

REVELATION Chapter 2 Notes

Introduction to the seven letters to the seven churches:

- Remember, the whole Apocalypse is to be sent to each church.
- But, Christ also zeroes in on each of these historic, real churches, applying specific examples of Law and Gospel to them individually. He doesn't just give them a generic message that applies to them all, but hones in on what is happening in each context.
- There is a two-fold audience that Jesus addresses in each letter: He afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. Thus, the two-fold message is 1) to the faithful who are in danger and worried about what will happen to them, Jesus comforts them with the Gospel and assurance of His reality; 2) to those who are too sure and secure and are becoming betrayers (slackers, lethargic), Jesus afflicts them (warns them) with the Law, so that they may return to the grace that they have in their baptism, etc. This provides a perfect example of how Law and Gospel should be applied to all people in all cases. Pastors, who stand in Christ's stead, are to forgive the sins of the penitent and pronounce the Gospel to them, but refuse to forgive the sins of the impenitent and declare the Law to them.
- We also must be careful when interpreting these specific letters to these specific congregations not to just sort of generalize the message in a way that applies to all churches throughout history. We certainly can apply the message to our congregations, for they may well be suffering the same things that these congregations are. But, we need to realize that these letters are to seven historical congregations and address specific problems their facing.
- See map, "The Seven Churches of Revelation" (handout), which shows how interconnected these seven churches are by means of the Roman road built between them.
- Roman πόλις (city) - had a main colonnaded road running through the center of the city; if there was a hill located there, that would serve as religious center (pagan temples would be built there); a theatre would be located there; a bathhouse and shops; and there would be an agora (marketplace – an important meeting place within the city) there. The cities were built so that there was a lot of intersection of people traveling through the heart of the city; this led to lots of interaction between the people of the city and the visitors who would come there. They were unlike our modern cities, which have a downtown area and areas surrounding downtown where people lived. In Roman cities, everything was pretty tight-knit.
- See Brighton's chart on the letters to the seven churches (separate handout).

Rev. 2:1-7 (Letter to the Church in Ephesus)

- 2:1 - "says the One who holds the seven stars . . . walks around in the midst of the seven gold lampstands" – each letter connects back to the opening vision of Christ. Why? The same YHWH that stands before John is the YHWH that is addressing each of these congregations. Thus, just as Christ appeared before John, He now appears in these letters before each of these congregations and addresses them. He is present with His church in His Word.
- 2:2-3 – "I know your works" – Christ is not an absentee landlord of the church; He knows what is going on in each of His churches. ὑπομονήν - a frequent word in revelation, meaning "steadfastness, endurance, ability to last, etc." We see here the three basic challenges (pressures) that the church is facing (we will see this in each of the seven churches): 1) false teachers ("those saying themselves to be apostles and are not"); 2) pagan

influence (“that you are not able to bear evil ones”); 3) Jewish harassment (“you bore on account of My Name” – Jews were telling Jewish Christians that they had betrayed their own by following Jesus and that they were denied access to YHWH because they followed Him). “On account of My Name” is a reference to baptism in Revelation (the Divine Name is planted on the Christian at baptism).

- 2:4-5 - μνημόνευε - 2nd person singular present active imperative – “continuously remember!”; μετανόησον - 2nd person singular aorist active imperative – “Repent!” – focus on individual completed action. What is meant by “first love”? The excitement that is felt when conversion takes place dwindles away and leads to lethargy in the Christian life. The congregation started out strong, but had begun to be overcome by the pressures it faced and was dwindling away from the faith. Christ issues a stern warning/rebuke to repent and get back to where they were when they began; to stand firm in the face of the trials that befall them, knowing that He is with them. “If you do not repent, I am coming and will remove your lampstand from its place” – Christ warns of judgment in time (not to be taken in an eschatological sense). In other words, He will simply let them fade away if they will not turn back to Him.
- 2:6-7 – “You hate the works of the Nicolaitans” – we don’t have a lot of information on what this heresy was. We have a reference from Irenaeus about them (“Nicolaitans are the followers of that Nicholas, who was one of the seven ordained to the diaconate by the Apostles. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John as teaching that which is a matter of indifference in the matter of adultery, etc.”). It could be that this referred to some nominal Christians who wanted to mix sexual immorality into the Christian religion (pagan practices). It could have also included eating foods sacrificed to idols. It could also be that the word doesn’t derive itself from any name or sect, but is simply a word play that contrasts with the “one who conquers” (νικῶτι) and means, “the conquered people.” We can see it as relating to Balaam in the OT, which also may be a cryptic word, used to title those who are involved in pagan practices. “Hear what the Spirit is saying . . .” – Even though it is Christ speaking to the churches here, He acknowledges that it is the Spirit speaking to them. Reminiscent of Luke 4 (“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon Me”). Christ and the Spirit are bound to one another. The Spirit only speaks of Christ and when Christ speaks, the Spirit speaks with Him. “To eat from the Tree of Life . . .” – Christ ends with Gospel; a magnificent promise is given to them, which they will understand when they read the end of the Apocalypse, as believers are united with Christ in paradise in the New Jerusalem and will have access to the Tree of Life, etc.

