An Introduction to Revelation 2 & 3

A practical guide to the Letters to the Seven Churches

This brief introduction is designed for anyone leading a reflection, facilitating a discussion, or giving a talk on the Letters to the Seven Churches. Revelation can be notoriously difficult to interpret, but these chapters contain important things for us to hear today. The final section offers some practical pointers for using the passages.

Before You Begin

Revelation paints a picture of the Church's struggle in the present age, while affirming that Christ will ultimately triumph. In the meantime, our faithfulness and obedience matter: we are called to cooperate with God's purposes.

Chapter 1 sets the scene, presenting Jesus in all his splendour through highly symbolic language. The images used to describe each church would have been familiar to its original readers.

Each church has an 'angel'. This may be a way of representing the church as a single entity rather than referring to a literal angel. Jesus stands among the churches, which are pictured as lampstands: they are called to bear his light. He also holds them in his hand. These images can be confusing if we try to interpret them all literally. Revelation is much more like a painting than a photograph or a map: its images communicate meaning through symbols.

The churches in chapters 2 and 3 each have particular strengths and challenges. Their experiences reflect issues that churches can face today. Notice, too, that each church is addressed as a whole community, with its own characteristics. Jesus commends what is good, but also calls each church to confront its weaknesses and overcome them.

Ephesus (Revelation 2:1–7)

Ephesus was one of the leading cities of Asia Minor (in what is now Turkey). Paul spent a longer period there than he did in any other place where he established a church.

The name 'Nicolaitans' is associated with the idea of victory or conquest (the name is derived from the Greek word for conquest - think of the Nike trainers brand). The concern appears to be with people who promoted a supposedly superior form of Christianity in order to strengthen their own authority and prestige. They may have been charismatic personalities who claimed to receive new revelations from God or angels. They ended up dominating the church.

The church was right to resist these teachings, but by focussing solely on the truth they had abandoned their 'first love'. This may mean that, in concentrating on what was right and wrong, the Christians had lost their devotion to Jesus. Alternatively, it could mean that they had stopped loving one another and had become like the Pharisees: correct in doctrine but lacking compassion. The first interpretation seems the more likely.

The closing images are also significant. The tree of life recalls Genesis and may have been a deliberate contrast with the temple of Diana, whose symbolism included the date palm, and its extensive garden. These allusions would probably have resonated with the people of Ephesus.

Smyrna (Revelation 2:8–11)

The church in Smyrna faced persecution from members of the local synagogue who opposed the belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Christians could face imprisonment or death because of their confession of faith - an experience that continues for many Christians today.

Two images would have been especially powerful for the original readers. Smyrna was built on a hill, and its buildings were associated with the image of a crown. Jesus promises his followers a different crown: the crown of life.

The city had also been destroyed and remained in ruins for centuries before being rebuilt. Its return to life may have offered a striking picture of the promise that faithful Christians, too, would be raised to life and receive the crown of life. In AD 155, Polycarp was publicly martyred in Smyrna. An account of his martyrdom is well worth reading. He was 'faithful unto death'.

Pergamum (Revelation 2:12–17)

Pergamum was a major administrative centre, and the Roman proconsul lived there. The ruler's authority was represented by a sword, but Jesus is presented as the one who holds the real sword. Pergamum was also a centre of emperor worship, which helps explain the reference to 'Satan's throne'. The Christians had little political power, and some had even been killed.

Some people within the church had begun to promote false teaching - a reminder that this can happen in any community. The church is commended for resisting those teachings that undermined its moral integrity. The argument seems to have been that, because God loves people so much, their bodily behaviour does not matter and they should be free to do as they please.

This is reinforced by a reference to Balaam, a seer who led Israel astray by encouraging sexual temptation. The central issue here is holiness: the call to live in ways that reflect God's character rather than simply conforming to the surrounding culture.

Those who worshipped the emperor could participate in cultic feasts. In contrast, Jesus promises food from heaven to those who remain faithful to him. The meaning of the 'white stone' is less certain, though white stones were sometimes used as tokens of admission to public festivals and feasts. The broad promise is that those who refuse to compromise will receive something better than the world - including the emperor - can offer. Its a call to faithfulness and living differently from our culture.

Thyatira (Revelation 2:18–29)

This is the longest of the seven letters, although Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities! The church seems to have grown in inward strength and outward activity. The city was known for its bronze-working, and the emperor was worshipped there as a god. The description of Jesus, whose feet are like burnished bronze, would therefore have carried particular force as a metaphor contrasting our devotion to him with the cult of the emperor.

Thyatira had many trade guilds, and belonging to a guild was often necessary to find work. Guild membership could involve attending meals, making sacrifices to a guild's particular god, and taking part in feasts that sometimes involved sexually immorality.

Christians would have felt pressure to participate to get work. The reference to 'Jezebel' recalls the figure in 1 Kings who led Israel into the worship of Baal and Astarte. Here, the name probably refers to one or more people teaching that God wanted his people to prosper, even if that meant worshipping other gods or participating in feasts involving immorality. These teachers may have been attractive, charismatic and persuasive. The message is clear: holiness comes at a cost. The passage also suggests that secret teachings were circulating, supposedly reserved for Christians who were especially 'enlightened'.

