

The Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia (2:1-3:22)

Introduction

- The messages emphasize different things, but they all exhibit a remarkably consistent structure. Each message consists of six parts. We'll learn about those parts while looking at the message addressed to the church at Ephesus (2:1-7).

The Structure of the Messages/The Message to the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

- The first structural element is the **Addressee**. Each of the seven messages is addressed to the “angel” of a particular church—in this case, “the church of Ephesus” (v. 1).
 - It’s possible to understand this “angel” in the normal sense of the word—a spirit being. However, outside of Revelation 2-3, no New Testament text refers to an angel associated with a particular church.
 - Since the Greek word translated “angel” can also be used in the more generic sense of “messenger,” some understand the “angel” to be a human—perhaps a pastor—who would receive the message John wrote and convey it to the church.
 - In any case, the message given to each church’s “angel” is clearly intended for the benefit of the congregation—not merely something revealed to a spirit being (Gregg 61-62; Johnson, notes on 1:20).
- The second structural element is the **Speaker’s Identity & Authority**.
 - The speaker in each of the messages is Jesus Christ. (John is merely the channel through which the communication is given.)
 - Christ doesn’t identify himself by name in any of the seven messages, but once he labels himself as “the Son of God” (2:18). For the most part, though, he identifies himself through descriptions that point back to the initial vision that John reported in chapter 1. In that vision Christ had seven stars in his hand, and he was walking among the seven lampstands (1:12ff).
 - The language emphasizes Christ’s absolute authority—over the church, creation, death, history, and eternity.
- In verse 2 we get to the third structural element: **Knowledge-Based Assessment**. The assessment is one of the two most important elements of each message, at least as measured by word count. Basically, this means that the message is like a report card that evaluates the church, and that Christ performs the evaluation from the vantage point of absolute knowledge.

- Each of the seven messages emphasizes Christ’s knowledge—of the church’s failures, accomplishments, and/or special circumstances.
- The assessment continues through verse 6, skipping verse 5. Notice that Christ recognizes the church at Ephesus for its good works. It had remained diligent over time, and had resisted the influence of false teachers (vv. 2-3, 6).
- But all is not well in Ephesus. Though the church had remained pure, it had lost its passion. Notice the change of tone in verse 4: “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.” Other versions of the Bible translate this as leaving “the love you had at first” (ESV, NRSV).
- The text doesn’t make clear what love the Ephesian Christians had lost—love for God or love for another. Commentators are divided on this matter (Johnson, notes on 2:4). But for John, the distinction between the two loves is irrelevant:
 - “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21).
- As a fact-based evaluator, Christ has pointed out the good and the bad.
- This brings us to the fourth structural element: **Encouragement and/or Warning** (v. 5). In some of the messages this is the element that gets the most attention, but here it’s just one verse long.
 - The tone that Christ takes in this section depends on the nature of the evaluation that he has offered. Regardless of whether Christ comes with an encouragement or a warning, he always issues a call for action in the form of verbs. Here in the message to Ephesus, the verbs are *remember*, *repent*, and *do*.
 - Warnings may be issued to those who are properly a part of the church or to outsiders who are troubling it.
 - Christ warns the church that if it fails to repent, he will remove their candlestick. In other words, they will cease to be “his representatives in the world” (Johnson, notes on 2:5). [Have technicians dim the auditorium lights at this point.]
- The final two structural elements can appear in either order. The **Promise of Reward for Conquerors** usually appears next to last, but in this message it appears at the end (v. 7b).
 - Though brief, this portion of the message is really important. Unlike the previous two segments, this element conveys essentially the same thought to each church.
 - Across all seven messages, the promise of reward assures those who conquer that they’ll inherit certain future rewards. The rewards refer to the good

things that happen to righteous people toward the end of Revelation (chaps. 20-22). In short, conquerors ...