Rev. 2:8-11 (Letter to the Church in Smyrna)

- 2:8-9 – “I know your affliction and poverty” – there were repercussions for being Christians; Christians suffered economically as well, for they were not welcomed in the marketplace, etc. “But you are rich” – their reality in Christ makes them rich beyond imagination (spiritual reality, not physical reality). “The blasphemy of those saying themselves to be Jews and are not” – The blasphemy of the Jews was that they were telling Christians that they had no access to the true God of Israel, when, in fact, it was vice versa. Their blasphemy was their denial of the Christ; of the Triune God. Because of their denial of Christ, they were not a synagogue of God, but “a synagogue of Satan.” Satan is the father of lies and they believed his lie about Jesus, i.e., that He was not the Christ. The unbelieving Jews are not YHWH’s people, but Satan’s people. This is a strong statement from Christ

and tells us most emphatically that Jews do not believe in the same God, as many people (even some in our own Synod) believe today. True Jews, or rather True Israelites, are those who believe in the Triune God and have faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world, who died on the cross for the sins of the world, and rose again. The fact that Jews and Muslims have a monotheistic faith does not somehow link them with Christians. They do not accept Christ and have therefore shut themselves off from salvation (blasphemy of the Holy Spirit).

- 2:10-11 – The devil is the one attacking them (“the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, etc.”), but the suffering will be limited by God (“ten days” – not literal, but symbolic indicating that there is a certain amount of time for this suffering, which is in God’s hands). “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life” – Don’t back down, confess Christ, and even if you shall be put to physical death, you shall surely live eternally as a king. οὐ μὴ + the subjunctive = emphatic denial (“surely not”). “The one conquering shall surely not be harmed by the second death” – the second death is the lake of fire (eternal suffering and torment). Thus, Christ’s glorious promise to those who remain faithful is that they do not have to fear judgment; that they do not have to fear eternal damnation (eternal separation from God’s presence), being cast into the lake of fire.
- *Note: The “first death” is experienced by all people when they are conceived and born in sin. All human beings come into this world “dead in sin.” The “first resurrection” is conversion, which is experienced by all believers when they are brought to faith in Christ and made alive. The “second resurrection” is the bodily resurrection that will occur on the Last Day. All people, believers and unbelievers will experience the “second resurrection.” The “second death” is the eternal death that will be experienced by unbelievers in “the lake of fire.” More will be said on this when we get to chapter 20 of Revelation.*

Rev. 2:12-17 (Letter to the Church in Pergamum)

- 2:12-13 – “Where the throne of Satan is” – Probably refers to the throne of Zeus that was located in Pergamum at that time. It “*indicates the source of the sufferings that the church of Pergamum was undergoing. The suffering may have been ridicule and hostility from a pagan society dominated by pagan rituals and emperor worship. Or it may have been persecution resulting from their steadfastness in their faith. Behind every form of opposition was Satan, the devil. Satan had seemingly focused his warfare on the church in Pergamum with a single-minded intensity. The critical feature of this letter’s introduction, then, is that the Lord Christ, the Lord of the church, knows of their dangerous situation and cares for them as their avenger who will judge their adversaries*” (Brighton, 77). “Antipas, My faithful witness, was killed” – Probably refers to a notable member of the community, who was killed for his faith. The church remained faithful in light of this tragic incident, which the Lord commends.
- 2:14-15 – Here, Christ points out that there are a few things that need fixing in the church, namely that the church has some in it who hold “to the teaching of Balaam” and “to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” If the church does not take care of these heretical members, she is in danger of allowing their false teachings to influence the church on a wider scale. The sins of those holding to the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans involved eating meats sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. “*The sin and teaching of Balaam was the attempt to serve two masters, God and mammon (human honors and material wealth, Matt. 6:24)*” (Brighton, 77).
- *Note: Christians should take notice of Christ’s strong warnings against allowing false teachings into their midst. During His earthly ministry, He warned His disciples to “be on*

