were complacent and overconfident in their spirituality, faith, and religion as Jesus indicated by his comment on a doctor being for the sick and not the healthy.

Christians desire to faithfully conquer Satan on their battlefield, the geographical location God assigned them to. Today, Christians in Los Angeles face the same enemy with a particular spiritual challenge, being in the richest and most resourced society in human history.

Christians are not only pressured to fail and cower by adversity, but also by prosperity. Prosperity might be more dangerous since the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, even in the church. Prosperity is a dangerous prospect that should sober serious Christians. John Piper wrote,

¹ For more on the deadly complacency in the divided kingdom, see Hos 12:8 and Amos 6:1-7.

The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18-20). The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.²

The danger for the Laodicean Church, and the readers of Revelation today, is the danger of complacency due to comfort and delusional self-sufficiency. Jesus seeks to wake the reader in Revelation 3:14-22. Jesus calls the original and modern hearers to repent from nauseating lukewarmness so that they conquer Satan. Jesus gives four reasons to repent, namely because he rebukes their sin, he threatens them, he loves them, and he promises to reward them.

Repent from Lukewarmness Because Jesus Rebukes You (3:14-17, 22)

Those hearing the public reader of Revelation need to pay attention because the Spirit is speaking to him (3:22; cf. 1:3). More specifically, the Spirit and the Son are speaking (3:14). They must listen to Jesus's rebuke because he is faithful and names our sin.

Jesus is Faithful (3:14)

Jesus is the Amen. The term ἀμήν denotes a strong affirmation of what is stated. When used with the definite article referring to Jesus, the text communicates Jesus pointing to himself affirmation of all that God has said and promised by virtue of his

² John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 18. Piper helpfully continues, "Jesus said some people hear the word of God, and a desire for God is awakened in their hearts. But then, 'as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life' (Luke 8:14). In another place he said, 'The desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful' (Mark 4:19). 'The pleasures of this life' and 'the desires for other things'—these are not evil in themselves. These are not vices. These are gifts of God. They are your basic meat and potatoes and coffee and gardening and reading and decorating and traveling and investing and TV-watching and Internet-surfing and shopping and exercising and collecting and talking. And all of them can become deadly substitutes for God."

person and work (5:6-10; cf. 2 Cor 1:20).³ Jesus is alluding to Isaiah 65:16-17 where Yahweh calls himself the God of *amen* who will faithfully bring about the new creation.⁴ As the Amen, Jesus is the faithful and true witness (1:5) who sends his witnesses out (2:13, 11; 17:6) to testify about him (1:2, 9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 19:10). He testifies to what he sees and knows, and his testimony is both faithful to God and true to reality. Jesus alludes to Isaiah 43:10-12 where he is the servant who will be a witness to the new redemption Yahweh will perform.⁵ Therefore, those who hear his testimony must heed it.

Jesus then calls himself ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ. The CSB translates the phrase as “the originator of God’s creation.” Some translate it “ruler.” The word ἀρχὴ most naturally would be translated as “beginning.” Christians hesitate calling Jesus “the beginning of all creation” since beginning can refer to the commencement of something as a state of being. Christians confessing the eternity of Christ need not worry because John reveals Jesus as “the firstborn from the dead” (1:5). If one takes “God’s creation” as the new creation, which is a prominent theme in Revelation, then Jesus, in his resurrection, is the beginning of the new creation (cf. Col 1:18).⁶ Since Jesus is the beginning of the new creation, everyone who wants to participate in the new creation should listen to him. Alternatively, the “beginning of all creation” can refer to the first cause of all creation.⁷

³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1996), 237. The article functions to substantivize the particle *amen*. Used with *amen* as a substantive it may be using the deictic function pointing to Christ who is presently speaking at the moment, 221.

⁴ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 339-43.

⁵ Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 342-3.

⁶ Thomas Schreiner, *Revelation*, in vol. 12 of *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 595; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 298; Charles L. Feinberg, *A Commentary on Revelation: The Grand Finale* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1985), 47.

⁷ David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 2014), 256. Aune writes, “The emphasis on the *temporal* priority of Christ to all creation is found frequently in early Christian literature

Jesus Names the Sin (3:15-17)

Jesus knows the church at Laodicea intimately (3:15). Like previous churches, Jesus knows the works of the Laodicean church (cf. 2:2-3, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8) because he walks among them (1:20). Jesus knows that this church is neither cold nor hot.

Though he wishes the church were cold or hot, they are lukewarm. Jesus specifically calls out this lukewarmness as sin (3:16). Lukewarmness most likely does not mean lacking passion for Jesus, though the sentiment is popular.⁸ Does Jesus really prefer passion for him (hot) or outright rejection of him (cold)? This is unlikely.⁹

Jesus uses imagery that would be very familiar to the Laodiceans. Six miles from the city is Hierapolis, which was known for its hot springs which brought healing. In contrast, the neighboring city of Colossae was known for its cold and refreshing water. Both hot water that heals and cold water that refreshes is preferred to lukewarm water that does neither.¹⁰ The church failed to be useful for either medicinal purposes like hot water or health-giving purposes like cold water. The church was ineffective in their faith and witness of holding to the testimony of Jesus in their city.

Jesus further defines the sin of lukewarmness as the church's dysfunctional mentality. They say, "I'm rich, I have become wealthy, and need nothing," not realizing that they are actually "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" (3:17). They believed

and was perhaps the product of the identification of Christ with the wisdom of God." Both Thomas and Hamilton understand Jesus to be the originator of the creation in general and not the new creation specifically. Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 303-4; James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 121.

⁸ Steven J. Lawson, *Final Call* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 189; Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary, "God's Last Word"* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 81.

⁹ Contra Thomas, "So despicable did Christ find lukewarmness that He preferred to deal with an obstinate opponent of the gospel, recognizing the greater possibility of finding fertile soil for the message here than with a lukewarm, professing Christian. Anything is better than lukewarmness." Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 307.

¹⁰ Hamilton, *Revelation*, 121-2; G. K. Beale and David Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 91.

they were not only self-sufficient, but overwhelmingly so. They felt no need for God's help or grace. The city of Laodicea was rich and declined imperial aid in recovering from an earthquake in AD 60 due to its thriving medical and textile industries. Similarly, the church let their self-sufficient attitude influence the way they ignored their constant spiritual state of neediness.

The church was delusional. Imagine a homeless, bankrupt, naked, and blind person meandering down the street. One feels compassion and offers him clothes, food, and money. He responds, "I'm fine. I'm more than fine, I'm rich, warm, and going to make a lot of money today." He is delusional. So was the church's confidence.

The delusion of self-sufficiency for the church unnecessarily endangered others because the church is called to conquer on account of the word of their testimony (12:11). Mistaken self-sufficiency hindered their witness. If everyone who thought they were sufficiently safe drivers were given a driver's license based on their self-perception, then it would be dangerous to drive on the streets. When churches trust their self-sufficiency, they unintentionally imperil the souls of those they contact.

Application

Christians must receive Jesus's rebuke, confrontation, and correction. He is faithful, he knows his people, and he rebukes them specifically. Churches must examine their sense of desperation. Does the church feel desperate for God's help, or do they feel like they have all that they need? Reflecting on the church's culture of prayer clarifies their spiritual state.

Readers who are not Christian should reflect on their response to confrontation and correction. Is correction a gift or nuisance? If one rejects Christianity because the Bible calls for repentance, then that is akin to one rejecting a doctor because they faithfully and consistently give the correct diagnosis and prescription for health.

Repent from Lukewarmness Because Jesus Threatens You (3:16-17)

After clearly stating and defining the sin of the church, Jesus threatens the church with the consequence for their lukewarmness. He then gives the grounds for his threat and accusation. Jesus reveals that because they are lukewarm, he will vomit them out of his mouth (3:16). For Jesus to vomit the church out of his mouth is to say that he will reject them as his people. The vomiting may refer to imminent judgment like the warnings to the other churches (2:10; 3:2, 10).¹¹ Some understand this to be the removal of the church's witness, like the warning to Ephesus (2:5).¹²

Similar to the previous message about names being erased from the book of life (pp. 95-6), this threat does not mean one can lose their salvation. It means that some who call themselves Christians and associate with a gospel church are not Christian and will be vomited out by Jesus if they do not repent. They will not be considered the conquerors of Revelation 21:7 but the cowardly compromisers of Revelation 21:8. The image communicates Jesus finally separating himself from those in his church out of disgust and detestation.¹³

Why would Jesus vomit them out of his mouth? To continue the imagery, it is because the professing Christians he addresses are nauseating. Jesus identifies the element that causes him nausea: their mentality of self-sufficiency discussed in the previous section. They think they are rich and have no other need.