The church is called to overcome the temptation to compromise. Those who remain faithful are promised a share in Christ's authority. The 'morning star' – the brightest of all the stars (actually the planet Venus) - is a powerful image associated with Jesus himself.

Sardis (Revelation 3:1–6)

Sardis was built on a hill and was considered by its inhabitants as being almost impossible to capture. Yet attackers managed to scale its walls at night while the guards were asleep. This actually happened twice, both times during the night, making Jesus' command to 'wake up' especially pointed.

The Christians in Sardis appear to have experienced little persecution and had become complacent. They enjoyed a good reputation as a lively church, but Jesus describes them as spiritually dead. The city had been attacked at the very point where it felt strongest. In the same way, the church had become complacent about areas of life that needed to change. Their belief in their own strength was their point of greatest weakness.

Clean white clothing was appropriate for entering a pagan temple. In the letter to Sardis, some members of the church are pictured as wearing white robes, ready and prepared, while most are not. If the latter respond to Jesus' call and address what is lacking, they too can be clothed in white.

Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7–13)

The church in Philadelphia was small and had little power, but it had remained faithful.

Jesus holds the 'key of David', an image connected with Jerusalem, the city of God. This need not be understood as a promise only of life after death. It can also point to the new community God is creating - a reality that comes from heaven and takes shape on earth.

There is a further layer of meaning. The Christians had been expelled from the synagogue and were therefore symbolically excluded. Jesus, however, is the one who can open the gates and welcome them into God's city. He can vindicate them in the face of those who have persecuted them.

They are encouraged to hold fast, without becoming disheartened or giving up. Jesus is near. The promise is that they will be permanently marked as God's people and recognised for their faithfulness, despite their apparent weakness. They will receive the victor's crown, like athletes who win a contest.

Laodicea (Revelation 3:14–22)

The final letter is a warning to Christians who have become lukewarm. The image is particularly vivid because Laodicea was associated with hot springs. Imagine being thirsty in the scorching Mediterranean heat and trying to quench your thirst with tepid water. You would spit it out!

Laodicea was wealthy, with a strong commercial and banking sector. The Christians seem to have enjoyed wealth and security, and perhaps a church that simply reassured them in their complacency without challenging them to become genuine followers of Jesus.

Jesus tells them to buy gold from him (rather than the local banks). He affirms his love for them, but makes clear that his love is intended to transform their lives. It is not a love that simply accommodates our dysfunctions. Although they may be well dressed outwardly, they are spiritually naked.

Jesus says to this church, in effect, 'Let me in.' He is knocking at the door, waiting to be welcomed into a church that had excluded him from its gatherings. The word used in verse 20 evokes the invitation to dine with someone of high status. Jesus offers a real relationship with the King - and the promise of sharing in his reign.

The Laodiceans have the outward signs of prosperity but are blind to their true condition. They need to buy eye ointment so that they can see clearly. Laodicea may have been known for its eye ointment and for its medical school. The challenge is to see reality as it is: only by facing the truth can we begin to change. That is part of what 'repentance' means.

How to Use These Notes

1. As a discussion starter

- Read the biblical passage.
- Read the notes for that passage and make sure everyone understands the key images and symbols.
- Discuss the issues the church faced in its own time.
- Ask how those issues relate to churches and Christians today.

Keep the discussion focused and help the group engage with what the passage might mean for us today.

2. As the foundation for a talk

- Use the notes to help you prepare and structure your talk.
- Explain the passage as a whole so that people can understand its overall message; avoid going off on tangents.
- Then focus on just one issue raised by the passage. You will only have time to explore a single issue properly.
- Choose the issue that seems most relevant to your audience today.
- Explore how the passage can help people respond to that issue, keeping the talk clear and focused.

A Postscript on Reading Revelation

I have probably read more books about Revelation than is good for anyone! They range from interpretations that treat it as a sequence of literal events, reading today's news through the lens of the book, to approaches that focus on the historical world in which it was written.

What seems clear is that the first readers would have easily understood many of its symbols, unlike us today. The imagery made sense in its historical context and drew on contemporary life - for example, the beast from the land was a representation of the emperor cult. Revelation included numerous allusions to the Old Testament.

The book's central message is the ultimate triumph of Jesus and the coming of God's kingdom in all its fullness. My conclusion is that Revelation is best read here as offering principles for faithful living, rather than as a form of clairvoyance about specific events battles and wars. This is the approach I have suggested for these two chapters. The seven churches may, in different ways, reflect the range of churches we encounter today.

Ephesus, for example, was doctrinally sound but had lost its heart and its love for Jesus. Laodicea was prosperous and well resourced, yet had become complacent and lukewarm, perhaps relying on its past reputation. But these letters are not simply corrective. Each one points towards a better way and offers fresh hope for renewal.