Christ Among the Churches Part I
Revelation 2:1-11

*The addressing of seven churches of Asia Minor...* The seven letters of the book of Revelation are the most important letters because they are authored specifically by Jesus (Revelation 1:11).

What we know about these seven churches is:

The letters were *personal*... They were actual historical churches with vital needs.

The letters were *prevalent*... In each letter appears the key phrase: “Hear what the Spirit says to the churches”; note the plural of church; each letter applies to all churches.

The letters were *practical*... Each letter contains the phrase: “He that hath an ear, let him hear;” they have application for us today.

The letters were *punishing*... Five of the seven churches had evil mixed with good; only the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia seem to be good churches with no need of rebuke.

The letters were *prophetic*... Some theologians have seen in these letters a remarkable unfolding of church history; in any other order of listing that would not be true.
The ages of church history and the seven churches...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ephesus</td>
<td>“The desired one”</td>
<td>Apostolic age 30-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smyrna</td>
<td>“Myrrh” (Death)</td>
<td>Persecution age 100-312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pergamos</td>
<td>“Mixed marriage”</td>
<td>Accommodation age 312-606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thyatira</td>
<td>“Daughters”</td>
<td>Papacy in Medieval times 606-1517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sardis</td>
<td>“Remnant”</td>
<td>Reformation age 1517-Rapture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>“Brotherly love”</td>
<td>Missionary age 1792-Rapture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laodicea</td>
<td>“People rule”</td>
<td>Apostate age 1900-Rapture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Priority of Love… The Message to Ephesus (2:1-7)

The prominence of Ephesus in history… “To the angel to the church of Ephesus write…” (2:1a); the word “angel” angelos, means messenger; while angels mentioned in Revelation are actual angels, most likely the word “angel” in this context refers to a representative or the pastor of the church.

1. The importance of the city… It was known as “The Metropolis of Asia”; the greatest city of Asia; it was called Lumen Asiae, “The Light of Asia;” its population in the first century was 250,000; the factors that made Ephesus such an important city were: its harbor, all roads north and south, east and west went through Ephesus causing Strabo, the ancient geographer, to refer to Ephesus as “The Market of Asia;” it was also the gateway to Asia for all Roman dignitaries; when they came to take office in Asia they would first disembark at Ephesus; it was also the wealthiest city of Asia and has been aptly called “The Vanity Fair of the Ancient World.”

Ephesus was also a “free city”; this means they could govern themselves without Roman interference; it was a special honor bestowed upon certain cities in the empire because of their loyalty to Rome; it was exempt from ever having Roman troops stationed or garrisoned there.

2. The idolatry of the city… Ephesus was the center for the worship of Artemis, the Greek name, also known to the Romans as Diana of the Ephesians; Artemis is a male name and Diana is female; in Greek mystery religions male/female identity was switched all the time as Satan always seeks to confuse sexual identity; this temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; the image of the male Artemis was one of the most sacred images of its time; it was by no means beautiful; it was a squat, black, many-breasted figure giving both a male/female identity; the temple was made of Persian marble, 425 feet long (about a block and half), 260 feet wide and had 130 columns 60 feet high embellished with gold and jewels; the belief was this
image fell from the sky from the chief god Zeus; Acts 19 tells us how precious this temple was to the Ephesians for as Paul preached he encouraged the people to turn away from gods made by human hands the citizens cried out, “Great is Diana to the Ephesians;” a riot occurred because the silversmith's in town were losing business from making medallions and idols of the goddess Diana; two of Paul's traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus were arrested.

The city was also famous for temples to the godhead of the Roman Emperors; temples to Claudius and Nero existed in the days of John, the apostle and after John's death the city added temples to Hadrian and Severus; in Ephesus pagan religion was at its strongest.

3. The immorality of the city… Ephesus was one of the most corrupt cities of the ancient world; Heraclitus, known as “the weeping philosopher” explained his tears by saying that “no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at the immorality that was so prevalent”; the Temple of Artemis was the center of crime and immorality; if a person committed a crime and could make it to the Temple before being arrested, he was safe and possessed the right of asylum; this only encouraged an influx of the criminal element; the Temple possessed hundreds of priestesses who were Temple prostitutes; because Ephesus was a sanctuary for criminals along with Temple prostitution, she became a notoriously evil place.

4. The involvement of Paul… Paul visited Ephesus on his second missionary journey; one would think it would be an unpromising place for the sowing of the seeds of Christianity, yet it was there that Christianity had some of its greatest triumphs; theologian R. C. Trench wrote: “Nowhere did the word of God find a kindler soil, strike root more deeply, or bear fairer fruits of faith and love.”

Paul stayed in Ephesus longer than any other city, approximately three years (45-48 AD); while there he was driven from the synagogue by the silversmiths who made idols of Diana (Acts 18:24-19:1-41); yet Ephesus became the center for missionary operations throughout Asia.