- reign with Christ in the thousand-year kingdom
 - avoid the second death (the lake of fire)
 - are admitted to the New Jerusalem
- Who are the conquerors? Who has the right to reign with Christ, escape judgment by fire, and enjoy God's holy presence forever? John's first epistle provides a good summary of what it means to be an overcomer: "Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:5).
- The last structural element in the seven messages is the **Appeal for Attention**. In the message to the Ephesians, this appears in the first half of verse 7. The appeal is stated exactly the same way in all seven messages: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."
 - The fact that *churches* appears in the plural suggests that these seven messages hold spiritual value for Christian assemblies at all times and in all places. In other words, we're to listen to the Spirit of God witnessing to us as Christ addresses each of the seven first-century churches (Gregg 65).
 - The relative lack of historical detail in the seven messages provides a measure of ambiguity, and thus we must also rely on the Holy Spirit to help us apply the truths found here to our own church's situation (Johnson, notes on 2:1-7).
 - The bottom line of the message to Ephesus is that Christ not only expects his church to keep its teaching pure and serve faithfully; he also expects it to be fervent in love for him and the Christian community.

The Message to the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

The Message to the Church in Pergamos [aka Pergamum] (2:12-17)

- As I mentioned before, there are six structural elements in each of the seven messages. In the remainder of the messages that I cover, I'll just focus on the two central elements, the **Knowledge-Based Assessment** and the **Encouragement and/or Warning**.
- The city in view is Pergamos or Pergamum. In his assessment of the situation there, Christ emphasizes the hostility of the environment. Satan's presence and influence were very much to be felt in Pergamum ("where Satan's throne is"; "where Satan dwells" [v. 13]).

- “This certainly refers to the fact that Pergamum was a center for worship of the pagan gods, especially the emperor cult. . . . Others see the reference to the altar of savior Zeus or the center of worship of Asclepius, the snake god of healing. Pergamum was an idolatrous center; and to declare oneself in that place a Christian who worships the one true God and Savior, Jesus Christ, would certainly provoke hostility” (Johnson, notes on 2:13).
- Opposition was so strong there that a Christian named Antipas had forfeited his life in faithful witness to Christ (v. 13).
- The church remained steadfast through persecution, but it had its problems as well. Christ judged that the Christian community welcomed or tolerated false teachers, who are described as holding “the doctrine of Balaam” (v. 14).
 - This is an allusion to an Old Testament story that is most memorable because of the unusual behavior of a donkey. The group of people who were compared to Balaam is probably the same as the Nicolaitans mentioned in verse 15.
 - Under Balaam’s influence, Israel engaged in idolatry and immorality (Num. 25:1ff; 31:16). Balaam’s name thus came to symbolize false prophets who lead God’s people astray (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11). Therefore, Christ is rebuking the church for its tolerance of those who propagated infidelity—spiritual and moral—within the assembly.
 - “Israel was led to worship idols and commit immorality as a result of [Balaam’s] deceitful counsel, and the church was being led in the same direction by the Nicolaitans. Balaam became proverbial for the false teacher who for financial gain influences believers to enter into relationships of compromising unfaithfulness” (Beale and McDonough 1094).
- Not surprisingly, the church received a warning, and the call to action is a call to repent (v. 16).
 - “The speaker’s command includes both a call to the whole congregation to repent and a special threat to the heretical members if they do not repent” (Johnson, notes on 2:16).
 - “Though the whole church is called upon to repent, it is only the offenders against whom Jesus threatens to fight . . .” (Gregg 69).
- The bottom line of the message to Pergamum is that it’s easy for a church to be polluted by false teaching—to somehow tolerate spiritual or moral error, perhaps because they’re wearing some disguise.