¹¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 206.

¹² Charles L. Feinberg, *A Commentary on Revelation: The Grand Finale* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1985), 47. Feinberg sees this as a loss of witness and not of being rejected for salvation.

¹³ Thomas Schreiner, *Revelation* in vol. 12 of *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. by Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 596. Schreiner compares this to the Canaanites being vomited out of the land (Lev 18:22, 25). Ian Paul compares this to Jesus rejecting those who profess him as Lord (Matt 7:21). Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 114.

Application

Do Christian parents feel their need for God's help in parenting to the point of crying out to him for help? Are Christian spouses open to getting help from the outside for their marriage? Do Christians and pastors feel their desperate bankruptcy and need for Jesus's help to evangelize, disciple, and serve their neighbors? For those who are spiritually comfortable and not desperately calling out to Jesus for grace, faith, and change, Jesus will vomit him out. He is not playing spiritual or religious games. Therefore, all Christians should feel the scandal and shame of feeling self-sufficient. They should repent in response to Jesus's warning.

Repentance involves the three elements of agreeing, accepting, and asking. The church must agree with God's perspective and odium toward their sin. Second, the reader must accept God's grace of forgiveness purchased by Christ's death (Rev 5:9). Third, the sinner must sincerely and decisively ask God to change him.

Many who reject Christianity do so because they feel that Christians are merely hypocrites pretending to be good. Jesus agrees that some professing Christians are fake, and he calls them out.¹⁴ But non-Christian hearers should also realize that some Christians do repent and that Jesus invites all Christians, hypocritical and sincere, to do so. He even calls and invites the non-Christian hearer to come to him and repent (cf. Rev 22:12-17).

Repent from Lukewarmness Because Jesus Loves You (3:18-20)

The church was likely rich and affluent like their city in wealth, clothing, and even medical eye care.¹⁵ The church is in a precarious position but need not be stuck there. Jesus points the way forward because he loves his church, as explicitly stated

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2008), 51-67.

¹⁵ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 196-201.

(3:19). In these three verses Jesus expresses three ways he loves his church. He advises them (v. 18), rebukes them (v. 19), and invites them (v.20).

Jesus Loves by Advising His Church (3:18)

Jesus advises the church to buy from him as he offers to meet their needs. Jesus offers three provisions to his people. Each provision corresponds to their wretched and pitiful predicament of being “poor, blind, and naked.” In love, Jesus advises his church to buy their needed provisions from him.

Jesus desires for his people to be rich. He does not want them to suffer under the bankruptcy of life cut off from the wealthy and generous Father in heaven. He offers them gold refined in the fire, referring to spiritual riches. The refinement in fire indicates the purity and high value of this gold.¹⁶ Additionally, Jesus longs for his people to be clothed. He desires to remove the nakedness of their shame, defeat, and destitution. Therefore, he offers them white clothes. The white clothes symbolize righteousness (Rev 3:4, 5; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14). Furthermore, Jesus wants his people to see and to end their spiritual blindness. Their self-perception of sufficiency revealed their inability to see their true need. Unlike the “Phrygian powder” used as eye salve for physical eyes in Laodicea, Jesus offered an ointment that would provide spiritual discernment (cf. John 9:39).¹⁷

Jesus calls his hearers to buy from him though they are completely bankrupt and devoid of resources to purchase anything. How can they buy from him when they are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked? Another famous passage in prophetic literature answers the question:

¹⁶ Likely symbolizing the purification through suffering, Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 96.

¹⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 210; Paul, *Revelation*, 116.

Come, everyone who is thirsty, come to the water; and you without silver, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without silver and without cost! Why do you spend silver on what is not food, and your wages on what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and you will enjoy the choicest of foods. Pay attention and come to me; listen, so that you will live. I will make a permanent covenant with you on the basis of the faithful kindnesses of David. Since I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples (Isa 55:1-4).

Isaiah's call contains the themes of listening, buying, David, and David as witness echoed in Revelation 2-3.¹⁸ More importantly, in Revelation 22:17, Jesus calls the hearers among the churches to come and take the water of life freely. The way the Laodicean church would buy from Jesus is by repenting, being zealous, and letting Jesus commune with them (3:19-20). In other words, they can "buy" the gold, white clothes, and ointment for free. Similarly, the hymn writer calls out, "Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream, all the fitness he requireth is to feel your need of him."¹⁹ Readers and hearers of Revelation must come to the Lord with their neediness because he is generous and excited to meet their need of him.

Jesus Loves by Rebuking His Church (3:19)

The second way Jesus loves the church is by rebuking them (v.19). Rebuke is a gift from Jesus because it truly leads the church away from danger, disappointment, and destruction (cf. Prov 19:20). It leads them back to the right path so that they bless those they love rather than ultimately harm them despite good intentions. Christ's rebuke fills the Christian with hope of restoration rooted in Jesus's forgiveness.

For churches to conquer they must welcome and seek out Christ's loving rebuke that comes authoritatively from Scripture but also can come through other

¹⁸ Calling this an allusion may be presumptuous though there is a significant degree of key words and thematic coherence that not only fits Rev 3:14-18 but also illuminates it. See G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 31-35.

¹⁹ Joseph Hart, "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy," in *The Baptist Hymnal*, ed. Wesley L. Forbis (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), 323.

Christians, churches, and organizations speaking the truth in love. The hearer who is discouraged should find encouragement that Jesus rebukes them in order to kill the sins that dampen the joy in their life. Jesus reproves the weak to give them strength. He confronts those stumbling in sin that they might find their footing. He corrects the stubborn as a way of softening a hardened heart.

Jesus Loves by Inviting His Church (3:20)

Third, Jesus loves the church by inviting the church (v. 20). This invitation is the most thrilling of all. Jesus stands at the door of the church community and knocks. Some hear this as an evangelistic call to those who do not consider themselves Christian.²⁰ The invitation certainly applies to them, as does all of Scripture. Still, Jesus is primarily addressing his church of professing Christians.

In this invitation Jesus is present because he stands at the door. Jesus actively pursues his church and does not passively or irritably wait. He knocks. Jesus desires to commune with the members of the church personally, even individually. Many today say the essence of Christianity is not a religion but a relationship. The core of the religious practices and rules flow from a relationship with God through Christ, just like any other relationship. Still, the entailments to a relationship is not primary, the relationship itself is.²¹

In desiring to come in and eat, Jesus communicates his desire for intimate and restored fellowship with the lukewarm Christians. Meal invitations were ways to forge reconciliation in estranged relationships. Some think that the dining Jesus mentions refers to the Messianic banquet of 19:9. It is more likely that it refers to present communion

²⁰ For example, “more evangelistic than admonitory,” because the Laodiceans “were merely professing Christians who lacked authentic conversion,” Alan F. Johnson, *Revelation*, in vol. 13 of REBC, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2006), 638.

²¹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 142-3.

with his church.²²

The audience should desire to commune with Jesus and draw near to him. The way they open the door to him is to call out to him in prayer, repentance, and faith. Jesus is present and pursuing readers today in order to commune with them. May readers open their hearts to Jesus as Lord, King, Savior, and Treasure. Those who let Jesus in can commune with him because he was in darkness on the cross, bearing God's wrath (Matt 27:26; Rom 3:25-26). Spiritually discouraged readers must look away from themselves, even their lukewarmness, and look to Jesus. He desires to be their strength and provision. He calls those stumbling in sin to get up and let him transform them from self-sufficient to joyfully and desperately dependent on him. Those who are not lukewarm must continue to repent of sin and continue to lean on Jesus. They must not get overconfident in doing well.

Jesus calls the church to repent from lukewarmness that they might conquer Satan. They should repent because Jesus rebukes them, threatens them, loves, them, and rewards them.

Repent from Lukewarmness Because Jesus Rewards You (3:21)

Jesus promises the highest reward imaginable as an impetus to repent from lukewarmness and to conquer: "To the one who conquers I will give the right to sit with me on my throne just as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (3:21). Jesus conquered by his death and resurrection (Rev 5:5-6; 12:5). By his blood he conquered Satan, the beast, and the world who follows them.²³ By faith Jesus endured the

²² Osborne, *Revelation*, 212-13; Hamilton, *Revelation*, 125; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 113. Caird agrees and sees an allusion to the Eucharist. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (1966; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 58. On the other hand, Thomas sees door and supper referring to the second coming, primarily with a secondary application to a foretaste of fellowship with Christ beforehand. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 322.