5. The institution of the church…The church was founded by Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos (Acts 18:24-28); Timothy was the first pastor of the church (1 Timothy 1:3); Tychius also served that church (Ephesians 6:21); John became the leading figure in the church and perhaps was an elder there before being
exiled by Domitian; tradition has it that Mary, the mother of Jesus died in Ephesus and was buried there.

The presence of Christ among the churches...

1. The control of Christ over the churches... “He holds the seven stars in His right hand...” (2:1a)... The “seven stars,” which are the seven angels (1:20) are the messengers of the churches and Christ has a hold on them; the word for “hold” (kratein) is a strong word; it means that Christ has complete control over the Church; if the Church submits to that control it will never go wrong; this does not mean that the local church has no freewill to go against Christ; it means Christ is the head of the Church and He can do as He pleases with each church as well as with individual believers; His hold can destroy and His hold can bless.

More than that, as true believers our safety and security lie in the fact that we are in the right hand of Christ (John 10:28); furthermore, the word “hold” takes the genitive case, which means that He takes total hold of us and will not lose grip on those who are truly His; sometimes when we take hold of something it is too big to fully grasp; not so of Christ; His grip is secure and firm.

2. The commitment of Christ for the churches...“Who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands” (2:1b); the lampstands are the churches; He cares about all the churches as He continually moves among the lampstands; as He walks He scrutinizes, examines, evaluates each church and then revels through His angel to John exactly what He sees; He is telling John exactly what to write.

The praises of Christ for the church at Ephesus...

1. He praises them for their works...

- In terms of accomplishment... “I know your works...” (2:2 a); the word for “works” is kopos, meaning labor to the point of sweat

- In terms of activity... “Your labor” (2:2b)... “and have not become weary” (3:3b); they did not let hard work discourage them; they did not grow weary in well doing (Galatians 6:9).
• In terms of attitude... “...you have persevered and have patience and labored for My name’s sake...” (2:3a); the word “persevered” is *hupomone* which means to accept hardship and suffering and turn it into grace and glory.

2. He praises the way they stand for truth...

• He recognizes their desire for moral purity... “You cannot bear those who are evil” (2:2a); they were intolerant to the evil that took place at the temples; they had a holy standard; as Paul told the Ephesians 4:27, “...nor give place to the devil.”

• He respects their resistance to false teaching... “You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars” (2:2b; 1 John 4:1-3); they rejected the teaching of the the Nicolaitans... “But this you have, that you hate the teaching of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (2:6); (we will meet the problem of the Nicolaitans when we come to the church at Pergamos).

The problem Christ has with the church at Ephesus...

1. His evaluation of the church at Ephesus... “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (2:4); there had been a honeymoon period; but the love they once had for Christ is no longer the same; it had grown cold; to be a Christian is to love the Lord Jesus Christ (John 14:21, 23; 1 Corinthians 16:22); their doctrinal and moral purity, their undiminished zeal for the truth was not enough; there is no substitute for one’s love for Christ; this proves you can be good and you can be right, but if love for Christ loses its passion, being good and being right are not sufficient to please God.

2. His exhortation to the Ephesians... “Remember from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent” (2:5)

• Remember... Where did you fall short?; present imperative; keep on remembering.

• Repent... Change your mind; aorist imperative; a decisive act of the past; did you really repent when you first gave your life to Christ?
• **Respond**... Demonstrate the passion you had for Christ; present imperative; keep on responding to do the works you did at first.

• **Remove**... God's judgment would bring an end to the church at Ephesus; that church no longer exists.

The promise He makes to the Ephesians... “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (2:7b); the tree of life is first mentioned in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22); later it appears in the New Jerusalem where it bears abundant fruit (Revelation 22:2); those who eat of it will never die; the “Paradise of God” is another name for heaven (2 Corinthians 12:4).

The message to the Ephesians is an encouragement to demonstrate real love for Christ; love for God is not wrought by legalistically observing commands, but focusing on His grace and love and forgiveness and serving Him because He has served you (Matthew 20:28).

The church at Ephesus represented the apostolic age with Paul and John very much a part of this church.

The Pressure from the Enemy... The Message to Smyrna (2:8-11)

The place of Smyrna in history... “And to the angel of the church of Smyrna write...” (2:8); again the angel is a messenger in the church.

1. The importance of the city... Smyrna was one of the few planned cities of the ancient world; the city goes back to 1000 BC; around 600 BC it was destroyed by the Lydians; for 400 years the city did not exist; it was but a collection of little villages; in 200 BC Lysimachus had the city rebuilt as a planned and unified whole; the most famous of all streets was the Street of Gold which began at the Temple Zeus and ended with the Temple of Cybele; it was called “the fairest city of Iconia”; it is named from the Greek word “Smurna” meaning “myrrh”, a bitter gum used in costly perfumes and embalming; it was a gift to Christ at His birth (Matthew 2:11).

