

## *So which one are you? Letters to the seven churches*

‘To the angel of the church in Ephesus write’: The ‘letters to the seven churches’ – a series of messages found in chapters 2 and 3 – can feel like an entirely separate section of Revelation. In what is often thought a pretty weird book, this unit contains some of the least weird writing. Unlike the vision of the heavenly Christ in chapter 1 (and much of the rest of Revelation), the setting of chapters 2-3 is on earth.<sup>1</sup> They are messages written to seven particular churches in particular locations, and those who read them today frequently start to make comparisons with their own church – hence the title of this paper ‘so which one are you?’ Readers have sometimes wondered how these chapters connect with the rest of the book.

Revelation as a whole is addressed ‘John to the seven churches that are in Asia’ (1:4, NRSV), calling them to faithful Christian discipleship and a life that is grounded in the vision of God. The ‘seven letters’ are about the present situation of those individual churches. One popular misunderstanding of this section is the view that the seven churches depict seven eras of church history from the early, apostolic, period right up till the present. One example of this is to see Ephesus as the apostolic age, Smyrna as the persecuted church (up to 312), Thyatira as the worldly mediaeval church, Laodicea as the modern church (since 1900), and so on, considering these messages as essentially predictive. There are a number of problems with this approach, and it is well to get them out of the way right at the beginning.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, there is no hint in Revelation of any interest in or knowledge of specific ‘eras’ of the church: what is addressed in chapters 2-3 are real first century churches with real first century problems. Moreover, this sort of schema – especially when dates are attached to the eras (and a variety of dates have been used over the years) – is a classic instance of an interpretation of church history reflecting the biases of the interpreters, often very conservative (largely fundamentalist) American or European Protestants with an anti-Catholic mind-set. Leaving such speculation aside, let us consider what these letters were saying to the churches of their time, before asking what they might be saying to us in our own time.

They are referred to as the ‘letters to the seven churches’, but they are in fact not really ‘letters’ at all. Though they begin with the name of the intended recipient and the sender, they are better characterised as prophetic oracles, or perhaps pastoral-prophetic messages. There are parallels with Old Testament oracles of judgment against the nations (eg Amos 1:3-2:16)<sup>3</sup> and with imperial edicts. Such edicts were public proclamations of laws or policies enacted by the emperor or another authoritative ruler.<sup>4</sup> In Revelation 2-3 Jesus speaks as a royal figure, through John to the churches. They are oracles because they speak God’s words, which must be heard and obeyed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 29.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation responsibly: uncivil worship and witness: Following the Lamb into the new creation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2011), 84-86.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell G Reddish, *Revelation*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 52.

<sup>4</sup> David E Aune, ‘Revelation’ in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, General Editor James L Mays (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), 1300-1319, at 1305.

## Structural pattern

Each of the messages follows a broadly similar structural pattern.

- Identification of the recipient: a command to John to write to the angel of that church
- Description of Christ, drawn largely from the opening vision
- Commendation – words of praise for the church, introduced by ‘I know’
- Condemnation – words of censure for the church’s failures
- Challenge – an exhortation to remain faithful
- Invitation to hear the Spirit
- Promise to the one who is faithful, related to the closing visions, chapters 20-22

## Address to the angel:

The message of each letter is directed to the ‘angel’ of that particular church. The term could refer to a local church leader (perhaps the bishop of that church), or to a messenger generally, but most commentators take the view that the ‘angel’ is the spiritual guardian angel of that church. This tallies with the way the word is used elsewhere in Revelation, and also with the strong connections in the book between earthly events and the action in heaven which initiates them.<sup>5</sup> As Eugene Boring noted, ‘The church is more than a human “worthy cause”; it participates in the reality of the eternal world.’<sup>6</sup> That’s something we do well to remember about our own congregations.