²³ For the object that is conquered, see pp. 141-44 and Rev 12:11.

cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2).

Revelation is clear that there is only one who sits on the throne, and that is God (Rev 4:2-3, 9-11). But the Lamb is in the midst of the throne (Rev 5:6; 7:17). Though Jesus seems to refer to his throne and the Father's throne as distinct, the end of the book calls it the throne (singular) of God and of the Lamb (Rev 22:1, 3). After speaking of a singular throne, it says the saints will reign forever and ever (22:5). From where does one symbolically "reign"? The throne. God the Father and Jesus the Son will give his saints the right to sit with him on his throne to reign with him.

Bible readers may recall how Jesus's disciples James and John wanted the best seats in the kingdom (Matt 20:20-28). They even got their mom to ask Jesus. Jesus responded by asking if they are willing to drink the cup of suffering. They said yes. Jesus affirmed that they would indeed suffer. Similarly, the message of Revelation is that the saints will suffer then finally reign. While James and John selfishly wanted prominent positions above their brothers, Jesus points out that all of those who conquer will get the most prominent seat, the throne of the Father and the Lamb. The professing Christians who are cowardly or compromised will not receive the right to reign (Rev 21:8).

Application

Christians must keep their future reign from Christ's throne at the forefront of their minds as they fight the temptation toward self-reliance. They effectively seek first Christ's kingdom compelled by a captivating vision of the final reward. The time and struggle invested to destroy lukewarmness for Christians is not in vain. Christians must not be comfortable or restful in earthly wealth like the Laodiceans may have been. Jesus says,

Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Make money-bags for yourselves that won't grow old, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke

12.32-34)

Congregationally, churches should fellowship with one another keeping in mind that they are sharing life with future kings and queens of the New Earth to come. Therefore, they should outdo one another in showing honor in Christian love. They should respect one another appropriately not only for who they are but who they will be. They should build one another up, knowing that it edifies them toward their future reign.

Readers and hearers who are not Christian are invited to reign with Jesus. They are invited to receive the eternal reward. Jesus wants to reward sinners. He wants to give his kingdom to his people. He calls readers to come to him, to repent from sin, and to trust in him alone as Lord of their lives, Lord of the church, and Lord of the new creation to come.

Conclusion

The message to the Laodiceans is to repent of their lukewarm, self-reliant mindset that renders them ineffective for Christ's purposes. Jesus compels them to repent of lukewarmness. He rebukes their sin, threatens to vomit them out, loves them with his advice, reproof, and invitation, and promises to reward those who conquer.

Let the one who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches (3:22). Let each one examine himself of sinful self-reliance and self-sufficiency, perhaps by spending time in prayer and meditating on the ways they have sinned (cf. Prov 19:16b). Let them repent, call out to Jesus for transformation, and take concrete steps to commune with Jesus desperately and repeatedly.

If the reader refuses to examine his sin of lukewarmness and repent, he will be useless and ineffective in bringing people into the joy of knowing Jesus. They will delude themselves into a damned eternity. Jesus will cut him off and vomit him out of his mouth and into an eternal misery. But if the hearer repents, he will effectively bring healing (hot water) and refreshment (cold water) to others as he shares life and shares Jesus. He will sit on Christ's throne and reign with him forever. He will know the joy of communing

with Jesus every day, now and into eternity, whether in pain or prosperity.

In becoming lukewarm, Christians become like the Pharisees in thinking they are well and not sick while the doctor stands before them. They become like Israel being blessed with riches and responding with pride, self-reliance, and forgetfulness that God redeemed them from sin. They become like Adam, feeling the ability to decide on the direction of their lives while disregarding God's good words. Jesus took Adam's, Israel's, and the church's condemnation on the cross. Then he rose from the dead and conquered Satan, sin, and death victoriously. This Jesus stands before the reader knocking. May each hearer open the door and let him in.

CHAPTER 9

THE MAIN PURPOSE OF REVELATION 2-3 FOR THE CHURCHES

To faithfully exposit and understand any section of Scripture, one must understand the nearer and farther context. As the previous seven chapters of this project has sought to provide a biblical-theological exposition of Revelation 2-3, one must situate the seven messages within both the overall framework of the section and also the whole book, so that one's understanding of each section is further strengthened.

The primary purpose of Revelation 2-3 is that Jesus calls churches to repent from sin and remain in him, so that they conquer Satan and receive their eternal reward, based on the purpose of Revelation, the commonalities in Revelation 2-3, and the unity connecting the peculiar aspects of each of the seven messages to the churches. The primary purpose will be demonstrated by, first, considering other proposals on the purposes of the section, second, considering the whole book of Revelation, and third, considering the patterns and peculiarities of Revelation 2-3.

Other Proposals for the Purpose of Revelation 2-3

Among those who reflect on Revelation there are at least three major themes used to summarize the purpose of Revelation 2-3. One says that the purpose is to demonstrate Christ's kingship. Another group says it is to help the churches respond to their failures. A third group says the purpose of the seven letters is to strengthen the church's gospel witness. While all three of these aspects are certainly in the text, discerning the specific purpose, which is true to generalities of the context while also adequately specific to the peculiarities, is not so clearly stated. Consider each group.

To Demonstrate Christ's Knowledge and Kingship

David Aune does not give an explicit purpose statement, yet he does write about the form of Revelation 2-3, and from that draws the function.¹ Aune argues that the form of the seven messages is neither letter nor oracle, but imperial edict. The function or purpose of the edicts 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.” While the penultimate reason for the form is to display Christ’s knowledge of each church, the ultimate reason is “to emphasize the fact that Christ is the true king in contrast to the Roman emperor who is both a clone and tool of Satan.”² While Christ’s kingship and deity are asserted both in the unit (2:18, 26-27; 3:1, 7, 14, 21) and by literary form as Aune argues, it is difficult to read the unit and conclude that this would sufficiently summarize the purpose of the section, given the many other details of the text.

To Discern the Situation and Respond Faithfully

A second possible purpose of Revelation 2-3 is to discern the ecclesial situation and react accordingly. Osborne seems to suggest that the unit calls the readers to address specific problems in the churches due to the conflict between good and evil. In his view, the letters detail “the effects of the conflict between good and evil in the lives of Christians, against whom the world is at war” so that the reader might “address practical

¹ D. E. Aune, “The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3),” *New Testament Studies* (1990): 182–204; David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 124-9.

² David E. Aune, “The Form and Function,” 203-4. In his commentary, he goes further to say it is a contrast between God and the Roman Emperor: “The author’s use of the royal/imperial edict form is part of his strategy to polarize God/Jesus and the Roman emperor, who is but a pale and diabolical imitation of God.” Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 129.

problems that are found in all the churches.”³

More than merely addressing the practical church problems due to the cosmic war, Poythress suggests the purpose is to provide “Christlike discernment, illumined by the Spirit,” in order to “evaluate our own church situation accurately and respond faithfully.”⁴ The words Jesus gives provide discernment for accurate church evaluation and response. However, Jesus clearly provides a common and more specific response that should be made explicit in a purpose statement. Jesus specifically calls the churches to repent from sin (2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19) and remain in him (2:10; 3:11).

Lawson seems to identify repentance as a core part of the message of Revelation, but then uses this to suggest that God calls the churches toward revival. The Lord’s desire for revival in his churches comes through self-examination leading them to embrace the solution, namely repentance from sin.⁵ He defines revival as “a sovereign work of God in His own people, bringing back to full spiritual fervor the hearts of believers that are now dormant and dull.”⁶ While revival is worth pursuing, it seems that this misses the theme of conquering that dominates Revelation.

To Proclaim the Gospel

The last proposed theme stating the purpose of Revelation revolves around proclaiming the gospel. Some articulate this as having a zeal for the gospel. Hamilton writes, “[The] main point of these seven letters goes like this: For the glory of God, Jesus charges the churches to be zealous for the gospel, reject false teaching, and live in a

³ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 104-5.

⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2000), 84.

⁵ Steven J. Lawson, *Final Call* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 69-70.

⁶ Lawson, *Final Call*, 208. He draws six laws of revival from Rev 2-3: preaching the Bible; exalting Jesus; continuing to pursue faith, obedience, holiness and love; exposing spiritual coldness and compromise; whole-hearted and life-changing repentance, and setting our mind on heaven. Lawson, *Final Call*, 210-20.

manner that corresponds to the gospel.”⁷ Beale extends the purpose beyond church zeal for the gospel to the church’s strength and perseverance in witnessing to the gospel. Beale generalizes, “[A]ll 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.”⁸ Beale and Hamilton are correct that Christ is centrally concerned with the church’s zeal and witness for the gospel, but they fail to state the purpose within the context of the cosmic war.