guard against the yeast of the Pharisees” and “to watch out for false prophets” (see Matt. 16 and 24). St. Paul speaks on behalf of Christ warning the churches in Corinth and Galatia to steer clear of false teachings for “a little yeast ruins the whole batch” (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). We should take note of this especially today when false teachers and their false teachings run rampant in the church. We are to steer clear of them and cling to what is in accord with sound doctrine.

- 2:16-17 – Christ calls them to repentance and promises those who repent the precious means of grace for forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. Through these means, they will be sustained in the true faith. “Hidden manna” is a reference to the Lord’s Supper and “a new name” is a reference to baptism. Thus, the Holy Sacraments the Lord instituted will be the means by which these Christians (and all Christians, for that matter) are brought to and kept in the faith.

Rev. 2:18-29 (Letter to the Church in Thyatira)

- 2:18-21 – *“The Lord knows and acknowledges the works of his church, in particular its faithful service and patience. He knows also that the believers are increasing and growing in faith and Christian service (“last works greater than first”). But all their faith, steadfastness, and service will be of no avail unless they realize the grave sin in their midst: the woman of sin within the congregation, Jezebel . . . Jezebel stands for and represents the sin of syncretism, a universalistic belief that all religions are of value and are able to be of benefit before God” (Brighton, 83).* The false teachings of Jezebel led some in the church to idolatrous practices (eating meats sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality). In doing so, it was thought by these heretics that they were doing nothing wrong, for God honors all forms of religious expression, i.e., Christianity can be mixed with pagan practices. The Lord sternly teaches otherwise! “And I gave her a time that she might repent” – The Lord desires that all people come to repentance and be turned back to faith. However, those who do not repent will receive His judgment now and eternally. In this case, she does not desire to repent, even though the Lord has patiently waited for her to do so. Thus, she will be judged.
- 2:22-23 – The judgment of Jezebel is described as being “thrown into a sickbed and into great tribulation.” This will affect all those who follow her false teachings and will infect their children. The Lord’s judgment is stern for those who will not repent. It is also perfectly just, for He is the “I AM who knows and searches minds and hearts.”
- 2:24-25 – “this teaching . . . the depths of Satan, etc.” – shows that an incipient gnosticism was already present at this time, and that this teaching was from Satan. Jesus knows that this false teaching exists and is telling them that He is the Truth and that He will be with those who remain faithful to Him, not allowing themselves to be swayed by Satan’s lies. Jesus interprets the reality of this false teaching theologically (something that is done throughout the book of Revelation). In Revelation, we learn a lot about Satan. We learn that as powerful as he is, he is always under the control of God; always kept in check, unable to do what God will not allow him to do. Satan is just a created angel, under the dominion of the Triune God. Some people like to interpret Revelation as pitting Christ against Satan, as some sort of battle that both must fight with all their might to try to win. Not so! Christ is the Creator, He is in full control, Satan has zero chance of facing off with Christ. The reality is that Satan is permitted to remain in this world and to influence non-believers, and even to attack God’s people, only until Christ returns. The ending is already known – Satan will be cast into the lake of fire for eternity on the Last Day. “Hold on to

what you have until I shall come” – Stay firm in the faith and I will rescue you. Don’t turn away and follow Satan’s lies (gnosticism).

- 2:26-29 – “And the one who conquers . . . I will give authority over the nations . . . rule by means of an iron rod as the ceramic pots are broken in pieces” – A reference to the rule of the Messiah as prophesied in Isaiah. The point here is that Christians will rule together with Christ. “I will give to him the Morning Star” – Christ is the Morning Star and He will give them Himself, so that just as He sits on the throne, so will all believers. Another amazing promise Christ makes to the faithful – a reference to the Mystical Union of believers – the fact that believers are united with the Triune God and will rule with Christ would have been extremely significant for 1st century Jews. Of course, we don’t sit on the throne as if we are God, but we sit there because we are incorporated into God through our faith in Christ.