## Description of Christ

The Book of Revelation opens with a vision of Christ ‘like the Son of Man’ standing in the midst of the seven lampstands. The message to each of the seven churches, as a message from Christ, is introduced by a reference back to a part of that opening vision.<sup>7</sup> Thus the message to Pergamum begins ‘These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword’ (2:12, see 1:16), to Thyatira: ‘These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze’ (2:18, see 1:14-15). The descriptions serve to connect the ‘seven letters’ section to what has preceded it, but it is more than this. It reminds John’s readers – both the original audience and we who read it today – that apart from Christ the church does not exist. Without the connection to Christ each of these churches would have a location but not an identity. ‘There is no church apart from Christ. Elements from the Christ vision in Revelation 1 define the church communities in Revelation 2 and 3.’<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the ethical instructions and warnings in the messages do not

---

<sup>5</sup> See Pheme Perkins, ‘Revelation’, in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, General Editors Dianne Bergant & Robert J Karris (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 1265-1300, at 1273., Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> M Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 86.

<sup>7</sup> The exception is Philadelphia, which looks back to Isaiah 22:22-25.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene H Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: the Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 46.

stand alone: they are grounded on the truth of the Christological vision of 1:9-20, that the crucified one is the exalted Lord of all.<sup>9</sup>

### **Commendation and Condemnation**

The body of the message contains the commendation and condemnation, the praise and/or blame appropriate to each of the churches. Only Smyrna and Philadelphia receive unqualified praise with no criticism, only Laodicea has nothing to be commended. The opening words to each of the churches, 'I know', shows that Christ knows the special circumstances of that church, knows what is going on in that particular congregation. The message relates to what is happening in that city and that church, economically, culturally, politically: to the social situation outside the congregation and the religious situation within it.<sup>10</sup> We should remember that Christ also knows what is going on in our own particular congregations.

### **Challenge – and promise**

Each of the churches is challenged to remain faithful in the face of a particular situation. Sometimes this is accompanied by a warning of the consequences of not remaining faithful: the church's lampstand will be removed (Ephesus, 2:5), Christ will make war on them with the sword of his mouth (Thyatira, 2:16). The motivating promise, eternal life, is the same for each church, but is expressed by a variety of images (tree of life, crown of life, white stone, and so on). This reward is given to those who do remain faithful until the end, that is, to the Christians who 'conquer'. 'Conquering' – winning the victory – is a key concept in Revelation, both in its Christology and in its understanding of the Christian life. Just as Jesus conquered (3:21), the life of the faithful Christian is about conquering: 'those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.' (21:7) Just as the Christological affirmation at the start of each message looks back to the vision of chapter 1, so the promise looks ahead to the glory of the final vision in chapters 20-22. The messages to the seven churches are thus integrally linked to the rest of Revelation.

### **Invitation to hear the Spirit**

The call to hear – in the sense not just of hearing alone but of obeying what is said – is incorporated into the closing words of each message. 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.' This is a call to heed the prophetic message which comes from God and from Christ: the prophetic Spirit's message consists of words of the risen Christ.<sup>11</sup> The individual messages may vary between the different churches, but the call to hear is common to them all. 'Whatever differences there are between the churches, two things are constant: the Spirit speaks, the people listen.'<sup>12</sup> All churches are to be places and

---

<sup>9</sup> Boring, *Revelation*, 88.

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 50-51.

<sup>11</sup> Charles H Talbert, *The Apocalypse: a reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 47.

communities where people are actively paying attention to the divine voice: ‘Churches are listening posts.’<sup>13</sup> How well are our congregations listening today?

Eugene Peterson discusses the messages to the churches under the headings of affirmation, correction or discipline, and motivating promise: three substantive elements of spiritual direction. He believes that no Christian community can do without any of these parts: ‘we need affirmation, we need correction, we need motivation.’<sup>14</sup>

### **The individual messages**

**Ephesus (2:1-7)** Ephesus was the principal city of Asia Minor, with a population of approx. 250,000, an important commercial and cultural centre. It contained a major temple to Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and a temple devoted to the emperor. It was also a significant Christian centre, part of the Pauline mission to Asia Minor. The Ephesians are praised for their labour and for their patient endurance, and for their resistance to false teachers, the Nicolaitans.<sup>15</sup> They are criticised for abandoning ‘the love you had at first’ (2:5): their zeal for orthodoxy had led them to forget that their primary obligation as Christians was to act in love to one another. They had become like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son – so consumed with being right and obedient that they had lost proper perspective and become hypercritical, their love and joy vanished.<sup>16</sup> They are called to repent and recover the spirit of love that they once had.