To this end, Goldsworthy proposes that the seven messages “serve to remind us that the drama of redemption has its ongoing effects in the world. The fact that Christ has conquered, but wills to extend his conquest into the lives of men and women through the preaching of the gospel, puts the church in the midst of the apocalyptic war.”⁹ He summarizes, “The risen Christ calls upon his churches to be faithful to his gospel and to persevere in well-doing.”¹⁰ One may restate Goldsworthy’s purpose of Revelation 2-3 as Christ extending his conquest over Satan through his churches as they struggle to be faithful to the gospel and persevere in well-doing. While Goldsworthy improves on Beale and Hamilton in getting at the heart of the purpose of Revelation 2-3, they still lack the explicit element of repentance that Christ clearly calls the five churches to. Furthermore, neither Goldsworthy nor Beale make explicit the eternal reward repeated in seven unique ways to each distinct church. Having considered the various proposals to the purpose of

⁷ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 53.

⁸ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 227.

⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation*, in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 233.

¹⁰ Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation*, 242.

Revelation 2-3, we turn now to considering the purpose of the whole book.

The Purpose of Revelation for Preaching

If one will preach Revelation 2-3 faithfully, one need not only identify the main goal of the two chapters but the main goal of the whole book. In other words, one must identify what David Helm calls “the melodic line” of a passage:

A melodic line is a short sequence of notes that form a distinctive portion of a song. It may be part of the main melody that gets repeated and varied. Books of the Bible work the same way. Each book has a melodic line that informs what the book is about. And each passage in the book, then, will serve that melodic line in some way.¹¹

Because the book was delivered as a whole and was not intended to be read or preached piecemeal, it is important that every time we read, teach, or preach any passage in Revelation, we do so in light of the themes of the entire book.¹² Therefore one must consider the structure of Revelation in order to evaluate its purpose. Furthermore, the purpose should cohere with the major exhortations of the book.

The Structure of Revelation

To identify the purpose of the book more accurately, briefly consider the structure of Revelation. Surveying some proposed outlines of Revelation, highlight major themes that inform the purpose of the book. While many have proposed various outlines of Revelation, Tabb says there is an emerging consensus on four key structural features: (1) there is a prologue (1:1-8) and epilogue (22:6-21), (2) there are at least four series of sevens (churches, seals, trumpets, and bowls), (3) the vision sections overlap with each other in an interlocking manner, and (4) “in the Spirit” occurs four times at key

¹¹ David R. Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 47. For approaching this idea from linguistics and discourse analysis, see David Alan Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 171-3.

¹² Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2000), 40.

transitional points within the book.¹³ One can summarize the structure of the body of Revelation as the Lamb's guidance (2-3), the Lamb's wrath (4-16), the Lamb's victory (17:1-21:8), and the Lamb's bride and home (21:9-22:5).¹⁴ These four sections highlight the Lamb calling the church to conquer, reminding them of his reign and wrath, and pointing them forward to his future victory and the final reward.

Vern Poythress has helpfully outlined the book from normative, existential, and situational perspectives. When outlining Revelation from the formal grammatical patterning of John "in the Spirit," the purpose of Revelation is to reveal a vision of Christ (1:10-3:22), a vision in heaven (4:1-16:21), a vision in the wilderness (17:1-21:8), and a vision on the great high mountain (21:9-22:5).¹⁵ From a rhetorical perspective the book breaks down into what John has seen (1:9-20), what is (2:1-3:22), and what is to be (4:1-22:5), which is made up of seven cycles consisting of the commission of judgment, the prosecution of war, and the elimination of evil all progressing toward the Second Coming.¹⁶ For a third complementary perspective, Poythress's chiasmic thematic structure highlights the major themes of victory, judgment, and victors, with the central theme being the villain of the Dragon, beast, and false prophet (12:7-13:18).¹⁷ This third outline

¹³ Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 20-21.

¹⁴ Tabb, *All Things New*, 22-24.

¹⁵ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 58-60. For a guide to triperspectivalism and its use for theology, see John M. Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017) and Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

¹⁶ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 60-64.

¹⁷ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 64-66. For Poythress the threefold Villain is the center of the chiasm with the beast at the center of the central theme. "While it is true that failure to recognize chiasms can sometimes lead to a misunderstanding of the passage." Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek*, 2nd edition, 134. On the macro level of a book Leland Ryken's sentiment seems wise: "The incidence of chiasmic structure in long passages has been greatly exaggerated in recent biblical scholarship," *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 42. For two more chiasms showing how elusive consensus is, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 130, 143.

helps one see the importance of the war motif and how the Beast is the villain that the reader is supposed to recognize and conquer. Taking these three perspectives together testifies to Revelation communicating the centrality of the heavenly Christ and his truth, the cosmic war moving toward Christ's victory, and the great enemy to be conquered.

Interestingly, the general outline of the seven messages of Revelation 2-3 parallels the way Revelation 4-22 unfolds. The seven messages begin with a vision of the exalted Christ, followed by a word to the present struggle, concluded by a vision of the reward. Similarly, Revelation 4-5 reveals the majesty of the Lamb, followed by the conflict in the world under his judgment (6-19), concluding with the enjoyment of the final reward in chapters 20-22.¹⁸ This structure communicates the central battle of the church empowered by Christ's majesty and his final reward. Each of these three elements are crucial in identifying the purpose of the book in order to identify the purpose of Revelation 2-3. It seems then, that the major themes of Christ's centrality and victory, the call to conquer, and the final reward should be explicit in identifying the specific purpose of Revelation.

The Purpose of Revelation

Based on the major themes from the structure of Revelation, I propose the following as the purpose of Revelation: Because Christ has conquered, he calls his saints to conquer Satan by enduring in faithfulness through discernment of beastly deception in their midst so that they receive their reward. To make this case, three types of purpose statements for the book will be examined, followed by an argument from key verses in Revelation 12 and 13.

¹⁸ I came to see these the three sections of chaps. 4-5, 6-19, and 19-22 structure on my own observation. In doing research, I was encouraged to see similar observations by Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7 Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 327 and G. K. Beale and David Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 53.

More general articulations of purpose. Caird contends that John writes “in order that his readers may fully appreciate the scope of God’s redemptive plan and the significance of the part which they themselves are called to play in it.”¹⁹ He correctly sees God revealing his plan as part of the purpose, but he fails to specify Christ’s victory in the plan. The reader’s part to play is generalized without specifying the call to conquer. In contrast, Hamilton speaks very generally of knowing Jesus and being faithful in light of the redemptive plan:

The Lord gives us this “revelation of Jesus Christ” and of what will “soon take place” (1:1) so that we can know and enjoy him by living in light of reality and in light of the way history will be brought to its consummation. More specifically, God wants us to know the glory of his mercy and his justice, and that is what we see in Revelation: history culminates in climactic demonstrations of the glory of God in salvation through judgment.²⁰

While God’s glory in salvation through judgment captures much of the center of biblical theology, Hamilton’s whole-bible biblical-theological center hinders his purpose from having a tighter connection to the themes of Revelation itself, namely the themes of cosmic war, the specific call and means of conquering, and the eternal Edenic reward.²¹ Those themes fall under his broad headings but his terminology fails to tightly reflect the particularities of Revelation’s terms. Equally general, John Stott asserts the

¹⁹ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (1966; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 295.

²⁰ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 18.

²¹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). Though agreeing that what Hamilton identifies is part of the center, I think it is more fully articulated as God’s glory in Christ by his kingdom through covenant in salvation through judgment. For more on the kingdom through covenant, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018). The way I articulate Hamilton’s center as the means to accomplishing the broader themes of kingdom through covenant is stated by Hamilton: “I agree with one student’s assessment of the relationship between *Kingdom through Covenant* and my work, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*: he said that if *Kingdom through Covenant* provides the ‘backbone’ of the biblical narrative (a claim they make for themselves), *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment* puts flesh on that skeleton.” James M. Hamilton, “What about the Covenant?” For His Renown (Blog), May 25, 2013, <https://jimhamilton.info/2013/05/27/what-about-the-covenant/>.

purpose is to encourage by Christ's suffering and victory, by exposing evil, and by producing praise.²² Though he roots the purpose in Christ, he fails to highlight cosmic war or the means of conquering. Additionally, he does not specify the future reward.