The Message to the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

The Message to the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

- The **Knowledge-Based Assessment** in the message to Sardis is almost entirely negative, and Christ's summary judgment is telling: The church had a reputation for being alive, but in reality it was dead (v. 1). Only a small number of people within the church community had kept themselves pure in the pagan environment where they lived (v. 4). As a whole, the church had failed to exhibit the full range of good works that would give evidence of a genuine relationship with Christ (v. 2).
 - “Though this could refer to incompleteness in the number of their deeds, more likely it describes the quality of their deeds—they do not measure up to the standard Christ sets. In the other letters, works acceptable to Christ are love, faithfulness, perseverance, keeping Christ's words, and not denying his name” (Johnson, notes on 3:2).
 - “Tragically, this is one of the two churches (Laodicea being the other) which receive no commendation from the Lord. The only thing good about the church as a whole (not considering the remnant of overcomers, vv. 4-5) was its reputation. The church had a name that it was alive, but in this respect was greatly overrated Once a church has a good reputation in the public eye, it is possible to mechanically continue in the same activities but lose the original motivation that made it great” (Gregg 73).
- The application section of the message to Sardis consists mostly of a **Warning**, but it also includes an **Encouragement** to that small number who actually had remained faithful.
 - The faithful were assured with the following words: “they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy” (v. 4).
 - The majority of the church is called to action with five verbs: *be watchful*, *strengthen*, *remember*, *hold fast*, and *repent* (vv. 2-3).
 - Revival was to be found in returning to what the church had “received and heard” (v. 3). The truth that it possessed but had failed to guard was the key to being reawakened and avoiding judgment.

The Message to the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

The Message to the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

- The **Knowledge-Based Assessment** in the message to Laodicea contains nothing positive. The church is “lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot” (v. 15). The church is satisfied with the way things are, but its complacency is disgusting to Christ: “I will spue thee out of my mouth” (v. 16).
 - We may be inclined to think that heat represents spiritual fervor, while cold denotes spiritual apathy, but the text doesn’t say that. Hot and cold represent two good extremes (imagine hot coffee and a root beer float). Just as a lukewarm drink is unappetizing, so the Laodiceans’ self-satisfaction is sickening to Christ (Johnson, notes on 3:15-16; Mounce 109).
 - The imagery of hot, cold, and lukewarm water is probably based on the springs that supplied water to Laodicea and other towns in the area.
 - “The city’s water supply originated from hot springs six miles away at Denizli. In the process of traveling through the aqueduct to Laodicea, the water became tepid—neither hot nor cold” (Gregg 78).
 - “‘Cold’ could refer to the useful cool water located at Colosse, less than ten miles away. ‘Hot’ would remind the Laodiceans of the beneficial ‘hot springs’ to the north of Hierapolis. Yet Laodicea, for all its wealth, had an insipid water supply—one that induced vomiting!” (Johnson, notes on 3:15-16).
- Laodicea was a prosperous city. It was known for its wool clothing, its banks, and its medical school (Mounce 107; Gregg 79). Not surprisingly, its prosperity led to complacency, even within the church.
 - We’ve already noted the **Warning**—that Christ would spew them out. Outwardly, they were well-to-do, but Christ saw that their hearts were “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (v. 17).
 - “The spirit of the surrounding culture had crept into the congregation and had paralyzed their spiritual life. . . . [T]he Laodiceans may have interpreted their material wealth as a blessing from God and thus have been self-deceived as to their true spiritual state. In any case, they had misread their true condition” (Johnson, notes on 3:17).
 - The **Encouragement** was that all hope was not lost. Christ called the Laodiceans to “buy” what was truly valuable from him—pure gold, white clothing, and eye ointment (v. 18). Verse 19 makes clear that this act of purchasing had to begin with an act of repentance.

- In verse 20, right before the two concluding elements, we find a striking image. Christ portrays himself knocking at the door, seeking to enter and enjoy a meal with the Laodiceans.
 - “Verse 20 is a tragic picture—Christ must humbly seek entrance into the church he purchased with his own blood. Even though the church as a whole might be indifferent to him, individuals may respond and experience intimate fellowship with him, pictured here as a meal” (Elwell, “Revelation” 1207).
- Some commentators (e.g., Johnson, notes on 3:20) believe that this image portrays the state of those who associated with the Christian community and thought themselves to be saved, but had no genuine relationship with Christ. Others (e.g., Mounce 106, 113) take the imagery as a reference to true believers who have lost intimate fellowship with Christ. In either case, the situation is pathetic, and can only be resolved through repentance and humility.