**Smyrna (2:8-11)** Smyrna (modern Izmir) was a prosperous port city, the centre of a thriving imperial cult. The city was famous for its loyalty to Rome and its ritual worship of the emperor. The message to Smyrna is the shortest of all the ‘letters’ and contains no condemnation, only praise, warning and encouragement. Although the city was wealthy the Christian community there was a poor one – perhaps due to their refusal to take part in worship of the emperor; nonetheless they were spiritually rich. The main challenge for this community was slanders spread by some of the Jewish inhabitants of the city, who were perhaps denouncing the Christians to the authorities as non-Jews, thus making them vulnerable to persecution. They are called not to fear the approaching suffering but remain faithful even until death; in return they will not be harmed by the ‘second death’, condemnation at the final judgement.

**Pergamum (2:12-17)** Pergamum was renowned for its library, its huge altar to Zeus and a temple of the imperial cult. The Christians are located ‘where Satan’s throne is’ (2:13), which could refer to the altar of Zeus, to Pergamum as the centre of imperial worship and of Roman government in the province, to the temple of Asclepius (the god of healing, whose symbol was a snake) or to the many pagan temples situated on the acropolis. The Christian community was experiencing persecution, but were remaining steadfast and not denying their

---

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Peterson, *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> One particular group of false teachers was the ‘Nicolaitans’ (2:6, see also 2:15, Pergamum). The origin of this name is uncertain (see Reddish, *Revelation*, 61), but the group are sometimes thought to be Gnostics (see Aune, ‘Revelation’ 1307).

<sup>16</sup> Reddish, *Revelation*, 54.

faith. One of their number, Antipas – the only named victim of persecution in Revelation – is called ‘my witness, my faithful one’(2:13), a description modelled on that of Christ (1:5, 3:14). As well as the external threat of persecution, which the community was resisting, there was also an internal threat: the toleration of false teachers (the Nicolaitans again) who were allowing the eating of meat sacrificed to idols.<sup>17</sup> The danger here is that of accommodation to the prevailing culture. Those who conquer will receive a white stone, in the ancient world perhaps an amulet or a mark of membership in a particular group.

**Thyatira (2:18-29)** Thyatira, the native city of Lydia (Acts 16:14), was known for its many trade guilds. It is commended because its more recent works are greater than the earlier ones: its spiritual condition is improving, the congregation is maturing. Nevertheless there is toleration of a false prophet and teacher, a woman symbolically called ‘Jezebel’ (see 1 and 2 Kings, a promoter of Baal worship and in opposition to God’s prophets). Again the charge involves the compromising of Christian commitment by eating food sacrificed to idols. This problem would be acute in a place like Thyatira with so many trade guilds, often associated with particular deities, and where membership involved attendance at feasts where meat that had been ritually offered to other gods was served. Not to attend could be economic suicide.<sup>18</sup> Those who continue to resist will share in Christ’s messianic rule over the nations.

**Sardis (3:1-6)** Sardis was a busy commercial and industrial city, which had been rebuilt after an earthquake in 17 CE and was then a flourishing centre of the wool trade (perhaps echoed in the reference to the Christian victors being clothed in white). The church there is told to ‘wake up’ (3:2) – a reference to the fact of the city twice having been taken in a sneak attack through the negligence of its defenders; if they do not change, Christ will come ‘like a thief’ (3:3).<sup>19</sup> As Talbert notes, ‘The people of Sardis have always had trouble remaining awake in the midst of danger.’<sup>20</sup> The problem is that the church is so comatose as to be spiritually dead, Christians in name only: the word ‘name’ appears four times in this message, emphasising that the issue is one of nominal Christianity. The promise is that those who conquer will not have their names erased from the book of life, the registry (like the civic registries of ancient cities) of those who belong to the people of God.