Focus on the war. A second way of articulating Revelation's purpose says the book aims to comfort the church in its battle. According to Hendriksen, "In the main, the purpose of the Book of Revelation is to comfort the militant Church in its struggle against the forces of evil."²³ He hits the war motif where others fail, yet comfort seems to be the primary means to engage the war rather than the endurance in faithfulness, the call to discernment of deception, communion with Christ, or looking to the eternal reward. The Lord Jesus intends to comfort and instill confidence in his fledgling church going forward, but there is a loud and repeated call to repentance (Rev 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19). There is an emphasis on conquering as well (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 21:7). Comfort seems to be one of the penultimate purposes serving the ultimate purpose of calling the church to conquer the dragon by enduring faithfully and wisely.

Focus on the Christian's duty. A third way of articulating Revelation's purpose is by focusing on the the readers' means of conquering the dragon. Tabb states, "Revelation's symbolic visions *challenge* readers to resist worldly compromise, spiritual complacency and false teaching. They also *encourage* embattled believers to persevere in faithful witness and hope in the present and future reign of God and the Lamb."²⁴ While

²² John Stott, *Basic Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. Stephen Motyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 192. "The message of Revelation . . . centers on the vision of the Christ who shares his people's suffering and death and then shares the throne of God. It points us beyond the chaos and trauma of world history, and of our own lives, to our security in God's plan both for us and for the world. It takes evil seriously, but God even more so. It horrifies us with its stark portrayal of death and evil, then raises our spirits to heaven by putting on our lips words of the most wonderful praise."

²³ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1967), 7.

²⁴ Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT 48 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 8.

articulating the means of conquering, he neglects the theme of cosmic war, Christ's victory, or the future reward. Another way of focusing on the reader's duty is to see the purpose as fulfilling one's calling to faithful endurance to conquer the world's pressure on the basis of God's real and rewarding reign. Osborne writes, "In response to these pressures, the book of Revelation presents a vision of reality in which God reigns and rewards the faithful who persevere in the midst of crisis. This is a counter-reality, a transcendent realm in which God's people are faithful to him and live in a Christian counterculture."²⁵ God's reign is too general and disconnected specifically from Christ's victory.

Beale states the purpose of Revelation in a myriad of ways. He most comprehensively, yet simply, articulated it when he said,

The goal of Revelation is to bring encouragement to believers of all ages that God is working out His purposes even in the midst of tragedy, suffering, and apparent Satanic domination. It is the Bible's battle cry of victory, for in it, more than anywhere else in the NT, is revealed the final victory of God over all the forces of evil. As such, it is an encouragement to God's people to persevere in the assurance that their final reward is certain and to worship and glorify God despite trials and despite temptations to march to the world's drumbeat.²⁶

Beale seems to hit all the major themes in his many forms of articulating the purpose (see previous footnote). His one deficiency is the lack of placing the believers'

²⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 10. He continues, "Moreover, God's children, the saints, are willing to endure suffering, for they realize that that this new realm is actually the real world and the pagan world is simply an illusion doomed for destruction. . . . This calls for endurance and faithfulness to God, leading the faithful to become victors over these pressures." For more background see Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 11-12.

²⁶ Beale and Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 1. Beale articulates it in several other ways: "John's purpose in writing is, therefore, to encourage those not compromising with idolatry to continue in that stance and to jolt those who are compromising out of their spiritual anesthesia so that they will perceive the spiritual danger they are in and repent and become witnesses to the risen Christ as Lord. For those who never respond, only judgment will ensue. . . . Therefore, the focus of the book is exhortation to the church community to witness to Christ in the midst of a compromising, idolatrous church and world," Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 33. Another way Beale said it was, "The main goal of the argument of John's Apocalypse is to exhort God's people to remain faithful so that they might inherit final salvation. . . . *The sovereignty of God and Christ in redeeming and judging brings them glory, which is intended to motivate saints to worship God and reflect his glorious attributes through obedience to his word* (see, e.g., on 22:9)." Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 151.

call in the context of the cosmic war and the call to conquer.

Vern Poythress seems to be the most comprehensive in articulating the purpose: “Revelation assures Christians that Christ knows their condition. He calls them to stand fast against all temptation. Their victory has been secured through the blood of the Lamb (5:9-10; 12:11). Christ will come soon to defeat Satan and all his agents (19:11-20:10), and his people will enjoy everlasting peace in his presence (7:15-17; 21:3-4).”²⁷ Combined with the three different aspects of outlining Revelation in the previous section, Poythress seems to suggest that the purpose of Revelation is to call the church to maintain its witness and purity in light of the Satanic counterfeits in the spiritual war and the future victory of Christ at his coming.²⁸ Poythress’s purpose statement and three aspects of outlining the book seem to do justice to revealing the purpose of the whole book.²⁹

The purpose of Revelation, just like the purpose of Scripture, is application, whether it means doing what the Word says (cf. James 1:22) or simply trusting God for what is revealed (cf. Rom 10:17). Furthermore, Scripture’s meaning *is* application, for to say one understands a text but does not love God and others in light of it not only fails to “apply” it as he ought but fails to “know it as he ought” (1 Cor 8:1-2).³⁰ So with Revelation,

²⁷ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 55.

²⁸ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 66. Similarly, Duvall: “Revelation proclaims hope—hope made possible by Christ’s victory, hope that brings comfort to the faithful who are now suffering, hope that calls for repentance from those who are compromising, and hope that one day God will judge evil and live among his people in a new heaven and new earth.” J. Scott Duvall, *Revelation*, TTCS (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 5.

²⁹ Poythress’s approach might be improved by making faithfulness to Christ as a person the issue, as opposed to general faithfulness, faithfulness to a message, or doctrine functionally divorced from Christ as a person (Rev 2:5; 3:18-20).

³⁰ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 81-85; Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001); Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999).

Those who read and those who hear and obey its message will be blessed. That the book has an ultimate ethical aim is borne out by the conclusion in 22:6–21, which is an intentional expansion of the prologue in 1:1–3, and especially of the ethical emphasis of 1:3. The prophecy of v. 3 is not a set of predictions but, in the biblical tradition, a word from God calling for obedient response in the lives of believers.³¹

If the meaning of Scripture is application and the purpose of Revelation is ethical application, then the purpose of preaching Revelation is its application.³² For this reason, it seems fitting to state the purpose of Revelation with regard to its application to both its original and contemporary readers. But what would this ethical application be? It is found in the exhortations in the heart of Revelation’s vision.

Key Passages for the Purpose of the Book: Revelation 12:11; 13:9-10, and 18.

Though the structure and proposed purposes seem to support the conclusion, one must find basis in the text itself. Revelation 12:11 gives the basis for the Christian’s responsibility to conquer: “They conquered [the dragon] διὰ τὸ blood of the Lamb and διὰ τὸ word of their testimony and they did not love their lives to the point of death.” The preposition with the accusative communicates the grounds or cause, not the means or agency (with the genitive).³³ The saints conquer the dragon *because of* Christ’s death and

³¹ Beale and Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 37; Tabb, *All Things New*, 224.

³² John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. Vernon L. Stanfield, 4th edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1979), 165. “The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is the main thing to be done.”; See also Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 84-85, 211-14; John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 137-50. On this point John Piper has written, “As I studied Romans 9 day after day, I began to see a God so majestic and so free and so absolutely sovereign that my analysis merged into worship and the Lord said, in effect, ‘I will not simply be analyzed, I will be adored. I will not simply be pondered, I will be proclaimed. My sovereignty is not simply to be scrutinized, it is to be heralded. It is not grist for the mill of controversy, it is gospel for sinners who know that their only hope is the sovereign triumph of God’s grace over their rebellious will,’” quoted in David Livingstone, “Three Doors Down from a Power Plant,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 33.

³³ Contra J. Scott Duvall, *The Heart of Revelation: Understanding the 10 Essential Themes of the Bible’s Final Book* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 179. Rightly, H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), 156. Despite the consistent preposition and noun case of its object, Sweet takes the blood of the Lamb as the ground of victory but “faithful testimony to the truth” as the means of conquering. J. P. M. Sweet, “Maintaining the Testimony of Jesus: The Suffering of Christians in the Revelation of John,” in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M.*

their testimony, not *by* them.³⁴ The primary call of the reader is to conquer. Does the book explain how the saints conquer?

