

IN RESPONSE - THE SEVEN CHURCHES

by Dennis Prutow

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As we begin a look at the seven letters to the seven churches, we take note of the universal application of these letters to the church at large through all ages. The Spirit sets the stage in this regard. Revelation 2:1-2, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this."

There is little doubt this letter is directed to a particular church, Ephesus. This city was a prominent seaport in Asia Minor. See map.¹ It was a large city, some 250,000. It was the home of the world famous cult of Diana. Acts 19:24, "For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen." This false worship brought great economic gain to many and the citizens of this city were generally quite affluent.

The introduction of the gospel was an immediate threat to the economy. Acts, 19:27, "Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence." For this reason, if for no other, tradesmen opposed the gospel. The results of affluence seemed to penetrate the church also.

But was this particular letter directed only to Ephesus? I do not think so for several reasons. First, there are *seven* letters. Christ holds the *seven* stars. He walks among the *seven* lampstands.

The number seven refers to completeness or perfection. We have in these seven letters a complete rehearsal of the difficulties faced within the church of Jesus Christ. It is of no small consequence that we also have letters written by the apostle Paul directed to *seven* different churches. We have letters to the church at Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica. We rightly take these letters written to spe-

cific churches as given to the church at large. So too, the letters to the seven church of Revelation 2 and 3.

Second, Christ describes Himself as, "The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands." We have already seen the interpretation. Jesus says, "As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20).



THE PROVINCE OF ASIA (Western part)

The angels are messengers. The primary messenger in the church is the pastor. He communicates the message sent from God. Christ holds the pastors of His church in His hand. If the number seven represents completeness, Christ holds the complete ministry of the church in His hand.

Christ walks among His churches and walks within His churches. The lampstands are candelabra like the one design by God for use in the tabernacle so that each contains *seven* lights. "Six branches shall go out from its sides; three branches of the lampstand from its one side and

three branches of the lampstand from its other side" (Exodus 25:32). The church of Christ must be aglow with the perfect light of God.

Jesus made a startling statement to His disciples. "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world" (John 9:5). *While I am in the world*, said Jesus. He then described the work of the church saying, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). Christ walks among the lampstands in order to provide them light to shine in this sin darkened world.

So a lesson here is that Christ calls His church to take His light into the darkness. From this perspective, the letters to the seven churches reveal various ways the light of Christ may be dimmed or may shine more brightly.

Finally, each of the seven letters ends with this comment from Christ. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7). Each letter ends with an exhortation for each church to listen to and hear what the Spirit is saying to the all churches. These letters are not designed for one but for all. We look at them to discern lessons for the church at large and for our individual congregations. There are lessons in each letter for each of our own congregations. May God give us grace to see, hear and understand.

One final word regarding the seven letters. We must understand as we gather for worship that Jesus Christ upholds the ministry of the church which faithfully reflects His light, maintains the standards of His word, carefully and forcefully proclaims that word, and seeks to follow Christ by the power of the Spirit.

As we gather for worship in faithfulness to Christ, the Lord Himself walks in our midst. We do not see Him with our physical eyes or hear Him move among us. Yet Christ is present by the power of His Spirit to change our lives and conform us to His image. He is present to speak through His word. He is present as the morning star to arise in our hearts.

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¹ Geoffrey B Wilson, *Revelation* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1985), 8.

IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO EPHESUS

by Dennis Prutow

After the To and From lines in each letter, Christ makes a statement concerning His knowledge of the church. This is a statement of commendation and or condemnation. Here Christ commends the Ephesians. "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false" (Revelation 2:2).

Christ's knowledge is not simply special understanding derived from an ability to see into our hearts. The knowledge Christ speaks of is open to view. It is knowledge based upon sight. It is not hidden special knowledge.

"I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance." Here is a church known because of her deeds. She is a picture of James 1:25, "One who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does." The doing of the word of God often entails toil, very hard work. We are not permitted to coast in the Christian life. Jesus put it this way, "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4).

Christians must also persevere in the work God has given them in this life. I think one of the most important qualities of a pastor or missionary is perseverance. The pastor must continue on in his work through thick and thin, through all the ups and downs. There are difficult times and there are rewards. We remember the call of Isaiah and Isaiah's response. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" (Isaiah 6:8). We fail to look at the commission God gave Isaiah. Perseverance is required to follow the assignment given by God.

He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.' Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their

ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed" (Isaiah 6:9-10).

This perseverance can be observed by those outside the church.

Christ emphasizes the importance of perseverance in verse 3. "And you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary." This is a stick-to-it attitude of heart based upon a desire to see the name of Christ exalted and lifted up. This is not a self-centered persistence based upon self-exaltation. "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

The church must test those teachers who come along to see if they are indeed sent by God. We must reject those who claim authority from God but fail to follow the word of God. We must detect false teaching and reject it. But it is not just the false teaching that is the problem. We must detect false teachers and insure the church does not embrace them in her ministry. God commended Ephesus for this. Will He commend us in like manner?