**Philadelphia (3:7-13)** Philadelphia was a small city in an earthquake-prone area. Like Sardis it been rebuilt after the severe earthquake of 17 CE with the aid of an imperial subsidy. The Christian community had little power but had remained faithful: this message contains no condemnation. Drawing on Old Testament prophecy such as Isaiah 22:22-25 (which refers to the key and the open door), Christ declares ‘I have set before you an open door’ (3:8): in Christian understanding a ‘door’ was an opportunity for spreading the gospel. Metzger notes ‘The church, though small, had a great missionary task to perform.’<sup>21</sup> Remember that, small

---

<sup>17</sup> The reference to practising fornication (2:14) is probably metaphorical, drawing on the common use of sexual imagery to describe religious unfaithfulness and idolatry. See Reddish, *Revelation*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Reddish, *Revelation*, 64; Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> This is not a reference to the parousia, to Christ’s Second Coming (which will happen whether the community is watchful or not), but to a coming in judgment on the unrepentant during the present situation. See Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 39, Reddish, *Revelation*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Talbert *The Apocalypse*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 41.

parishes! The challenge facing this community appeared to have come from the Jewish population of the city: the Philadelphia church would not be spared from testing, but it will be kept in (not 'from') the hour of trial. Reference to the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven anticipates the more detailed description in chapters 21-22, another link between the 'seven letters' unit and the rest of the book.

**Laodicea (3:14-22)** Laodicea (also in the earthquake belt) was famous for its banking industry, its textile production and its medical school specialising in eye diseases, with its eye salve a major export. All of these aspects are echoed in the message to this community. The church receives the severest condemnation, being accused of being neither hot nor cold but merely lukewarm. The water supply of the surrounding region is relevant here: nearby were the hot springs of Hierapolis, valued for their medicinal benefits and the cold streams of Colossae, famous for their purity. At Laodicea however the water was lukewarm and barely drinkable. The issue for this community was their misguided sense of wealth and self-sufficiency: they needed to realise the extent of their spiritual poverty and obtain from Christ gifts that can't be purchased with mere money. But in spite of the failures of this community and the condemnation it merits these are still people whom Christ loves. 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.' (3:20) Christ's knock on the door (remember, in the Holman Hunt masterpiece *The Light of the World* the only handle is on the inside) is an illustration of grace and free will. So often used in respect of individuals, this is actually about the community inviting Christ into its corporate life.<sup>22</sup>

### **So why seven letters?**

Having looked at all the 'letters' we are at the point of asking ourselves (if we haven't been doing that all the way through) the question posed in the title of this paper 'so which one are you?' We can read them and try to work out 'which one is our parish?' But that's not the right way to approach these messages, and I say that because of another question that may be floating around in our minds at this point: why seven letters, and why those seven specifically? After all, we know there were many other communities of Christians in Asia Minor at that time which are not so addressed – Colossae, for example. Why were no messages written to them?

It is unlikely that John was aware of just these seven churches, so something else is going on here. Seven is a special number, in Revelation as in the rest of the Bible. Seven means complete, all-inclusive. These seven summarise all churches, and so the messages are addressed to the Church as a whole. We can discern this in the call to hear which is part of the closing words of each message. 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches': to the 'churches' plural, not just to the particular community being addressed in that message. Metzger considers that by singling out just these seven churches, John is suggesting that the messages are intended for all churches, wherever they are located. He goes on to say 'The message to each church is at the same time a message to all

---

<sup>22</sup> Gorman, *Reading Revelation responsibly*, 96.

churches.’<sup>23</sup> Peterson goes further, and speaks perhaps into our tendency to look for our own congregations in these messages, to look for a one-to-one correspondence between one of the seven communities addressed in Revelation and any one community familiar to us: ‘No single congregation exhibits the wholeness of Christ.’<sup>24</sup>

### **Common issues**

Having now looked briefly at the seven messages to the seven particular churches addressed in Revelation we now have a better idea of the common issues facing these communities. Because of their faith they were subject to external pressures from the surrounding pagan society and from Jews, and they also faced internal problems because of false teachers (false apostles, Nicolaitans, those who hold the teachings of Balaam, Jezebel). These various false teachers were connected with the issue of eating food offered to idols, that is to accommodation to the pagan culture amongst which they lived<sup>25</sup>. The churches also faced spiritual dangers: lethargy, complacency, nominalism, a lack of love within the community.