John does not provide much exhortation to the saints in Revelation 4-20. The most prominent exhortation is in 13:9-10, which reads, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him listen. If anyone is to be taken captive, into captivity he goes. If anyone is to be killed with a sword, with a sword he will be killed. This calls for endurance and faithfulness from the saints.” The call is for endurance and faithfulness.

Specifically within the call to endure is a call to wisdom in light of the second beast from the earth, the false prophet: “This calls for wisdom: Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, because it is the number of a person. Its number is 666” (13:18).³⁵ Wisdom is necessary because the second beast is especially deceptive and effectively deceives saints to compromise. Therefore,

John uses the most offensive language he can to delineate his spiritual enemies (Balaamite, Jezebel, fornication, monster, whore), because he is aware that they present themselves to the world in a much more attractive light. No man chooses evil because he recognizes it to be evil, but always because, for the moment at least, it appears to be good. The essence of evil is deception and counterfeit. Satan is “the deceiver of the whole world,” who misleads men by telling them lies about God.³⁶

In light of Revelation 12:11 being the theme, and 13:9-10 and 13:18 being the climactic call to the church, it seems to back up my proposed purpose of Revelation and the purpose of Revelation 2-3. This is confirmed by the repeated call to endure in 14:12

Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 114, 116.

³⁴ Rightly translated by the NASB, contra CSB, NIV, ESV, and LEB. Strangely, Richard Bauckham, takes “the blood of the Lamb” to include the martyrdom of the saints. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 75. Although he cites Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 156-7, and H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, 156, Bauckham does not provide adequate support for the assertion. For a clear explanation of this point, see Thomas Schreiner, *Revelation* in vol. 12 of *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 663.

³⁵ Duvall, *The Heart of Revelation*, 185.

³⁶ Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 294.

and the call to wisdom in 17:9. I conclude that the purpose of Revelation is to call Christ's saints to conquer Satan by enduring in faithful witnessing and wisely discerning the beasts' deception in their midst, on the basis of Christ's victory so that they receive their reward. The purpose of the book of Revelation then supports the purpose of Revelation 2-3 that Jesus calls churches to repent from sin and remain in him so that they conquer Satan and receive their eternal reward. Having considered other proposals for the purpose of Revelation 2-3 and the book of Revelation as a whole, it is necessary to turn to the contents of Revelation 2-3.

Looking at Revelation 2-3

This chapter proposes that the purpose of Revelation 2-3 is to call the readers to conquer Satan, on the ground of Christ's victory, by repenting from sin and remaining in him so that they receive their eternal reward. Satan, in connection with his beasts and the prostitute, pressures the church to cower by quitting or compromise through adversity or prosperity. To argue for this one must consider the commonalities, structure, and specific commands to each church and whether they support or contradict the proposal.

The Commonalities

The call to conquer. At its core, the purpose of Revelation 2-3 is a call to conquer. This is substantiated by the climax of the seven messages ending with a call to the one who conquers (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). To understand this purpose, consider what it means to conquer and whom the Christian conquers. Some think the saints are to conquer "the godless world and its inhabitants."³⁷ But John states the object of conquering explicitly. The professing Christian is called to conquer Satan, the dragon. John envisions the saints having conquered the dragon after he was cast out of heaven (Rev 12:11). The dragon raises the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth to

³⁷ J. P. M. Sweet, "Maintaining the Testimony of Jesus," 109.

carry out his purposes against the saints (Rev 13:1-18). Some have called these three the Satanic Trinity.³⁸

What does it mean to conquer? It means to obey the call and commands of Revelation 2-3 to the churches. “To be victorious or overcome in God’s kingdom means to follow the Lamb with one’s whole life until the very end of one’s life. . . . Our main task is to endure, to stand, to persevere, to stay the course, to remain faithful, to keep following the Lord. . . . We win by standing our ground, by staying faithful.”³⁹ Endurance in faith is the essence of conquering: “To conquer is to persevere in faith, and to persevere in the faith is to do good works in response to the love of God shown to us in the gospel.”⁴⁰ Practically, readers today must understand that the context for this perseverance is on the mission field and in their own nation, neighborhood, church, home, and even their own heart.⁴¹

The beginning of each message: Jesus’s identity. Jesus opens each of his seven messages with a description of himself, mostly drawn from the vision in Revelation 1. What is the purpose of these introductions? The descriptions identify Jesus with a particular aspect that is relevant to the specific message to each church, pertaining to either the commendation, rebuke, solution, or promise of reward. The connection strengthens the impact and effect of the message communicated. The introductions to

³⁸ J. P. M. Sweet, “Maintaining the Testimony of Jesus,” 116.

³⁹ Duvall, *The Heart of Revelation*, 182. This may seem to lack repentance from sin as a necessary part of enduring, but Duvall says the specifics of enduring includes “saying no to evil,” which means to repent on 185-8.

⁴⁰ Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation*, 241.

⁴¹ Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation*, 241. Goldsworthy writes, “The cosmic struggle between Christ and Satan takes place in the church engaging the world. Christ’s ‘mopping-up’ campaign against Satan is actually, marvellous [sic] to relate, being worked out in the front-line trenches of local church evangelism, pastoral care, teaching and preaching. It is being worked out in the Christian home as children are instructed in their covenant privileges and taught the meaning of faith in the doing and dying of Christ.”

each message are meant to bolster faith in the one identified and therefore compel them to respond in repentance and perseverance.⁴²

The address to the “angel” of each church. Each message begins with Jesus commanding John to write to a specific angel of each church. What is the angel of the local church, and how does that inform the purpose of Revelation 2-3? Various views of the “angel” in 1:20 and the seven messages have been proposed. They fall into two categories: heavenly angelic beings and humans.⁴³ The main reason for “angel” to refer to an angelic being is that the word ἄγγελος is used in Revelation to refer to a non-human in every instance outside of 1:20 and chapters 2 and 3. Since Jesus rebukes the church *and* the angel, some opt for the idea that the “angel” refers to the personified spirit of each church rather than a sinless angelic being representing the church.⁴⁴ This seems unlikely because this would be the only use of the term as a personified spirit.

It seems more likely that the angel of the church refers to a human messenger. The word is used for human messenger in the New Testament and other Koine Greek literature (e.g. Matt 11:10; Luke 7:24; and 1 Macc 1:44 in the LXX). Some take the human messenger to refer to the pastor, bishop, or leader of the church while others take it to be a messenger of the church who is not necessarily a leader. Against it being the bishop or pastor of the church is the practice and teaching of a plurality of elders during

⁴² James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, 112.

⁴³ For a fuller discussion, see Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 108-112 and Everett Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1-3: Status Quaestionis and Another Proposal,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21, no. 3 (2011): 371–86.

⁴⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 63; Leon L. Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC, 2nd ed. edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1987), 60-1; Jonathan Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings: “Notes on the Apocalypse” An Humble Attempt*, vol. 5, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith and Stephen J. Stein (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 143.

the time of the New Testament.⁴⁵ Though certainty seems impossible, it may be best to see the angel as a messenger of the church who is reading the book of Revelation aloud to his congregation. Why? First, 1:3 may be referring to a congregational reader. Second, the reader seemed to have a role in the congregation (Col 4:16; 1 Tim 4:13). Third, some “rabbinic texts show that the term *messenger of the congregation* could be used of the reader, whose function is confirmed for the synagogue in the time of Revelation by the NT.”⁴⁶ No view is without problems, and against this view is the use of ἄγγελος throughout the rest of the book.

Regardless of one’s conclusion on the identity of the angel, the issues that are difficult to hold together are (1) they are called angels, (2) they are confronted and rebuked for sin, and (3) though distinct from the church they are identified in a representative way with those who are to hear and heed the message. The angel of each church maintains the heavenly connection between church and the Lord, so that the church more deeply feels the reality of the cosmic war, the ground of victory, and the hope of the reward. Therefore, whether through a representative angel, spirit of the church, or human messenger, Christ is addressing the church and all who are part of it before heaven and earth. Therefore, the messenger and church must heed the message and not evade the accountability. Since Jesus addresses the angel and holds him accountable with the church, the address to the associated angel strengthens Christ’s call for the churches to conquer.

The concluding call to listen to the Spirit. Each letter has as at its ending (or near its ending), “Let the one who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the

⁴⁵ Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority? Elders in Baptist Life* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2006), 7-10; Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Role of Elders,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 283-9.

⁴⁶ Everett Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1-3: Status Quaestionis and Another Proposal,” *BBR* 21, no. 3 (2011): 384.

churches.” Who is the Spirit and what is he saying? The “Spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ The Spirit speaking to the church brings grace and peace in his power by means of his Christocentric word (Rev 1:4).⁴⁸ These words are life-giving, encouraging, convicting, and comforting to enable the saint to conquer. What is this word?