   Smyrna was a “free city” highly devoted to Rome; Cicero called Smyrna “one of our most faithful and our most ancient allies;” It was the first city to erect a temple to the goddess Roma and the spirit of Rome; it was the one city chosen by Rome to erect a temple to the godhead to Tiberius Caesar.
The city prospers today as Izmir, Turkey with a population of over 2,000,000.

2. The ideology of the city... It was a city loyal to Rome; was a seat of Emperor worship which led to the persecution of Christians who refused Caesar and acknowledge him as lord.

3. The involvement of the Jews... There was a large Jewish colony living in Smyrna with considerable influence because they contributed much money for the beautification of the city; they did everything they could to destroy the church there and persuaded the Roman authorities to active persecution.

The Accusations the Jews made Against Christians:

- They were cannibals... They ate the flesh and drank the blood of Jesus (John 6:53).

- They were immoral... The love feast held for the benefit of the poor in the church at times turned into a drunken feast; it was like a potluck dinner connected with the Lord’s Supper (Jude 1:12; 1 Corinthians 11:17-22).

- They were breaking up families... Believers would leave mother and father to follow Jesus (Luke 14:26).

- They were atheists... No images of God.

- They were politically disloyal... They would not acknowledge “Caesar as Lord.”

- They were doomsayers... They believed in the return of Christ and hell for all who rejected Him.

The most famous martyr was Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of John; the police captain of the city pleaded with Polycarp to save his life: “What harm is it to say ‘Caesar is Lord’ and to offer sacrifice and be saved”; when he entered the arena Polycarp claimed he heard a voice from heaven saying: “Be strong Polycarp, and play the man”; the proconsul gave him a choice, curse Christ and make a sacrifice to Caesar and declare him lord, or die; Polycarp responded: “Eighty and six years I have served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” The proconsul threatened him with being burned to death; Polycarp replied: “You threaten me
with fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come do what you will.” He was burned at a stake on Saturday, February 23, 155 AD.

The persecution they suffered...

1. In terms of pressure... “I know your works, tribulation...” (2:9a); there was pressure from without; the word tribulation (thlipsis) refers to harsh affliction; a force of circumstances seeking to crush the Christianity out of them.

2. In terms of poverty... “and poverty (but you are rich)...” (2:9c); in the New Testament, Christianity and poverty were closely connected; the word “poverty” (ptocheia) is a word that speaks of complete destitution; many Christians were lower class slaves.

3. In terms of put-down... “I know the blasphemy who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (2:9d); the word “blasphemy” refers to slander or to belittle one; the source of blasphemy came from “a synagogue of Satan”; Satan was behind the work of this Jewish mob; John is taking a favorite expression of the Jews, “the assembly of the Lord” (Numbers 16:3; 20:4;31:16) and reversing it; the word “synagogue” means “assembly” or “coming together”; it is if John is saying, “You call yourselves the assembly of God, when in fact you are the assembly of Satan; it is a terrible thing when people use religion to do evil.

The peace they should have... “Do not fear any of those things you are about to suffer...”(2:10a); the word “fear” is phobos, from where we get the word phobia; some fears are natural, but when serving the Lord we should not let fear of tribulation and harsh affliction shut us down.

Paul told Timothy, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7); the word translated “fear” (delias) is better rendered “timidity” or “cowardice;” however, the fear Paul spoke of to Timothy is from intimidation, of belittlement; those who oppose the gospel use tactics of intimidation, they attempt to put-down the believer, but as Christians there is no place for cowardice or timidity because God has given us His power, His love, and a sound mind to stand up to those who want to shout us down or shut us down; whether it’s phobos fear, or cowardice fear, no fear shout prevent us from living and sharing the gospel.
The purpose God has... “...the devil is about to throw some of you in prison that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days...” (2:10b); “ten days,” an ancient saying to represent a brief period of time.

Some interpret “ten days” as ten persecutions from Nero to Diocletian

The Ten Emperors of Rome

Nero (54-68): Beheaded Paul and crucified Peter upside down
Domitian (95-96): Exiled John
Trajan (104-117): Ignatius burned at the stake
Marcus Aurelius (161-180): Burned Polycarp at the stake
Severus (200-211): Martyred Irenaeus
Maximinus (235-237): Martyred Ursula and Hippolytus
Decius (249-251)
Valerian (257-260)
Aurelian (270-275)
Diocletian (303-313): The worst of all emperors; five million Christians were martyred from Nero to Diocletian between 54-313; information from Fox’s Book of Martyrs.

The promise of God... “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death” (2:11); there are rewards for faithful service to Christ given when we get to heaven (1 Corinthians 3: 11-17) and stand before the judgment seat (2 Corinthians 5:9-11); there is the “crown of life” for those persecuted or martyred for their faith.

He also promises that those who overcome will not be hurt by the second death which is hell (Revelation 20:14).

The reassuring word to the church at Smyrna is a word to all suffering, persecuted Christians: This church represented the age of persecution from 100 to 312 AD; an appropriate word for those who suffer for the gospel: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).