In each letter except two, Christ has a word of rebuke. Only two of the seven letters contain no word of warning or censure. In other words, only a minority of the church stands in a position of receiving only commendation. Most churches stand in need of correction. We should be honest in our self-evaluation at this point.

Verse 4. "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love." This is a most devastating critique. All manner of activity can be technically correct without proper motives.

If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2-3).

Love, as fully described in Scripture, is the normative sign of the presence of the

Holy Spirit in a human life. This church has left its first love.

The devotion of heart once experienced after conversion has waned. This is not normal. John the baptizer "was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light" (John 5:35). We too must be lamps having heat as well as light. We must have affections burning for Christ. Lamps with low flames because of little oil are unacceptable.

Verse 5. "Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place unless you repent." A change of heart is needed. Remember your former state when you had deep joy and exaltation in Christ.

You have fallen. The idea here is that of falling from a proper understanding of grace. There is reliance upon self-righteousness as obtaining merit before God. It is the idea of Galatians 5:4, "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."

Verse 6. "Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." We know nothing of the Nicolaitans except that they were opposed to the Law of God. They were antinomians. The Ephesians were not antinomian. They too hated that devilish doctrine. But perhaps they lapsed into a Pharisaical tendency by leaning too much upon their own merit. Love was lost. Legalism was the problem.

Verse 7. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God." We need to listen to the rebuke. "For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God" (2 Timothy 1:6). The rekindling process begins with understanding the problem and seeking the face of God for needed grace and renewal. There is a reward. It is access to the tree of life in the garden of God. Are we really listening?

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IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO SMYRNA

by Dennis Prutow

Revelation 2:8, “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this.”

Smyrna, the only one of the seven cities still in existence (modern Izmir), lay some thirty-five miles north of Ephesus. A beautiful city and prosperous port (c. 200,000 pop.), it claimed to be the first city in Asia, and a faithful ally of Rome, was in fact the first province to build a temple to the goddess Roma in 195 B. C. Its large colony of Jews used their influence with the authorities to persecute Christians, and they later assisted in the martyrdom of the aged Polycarp (A.D. 156). The faithful church in Smyrna receives the shortest letter and the warmest praise.¹

Verse 2:9, “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” Christ says to this church that He knows their earthly poverty. This poverty was visible. At the same time, these people were rich in Christ. They were quite the opposite of the Christians in Laodicea, as Revelation 3:17-18 indicates.

Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

Those outside of the pale of the church blasphemed the Christians. They reviled the church and uttered impieties against her. Jews according to the flesh in Smyrna opposed the church and persecuted her. Christ calls the Jewish synagogue, filled with those who despised and rejected Christ as Messiah, the Synagogue of Satan. In our day, worshipers opposed to Christ compose gatherings of

the devil. Although these are harsh words, they come from Christ.

Christ the now offers words of comfort, warning and consolation. Verse 10, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna bore witness to the type of suffering faced by the church. He also gives testimony to the lack of fear exhorted by Christ. James Ramsey comments:

Polycarp, its chief bishop and a disciple of the apostle John, suffered martyrdom here in extreme old age. The narrative has been often repeated, but we cannot refrain from giving here at least the answers of the aged martyr when summoned before the proconsul, and addressed in the customary language—“Swear, curse Christ, and I will set you free.” “Eighty and six years have I served Him, I have received only good at His hands. Can I then curse Him, my King and my Savior?” “I will cast you to the wild beasts if you do not change your mind,” said the proconsul. “Bring the wild beasts thither,” said Polycarp, “for change my mind from the better to the worse I will not.” “Do you despise the wild beasts?” I will subdue your spirit by the flames.” “The flames which you menace endure but for the time, and are soon extinguished. Calmly rejoined the martyr; “but there is a fire reserved for the wicked, whereof you know not; the fire of a judgment to come, and of punishment everlasting.” These flames soon did their work. By his death, the rage of the populace, to which already many victims had been sacrificed, was so far satiated that the proconsul suspended the persecution, and this poor suffering church had a respite.²

The persecution, says Christ, is a work of the devil. We will see this clearly

in Revelation 12. It reminds us of Job. The persecution itself is prison if it is not literal imprisonment. God locks us in the persecution for testing. As Paul boldly says in Romans 5:3-4, “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope.” Tribulation, testing, has a way of proving the quality of Christian character. Sometimes the tests are severe.

Christ says the period of testing will be relatively short, ten days. Ten refers to completion and perfection from a human perspective. The time of testing will be correct to prove the character of the Christians at Smyrna before a watching world. Polycarp is an example.