The command to each church is “Listen.” The first response to any creature addressed by God is to listen carefully to what God is saying. Faith comes by hearing, and one must hear with trembling (cf. Rom 10:17; Isa 66:2). The formula, “Let the one who has ears to hear,” alludes to the prophets (Isa 6:9-10; Jer 5:21; Ezek 3:27; 12:2) and the words of Jesus (e.g., Matt 13:9). The significance is that this final call is a prophetic call to repentance in light of judgment, often communicated with symbolism to both shock those who would listen and harden those who would reject it (cf. Rev 22:10-11).⁴⁹ The final call of the Spirit to the readers and hearers of the book is “Come” (Rev 22:17), which is another way of calling the reader to conquer by enduring faithfully and wisely.

The unique promises communicating the eternal reward. Each message ends with a promise of the eternal reward. Each promise Jesus holds out is distinct from the other six messages. However, they function more like different facets of the eternal reward rather than exclusive and disconnected rewards because most of them find connection to Revelation 21:1-22:5 (see Table 2). The reward is the actual hope and goal energizing the courage for the saints to remain in Jesus, maintain missional witness, and to repent from personal and ecclesial compromise.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 72. Mounce proposes the prophetic Spirit or Christ’s own spirit.

⁴⁸ To see the idea of grace flowing to the reader through the inspired writing, see John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), 65-7.

⁴⁹ Beale and Campbell, *Revelation*, 57-58. For an extended examination on the formula in biblical-theological context, see G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 241-67.

⁵⁰ Duvall, *The Heart of Revelation*, 191-192. “The rewards communicate the incentive and reason for conquering. . . . The rewards promised each church describe distinct aspects of the eternal

The additional descriptions of the conqueror's final reward, climaxed in taking the most prominent seat in the kingdom for all eternity, effectively motivate those with ears to hear to listen to the Spirit and conquer the dragon by repenting from sin and remaining in Jesus. The commonalities in Revelation 2-3 point to the proposed purpose of the section. Next, consider the macro structure of Revelation 2-3.

Table 2. Meaning of the rewards in Revelation 2-3

Verse	Image	Meaning	Later in Revelation
2:7	Eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God	Enjoying God's presence in his dwelling	22:2
2:11	Not be harmed by the second death	Delivered from the eternal lake of fire	21:6-8
2:17	Receive hidden manna and a white stone with a new name on it	Satisfaction of our deepest hunger and entry to the victory feast	7:14-15
2:26-28	Authority over the nations and the morning star	Authority to judge nations and receiving Jesus himself	21:26; 22:5
3:5	Dressed in white, name in the book of life, and acknowledged by Jesus before the Father	Honor for righteous acts, security of eternal life and salvation at the judgment	20:15; 21:2; 7:14
3:12	A pillar in God's temple and three new names	Eternal participation in God's dwelling and divine association	21:9-14
3:21	Right to sit with Jesus on his throne	The most prominent seat in the kingdom	22:5

reward." The reward is also revealed in five of the seven beatitudes (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:14). Another scholar suggests that the rewards follow a salvation-historical line from creation to Christ's exaltation, Matthijs den Dulk, "The Promises to the Conquerors in the Book of Revelation," *Biblica* 87, no. 4 (2006): 516-522. While that may be a general pattern worth noting, the emphasis of each reward finds its emphasis in the consummation described in Rev 21:1-22:5.

The Macro Structure of Revelation 2-3

The structure of Revelation 2-3 may also communicate significant meaning. It has been observed that the seven messages are in the structure of a chiasm.⁵¹

- A. Rev 2:1-7 to Ephesus
 - B. Rev 2:8-11 to Smyrna
 - C1. Rev 2:12-17 to Pergamum
 - C2. Rev 2:18-29 to Thyatira
 - C3. Rev 3:1-6 to Sardis
 - B'. Rev 3:7-13 to Philadelphia
 - A'. Rev 3:14-22 to Laodicea

The chiasm draws attention to both the center and the borders. The center of the chiasm (C) focuses on the compromise of the church in its teaching and practice. The B sections call the churches to endure suffering faithfully. The A sections focus on the internal sins of lovelessness and self-reliance. These three divisions highlight means of conquering the dragon on the basis of Christ's death and his testimony. On the structure of Revelation 2-3 Morris writes, "A further pattern is to be discerned in the sevenfold arrangement. Churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger, churches 2 and 6 are in excellent shape, churches 3, 4 and 5 are middling, neither very good nor very bad."⁵² While this macrostructure

⁵¹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 226-7. Also see Hamilton, *Revelation*, 54-7. Beale says, "The main point in a chiasmic structure lies usually on the outside parallels, though sometimes the middle point receives the emphasis. The significance of the chiasm here is to emphasize that the churches in Asia Minor are in serious trouble. The chiasm is bounded by churches that could be about to lose their identity, and the churches in the middle of the pattern are in poor health. If the seven churches represent the church universal of the first century and throughout the church age (see on 1:4, 11), then the significance of the chiasm is to underscore that the church in any generation is typically not a healthy, witnessing church. Nevertheless, there is always a small part of the church which faithfully maintains its witness like Smyrna and Philadelphia. This sober assessment of the church's overall condition matches what is said in 2 Tim. 1:15, though the evaluation there is even more negative. Ministers of the gospel must be aware of such realistic evaluations of the church, so that their calling is not destroyed when the triumphalist expectations of modern Christendom are not fulfilled." Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 33.

⁵² Morris, *Revelation*, 63. Beale concurs with this structure, saying, "The seven churches fall into three groups. The first and last are in danger of losing their very identity as a Christian church. Therefore, they are exhorted to repent in order to prevent their judgment and to inherit the promises that genuine faith deserves. The churches addressed in the three central letters have to varying degrees some who have remained faithful and others who are compromising with pagan culture. Among these Pergamum

does not argue for the proposed purpose, it nicely organizes the message of the section in a way that more clearly reveals three tenets that must be factored into the purpose.

The Commands of Revelation 2-3

The macrostructure clarified three major themes of Revelation 2-3. In a homiletical main idea or proposed purpose of the section these themes must be accounted for. Again, Hamilton states his homiletical main idea thus, "For the glory of God, Jesus charges the churches to be zealous for the gospel, reject false teaching, and live in a manner that corresponds to the gospel."⁵³ The three charges he mentions can be related to the themes of repenting from internal sin, external sin, and endurance. It may be better to put the three themes in the terms of the letter itself. So, the commands are to repent from sin and remain in him. To get a sense of the whole let us briefly survey the themes.

Repent from external sin. The Spirit calls the churches to repent from internal sin. The sin of Pergamum was tolerating members who were holding to compromising teaching (Rev 2:14-15). Thyatira was one step worse since they tolerated outspoken false teachers (2:20-23). At the heart of these sins was compromise with the world's approval in a way that they wrongly believed they could combine worldliness with Christianity.⁵⁴

is in the best condition and Sardis is in the worst. These churches are exhorted to purge the elements of compromise from their midst in order to avert judgment on the compromisers (and probably also themselves) and to inherit the promises due those who overcome compromise. The second and sixth letters are written to churches which have proved themselves faithful and loyal to Christ's 'name' even in the face of persecution from both Jews and pagans. Even though they are 'poor' and 'have little power,' they are encouraged to continue persevering as the 'true Israel,' since more trials will confront them. They are to endure with the hope that they will inherit the promises of eternal salvation (both will receive a 'crown'). Therefore, the logical flow of each letter climaxes with the promise of inheriting eternal life with Christ, which is the main point of each letter. The body of each letter provides the basis upon which the Spirit calls the churches to respond by 'hearing,' which should inevitably result in 'overcoming,' the consequence of which is inheritance of the respective promises." Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 226.

⁵³ Hamilton, *Revelation*, 54. Beale's main idea is a little less tied to the structure: "Christ encourages the churches to witness, warns them against compromise, and exhorts them to hear and to overcome compromise in order to inherit eternal life," Beale and Campbell, *Revelation*, 53.

⁵⁴ Duvall, *The Heart of Revelation*, 180-1, 185. Goldsworthy expands, "Those who lust for the kind of power that the world respects, who seek to establish before men a triumphal image of the church and of Christian existence, reject the victory of the Lamb at the point of daily living and declare that they

Sardis was the worst of these three churches, with the external sin of incomplete works, to the point of almost being completely dead (3:1-2). In all three cases, the Lord Jesus calls for repentance from these sins which were externally and outwardly visible for any who looked at these churches.

