

The Seven Churches

Part 1

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The letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 have been the subject of much debate, both in secular commentaries and in God's church. Were they only churches along a Roman mail route with no present-day significance? Should we understand them prophetically as successive eras of the church from the days of the apostles to the present? Does the Bible provide any evidence that all seven might exist together in the end-time--right now--just as they did in Paul's day?

Within the letters the glorified Jesus Christ gives each of the seven churches specific instructions to overcome. In this initial study, we will examine the time element of the seven churches, and in future issues we will analyze each era individually.

1. How does the book of Revelation view the churches? Does it recognize that they have future meaning, as types of the end-time church? Revelation 1:4, 7, 10, 19; 22:7, 10, 16.

Comment: Christ specifically addresses the book of Revelation to the seven churches in Asia, but the introductory chapter places it in the context of the Day of the Lord and Christ's return. The visions John sees are of "things which are, and . . . will take place after this" (1:19). Since the Day of the Lord is still future, we can conclude the seven messages are valid not only for John's day, but also for ours. Revelation 22 accents this by declaring that Jesus' servants would teach this prophecy in the churches until He returns.

2. Do the seven churches exist successively from the Ephesian era during the days of the apostles to the Laodicean era at Christ's return?

Comment: Though history and experience of the modern era of the church indicates such a partial fulfillment, no *internal* evidence from the Bible supports this concept.

3. Does internal evidence indicate another type of fulfillment? Do all seven churches exist concurrently at the end? Revelation 2-3.

Comment: Notice these intriguing facts:

- Grammatically, Jesus gives the seven messages as if they exist simultaneously.
- Jesus ends each of the messages with "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," plural.

In Revelation 2:23, addressed specifically to Thyatira, Christ says that, by what happens to her, "all the churches shall know" He is the Judge and Head of the church. Every

church must exist concurrently with her to observe her calamity--especially those that had supposedly preceded her!

The letters' language indicates an end-time frame of reference: To Ephesus and Pergamos, He says He will "come to [them] *quickly*." To Thyatira, He will "cast her into *great tribulation*," and her faithful should "hold fast . . . *till I come*" and "[keep] My works *to the end*." To Sardis, He will "come . . . *as a thief*" (see Matthew 24:43). To Philadelphia, He mentions "the *hour of trial*" and "I come *quickly*." To Laodicea, He says they will be "*tried in the fire*," a symbol of tribulation, and He "*[stands] at the door*," indicating immediacy.

4. Could the church's scattering into many small groups indicate all seven churches currently exist? Leviticus 26:14-16, 33; Zechariah 4:2-4, 11-14; Revelation 1:12, 20.

Comment: The sins, lacks and needs of each give the seven churches distinct personalities and attitudes. We find all the problems Jesus describes in the various branches of the church today. Remember, Christ addresses them individually, but advises "the churches" to heed His advice to all. The parallel prophecies of Zechariah 4 and Revelation 1 show the seven churches, distinct but existing together, at the time of the Two Witnesses.

5. Are the messages relevant to us individually? Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26-29; 3:5-6, 12-13, 21-22; II Timothy 3:16.

Comment: A careful self-examination will reveal that each of us has, to some degree, every problem described in every message. All seven messages apply--today--to us! As we overcome, grow and mature, as we become more like Christ, we should see less and less of each negative point in ourselves. Christ's advice to all seven is the same: Overcome! If we heed His advice, we will avoid the threatened judgments and receive the rewards He offers!