Christians must be faithful until death. Jesus reminds us, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Paul declares, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). We may retire from our various vocations at age 65 but there is no retirement in the Christian faith.

The crown of life awaits those who persevere in faith and love. The crown is the reward of the athlete. You must run the race fully and faithfully. The Christian’s crown is the reward of eternal life. “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:12).

Verse 11, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.” Physical hearing is one thing. Spiritual hearing is quite another. Spiritual hearing comes as a result of spiritual rebirth. Compare Acts 16:14. Spiritual rebirth is the first resurrection (Ephesians 2:5). “Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power” (Revelation 20:6). The second death is the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14). ‘In Response’ is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1998 by Dennis Prutow.

¹ Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Revelation* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1985), 31.

² James B. Ramsey, *The Book of Revelation, An Exposition of the First Eleven Chapters* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 135.

IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO PERGAMUM

by Dennis Prutow

We move up the coast of the Aegean fifty to fifty-five miles to a third seaport city, Pergamum, located on the Caicus River a few miles from the sea. Revelation 2:12, "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this."

We note two things about this center of commerce. First, Pergamum had an immense library of 200,000 volumes.

By its devotion to literature, this city has inscribed its name upon the very structure of our own language. The king of Egypt would not permit the exportation of the papyrus plant, which was then used for writing, as we use paper, and from which the word "paper" is derived; and the philosophers of Pergamos were under the necessity of providing a substitute. This they did by preparing sheep skins and goat skins in a peculiar way, and on these they were accustomed to writing their books. The preparation of these skins was brought to perfection in Pergamos, and from this circumstance they were called "Pergamana Charta," a name which has been contracted and modified by passing through various languages until it stands in our tongue, parchment; that is, paper of Pergamos, a name which will forever commemorate the inhabitants of Pergamos in the pursuits of literature.¹

Second, Pergamum was also a center of idolatry. She had temples to various Greek gods and goddesses. Among the centers of worship was a temple to Aesculapius, the god of medicine and healing. "The popularity of this cult made Pergamum the 'Lourdes' of the ancient world (R. H. Charles)."² Pergamum was also the first city "in Asia to erect a temple to Augustus (29 B.C.). . . ."³ As such it was a center for the imperial cult.

Christ reminds this church He is the One with the sharp two edged sword. He comes in power to bless His people but

He also comes in judgment. The sword is the word of God (Ephesians 6:17). The word brings healing or correction. The former may come through the latter.

Verse 13, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells." As in the cases of Ephesus and Smyrna, Christ gives a word of commendation to Pergamum. Christ knows the people dwell among much evil. The throne of Satan indicates this city is a capital of evil. The people were required to confess "Caesar is Lord." The basic Christian confession is, "Christ is Lord" (Romans 10:9). Under pressure, the church maintained its commitment to Christ and did not deny Him. The people remembered the words of Jesus, "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33).

The Lord mentions a martyr, Antipas. We know nothing else of him. He would have been famous to those of Pergamum as Polycarp is so well remembered for his faithful witness to Christ in Smyrna.

Verse 14, "But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality." Some members of the church might be praiseworthy. But there were problems.

Balaam was a false prophet eager to please men and fill his pockets. When Israel came out of Egypt and approached Moab, Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse Israel. "So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak's words to him" (Numbers 22:7). Balaam also advised Israel to practice idolatry and sensuousness she done at the foot of Mount Sinai. "Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in

the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the Lord (Numbers 31:16).

At Pergamum some were "forsaking the right way." They "followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness (2 Peter 2:15). "For pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam" (Jude 11). The church was therefore a mixed multitude (Exodus 12:38, Numbers 11:4).

Verse 15, "So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans." The Nicolaitans were antinomians. They opposed God's law as a standard for Christian living. These Nicolaitans would not halt the course of idolatry but give license to it. This is often the case in our culture. Adultery and fornication, violations of the Seventh Commandment, are not seen as incompatible with a Christian confession.

Verse 16, "Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth." The proper answer to idolatry and sensuality is repentance. You must change your mind about these sins and view them as God views them. Failure to do so will result in experiencing the judgmental side of Christ's sword. This may mean judgment in this life. It may mean eternal perdition. Christ will make war against those in the church who reject His ways.

Verse 17, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it." We must not casually dismiss the words of the Spirit as though they do not apply to us. Christ is the hidden manna, the bread of heaven, hidden in heaven. Jury verdicts were given by placing a black stone or a white stone in a box. Christ says He will give a white stone to those who overcome. They "shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment" (WSC, Answer 38).

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¹ William J. Reid, *Lectures on the Revelation* (Pittsburgh: Stevenson, Foster and Company, 1878), 47.

² Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Revelation* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1985), 33.

³ *Ibid.*