Repent from internal sin. Not all sin is outward and obvious. Some sins are more subtle and take many instances of bad fruit before others can see the rotten fruit. Idolatry is the way of the world that sometimes seeps its way into the church in less obvious ways. One way it does this is by a lack of brokenness, penitence, and repentance.⁵⁵ This can come in “Christian” ways. The church at Ephesus was faithful in many ways but was not loving and therefore worldly (Rev 2:4). A second way it comes in is by self-reliance. It may not be outward idolatry or immorality, but at its heart the worldly mindset of self-reliance marginalizes repentance and functionally eliminates the need for a gracious God. This was the problem for the church at Laodicea (Rev 3:14-17).⁵⁶ These churches received the most severe threats from Jesus (2:5; 3:16).

Remain in Jesus. The main call of the book of Revelation, and even these seven messages, is to remain in Jesus. The term ὑπομονή is “the key ethical term in the Apocalypse.”⁵⁷ Enduring in Christ is the implication behind repenting from sin externally and internally. Even as Thyatira is called to repent for sinfully tolerating false teachers or

are as offended by his suffering as were those Jews who could not tolerate a king-messiah who dies. The gospel pattern of daily Christian existence is one of a confident struggle. When the Spirit of God writes upon the hearts of and minds of ordinary Christians the truth that the victory of God, his glory and majesty, are all clothed in the suffering of the Lamb, he dignifies our struggle with a significance that outshines all the remarkable feats to which the world attaches fame and importance.” Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation*, 242.

⁵⁵ Duvall, *The Heart of Revelation*, 186-7.

⁵⁶ For a biblical theology of repentance, see Mark J. Boda, “Return To Me”: *A Biblical Theology of Repentance*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

⁵⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 543.

outspoken members, they are called to hold on to what they have (2:25). The two churches that are not rebuked for sin, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are called to be faithful to the point of death (2:10) and hold on to what they have (3:11). The way to conquer the dragon is by remaining in Jesus and enduring faithfully all the way until the end.⁵⁸

The commands of Revelation 2-3 form a three-strand rope as the means of conquering the dragon to receive the eternal reward. The conqueror succeeds by repenting from external and internal sin and by remaining in Jesus until the end. Each Christian is called to this. Furthermore, every church is called to work out the practical implications of this congregationally.

Conclusion

I have sought to argue that the main purpose of Revelation 2-3 is that Christ, on the basis of his victory, calls the churches to conquer Satan by repenting from sin and remaining in him so that they receive their eternal reward. The purpose of Revelation 2-3 is based on the purpose of the book of Revelation: Because Christ has conquered, he calls his saints to conquer Satan by enduring in faithfulness through discernment of beastly deception in their midst so that they receive their reward. Broadly examining the commonalities of the introduction and conclusions of the seven messages support this purpose. The chiasmic structure of Revelation 2-3 clarifies the three main themes, and the commands of the section clarify the specific means of conquering. A survey of other proposals on the purpose of Revelation 2-3 clarified the proposal.

The call to those expositing this section of Scripture is to ensure that the

⁵⁸ Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation*, 237. “The distinctive contribution of the seven messages in Revelation is to show that the good works of the people of God are part of the apocalyptic struggle between the reigning Christ and the powers of darkness. . . . The struggles of the local churches to live out the gospel, to resist the impact of non-Christian values and ideas, and to stay true to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, are all part of the conquest of the world through the gospel. Behind the scenes the same conquest is being affected in the reign of Christ in heaven. In the world the church must be content to follow the example of the Lamb in his sufferings, but it is assured that the Lamb’s sufferings are the key to the conquest of the Lion.”

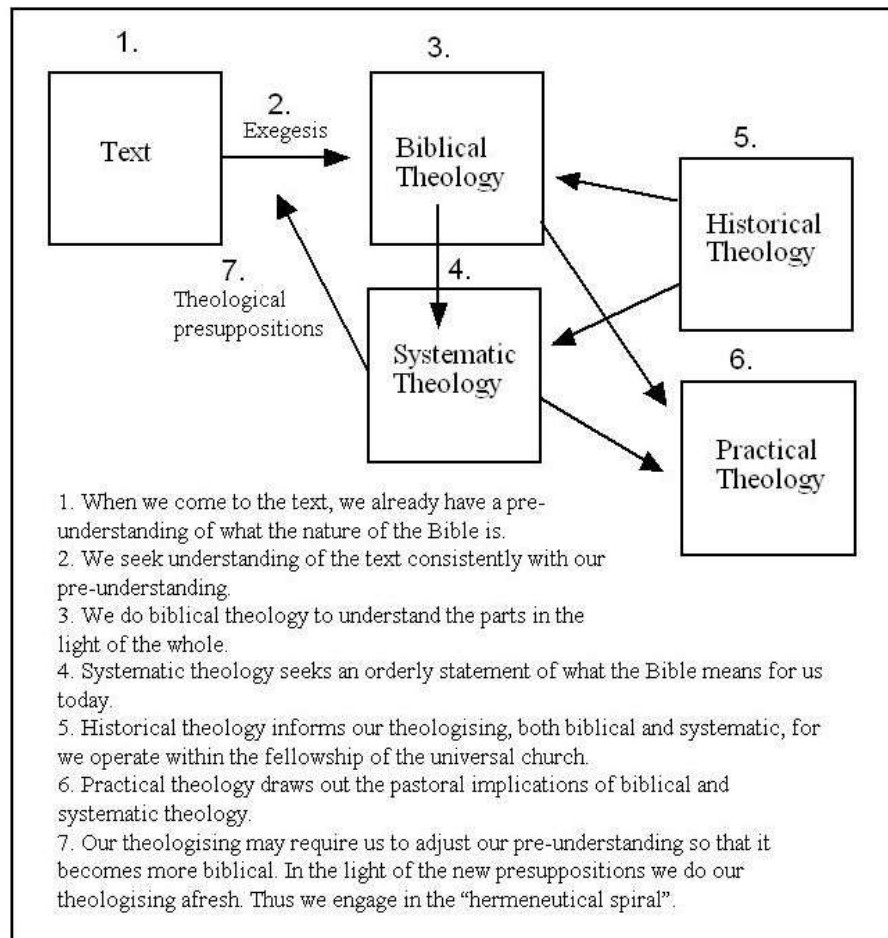
content and intent of Revelation 2-3 controls the content and intent of the sermons preached to Christian and non-Christian hearers, especially in the context of the local church assembled. Even more importantly, Christians who read this must listen to what the Spirit says and rise to the call to conquer. Churches should intentionally fellowship, encourage, rebuke, and take responsibility for one another's discipleship in light of the cosmic war and the inevitable judgment of each church member. Lastly, those who are not Christian are either to be hardened by the heavenly vision of the cosmic conflict or to be awakened to the danger, reward, and invitation of the risen Christ, his Spirit, and his bride. "Both the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' Let anyone who hears, say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who desires take the water of life freely" (Rev 22:17).

APPENDIX

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

Here is a helpful diagram showing the relationship between the theological disciplines for practical theology by Graeme Goldsworthy.¹

Figure A1. The relationship of the theological disciplines



¹ “What is the Discipline of Biblical Theology?” 9 Marks, accessed December 23, 2016, <https://9marks.org/article/what-discipline-biblical-theology/>. The older version of this article had the diagram, but it is no longer online.

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ABSTRACT

THE SPIRIT ADDRESSES THE CHURCHES: A BIBLICAL- THEOLOGICAL EXPOSITION OF REVELATION 2-3

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This project expositis Jesus's messages to the seven churches of Asia found in Revelation 2-3 in biblical-theological perspective, calling hearers to repent from sin and remain in Jesus in order to conquer the dragon and receive the final reward.

Chapter 1 introduces the biblical-theological project by defining biblical theology, defining preaching, and exploring the use of biblical theology for applying Revelation 2-3. Chapter 2 presents the initial call to repentance from abandoning their initial love. Chapter 3 calls hearers to finish life fearlessly and faithfully. Chapter 4 reproves churches of compromise among her members. Chapter 5 urges the church to repent from sinful tolerance and retain Christ. Chapter 6 sounds the alarm to wake up the church to the danger of incomplete works. Chapter 7 encourages hearers to cling to Jesus in tribulation. Chapter 8 corrects lukewarm self-sufficiency in churches. Chapter 9 argues for the primary purpose of Revelation 2-3.

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