These communities all faced difficulties: the Christian life was not then – as it is not now – a walk in the park. But the ‘letters’ do not portray the churches as universally poverty-stricken (only one church, Smyrna, is depicted as poor) or as universally persecuted. Only one church, Pergamum, has a martyr, and while others (notably Smyrna and Philadelphia) faced hostility there was no pervasive state-sponsored persecution at that present time. The big difficulty, the greatest danger, was that of accommodation to the larger pagan society. ‘The churches are in danger of losing their Christian identity.’<sup>26</sup>

### **So where do we come in?**

The Christians of Asia Minor, in these communities and in all the others, were struggling with the issue of holding onto and living out their Christian faith in the midst of the political, economic and social situations in which they found themselves. So much of Revelation seems to be concerned with the future, even the distant future: this section of the book was anchored to the everyday realities of the lives of real Christians in real communities.

Here are men and women asking, “To what extent can we be involved in our society and still maintain our commitment to Christ? Can we join with our neighbors in the public feasts and celebrations? Can we belong to the civic clubs and the professional organizations that sometimes have practices that we find unacceptable? What if our jobs and even our lives are at risk if we do not participate?”<sup>27</sup>

That’s not so different from us, is it? Because the extent to which Christians should live amongst our fellow-citizens with lives that look different from the lives that surround them is one that we also grapple with. As Metzger puts it, ‘Every generation of Christians must face

---

<sup>23</sup> Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 43. See also *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Talbert, *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Reddish, *Revelation*, 66.

the question: How far should I accept and adopt contemporary standards and practices?’<sup>28</sup> The danger of accommodation is one that concerns us, in our day, just as much as it affected those in Pergamum, Thyatira, Laodicea and the others. Reading the messages to the seven churches, as Peterson notes, trains God’s people ‘to live a life of confident faith in Christ in a hostile environment.’<sup>29</sup> Revelation functions as an ‘antidote to assimilation’, to the temptation for Christians to live no differently from others in an alien culture.<sup>30</sup>

So reading these chapters of Revelation challenges us about how we live in our society. I also find it oddly comforting. Because if you strip away the references to Jezebel, the Nicolatans and much of the imagery, this is a picture of church as we know it. Mixed. Full of individuals and communities which sometimes get it right and sometimes get it very wrong. Reading these messages reminds us that ‘church’ (as Peterson notes) ‘is not a spiritual aristocracy but simply a geographically identified assembly of ordinary believers.’<sup>31</sup> Churches today are not really any better or worse than any of the seven congregations to which John addressed these messages, or to any of the other New Testament communities. ‘No church ever existed in a pure state. The church is made up of sinners. The fleas come with the dog.’<sup>32</sup> This is good news indeed, because it can stop us idealising the church, either in the apostolic age or in our own – and then we will be free to get on and live worshipping, believing, praying and above all, different lives in the middle of our own society. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

**Deborah Broome**

**October 2011**

### **Questions for discussion**

What do you think is the greatest danger facing the church today?

Where do Christian communities face pressures to assimilate to the rest of society?

Internal or external threats to Christian communities: which ones have you noticed, and which would you address first?

---

<sup>28</sup> Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, 111.

<sup>31</sup> Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Peterson, *ibid.*, 51.

## REFERENCES

- Aune, David E. 'Revelation' in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, 1300-1319. General Editor James L Mays. San Francisco: HarperCollins. 1988.
- Boring, M Eugene. *Revelation*. Interpretation Commentary. Louisville: John Knox Press. 1989.
- Gorman, Michael J. *Reading Revelation responsibly: uncivil worship and witness: Following the Lamb into the new creation*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade. 2011.
- Metzger, Bruce M. *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*. Nashville: Abingdon. 1993.
- Perkins, Pheme. 'Revelation', in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*. 1265-1300. General Editors Dianne Bergant & Robert J Karris. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press. 1989.
- Peterson, Eugene H *Reversed Thunder: the Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 1991.
- Reddish, Mitchell G. *Revelation*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys. 2001.
- Talbert, Charles H. *The Apocalypse: a reading of the Revelation of John*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. 1994.