

# Letters to Seven Churches

If we study the blessings upon the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, and study their placement around the camp in the wilderness and their duties regarding the tabernacle and the encampment, we will see that some have a closer place with God, have greater responsibilities in worship or service, and even appear to have ranks within them. Levi's descendants were all priests, but only men from the line of Aaron were high priests. These differences are clear in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Looking at the twelve disciples, we can see differences in their closeness to Jesus. Peter, James, and John went with Jesus to the Mount of Transfiguration and farther into the garden of Gethsemane. It seems he called them to a special place several times. There were other disciples who were also sent out in the seventy, but were not counted in the twelve closest. Others were not sent out at all, but were with Jesus many times (Lazarus, Mary, and Martha). And there were yet others who followed from a distance, some seeking healings, deliverances, or free food. The repentant thief on the cross had no time to perform good works or witness to his family or just grow up in Christ; yet he was saved, nonetheless.

So, with these as examples, let's look at the letters to the churches and see the differences in groups of believers—or ranks of Christians. Though these represent stages in the history of the church, they also reflect current conditions in various assemblies and nations. For each church, we will consider five points: Commendations (or compliments); Criticisms (or shortcomings); Commands (or instructions); Correction (or exhortation); and Compensation (or rewards).

## Ephesus (Rev. 2:1–7)

Commendations:

- Works, labor, and patience;
- Cannot bear evil people;
- Tried and revealed false prophets;
- Remained patient in suffering;
- Labored without giving up, in Jesus' name; and
- Hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which Jesus also hates (v. 6).

By these commendations, we would think that this was a perfect church. Certainly, they excelled in many ways. And notice that they hated the *deeds* (not the *persons*) of the Nicolaitans.

But who are the Nicolaitans? Different scholars throughout the church age have posited various ideas about who these are. We see them again in the letter to the church at Pergamos. Some say that they were a heretical sect which was led by the disciple Nicolas, appointed to the table ministry in Acts 6:5. Many scholars reject this, since there is no Scriptural basis for such a conclusion, nor any such reports throughout early church history.

I believe that if we look at the meaning of the name Nicolaitans and the root name from which it springs, Nicolaus, we will find our answer. Nicolaitans means “follower of Nicolaus.” Nicolaus means “victorious over the people.” Thus, the Nicolaitans were those who accepted a human leader as head of the church. Ephesians 4:15; 5:23; and Colossians 1:18 tell us that Christ is the head of the church, which is his spiritual body. Thus, to yield to a head other than Christ is to commit heresy.

Therefore, Nicolaitans are denominational heads which assume a position of authority in the place of the true head, Jesus Christ. They rule over the people, being lifted up as supreme clergy over the laity. Some churchgoers even consider their writings to be equal to or more relevant than the Word of God.

In that first century, the Nicolaitans taught against the decrees of the apostles in Acts 15:20, 29. From the acceptance of food offered to idols, their rejection of biblical moral codes spread to an acceptance of sexual immorality. Today, the idea of food items offered to idols doesn't enter our life to any extent (though I refuse to buy food that is specifically “halal”). But we do have heads of certain denominations who have embraced the LGBTQ movement and the attendant gender confusion and “trans” movement—things clearly forbidden in Scripture.

Here in Ephesus, the commendation is that they hate those deeds, as God does. We will see in Pergamos that some in the church did not continue in that rejection of sin. However, in Ephesus, their stand was commended, along with many other positive things. But there is criticism against them.

Criticisms:

- They had left their first—or preeminent—love (v. 4).

What does this mean? Let's look at Mark 12:29–31, where a scribe asks Jesus, “Which is the first commandment of all?” He wanted to know the preeminent commandment. Jesus replies:

“The first of all the commandments is, ‘Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (MEV)

Our first love is love for God. We are to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (body). That is the first love.

Today, as in Ephesus, there is a move to make the second commandment the preeminent one. I am not saying that we are not to love others or not to meet their physical needs if it is in our power to do so. However, when we focus primarily on showing love to others—current term “love on” others—we have left our first love. The key word there is “primarily.” Our love for God and his righteousness and Word should be our primary love. From that relationship and fellowship then comes the agape love for one another and the resultant works for which the Ephesians were commended. Thus, “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts” (Rom. 5:5).

To only do the works as a first cause—forgetting the love of God and his righteousness and Word—is to depend on self effort and self-righteous virtue signaling. From that, the Ephesian church is told to repent. And that condition is very much alive today in those that preach a social gospel linked with identity politics.

So this church receives several instructions or commands.

Commands:

- Remember where you started: at the cross, being reconciled to the Father through the Son with the Holy Spirit;
- Repent of having left your first love;
- Do the first works—praise God for the reconciliation, and focus on him, performing the ministry of reconciliation of others first. See 2 Corinthians 5:18–20.

We get it backwards when we say we should meet people's physical needs first—then tell them about God. The preeminent thing is to secure their eternal salvation through the gospel, and then do what we can for their physical needs in this life. Yes, sometimes meeting a physical

need, such as providing food to the hungry, will open a door to preach the gospel to them, but our main focus should be the gospel with the food, not the food without the gospel.

We can see this priority in one of Jesus' healings. It is recorded in Matthew 9:1–8; Mark 2:1–12; and Luke 5:17–26. Luke's report of the event is most comprehensive:

On a certain day, as He was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby, who had come from every town of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal the sick. Now some men brought in a bed a man who was paralyzed. They searched for ways to bring him in and lay him before Him. When they could not find a way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his bed into their midst before Jesus. When He saw their faith, He said to him, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." The scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is He who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" When Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered them, "Why question in your hearts? Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or 'Rise up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," He said to the paralyzed man, "I say to you, rise, take up your bed, and go to your house." Immediately he rose before them, and took up that on which he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God. They were all amazed, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen wonderful things today." (MEV)

The forgiveness—reconciliation—came first. The physical healing was proof of and emerged from the reconciliation. Jesus declares plainly why healings come—to prove his power to reconcile us to God, to forgive our sins—which sparks our preeminent love toward God.

The first works are those of responding to God's love and being reconciled and then seeking to reconcile others by God's Word and his love for them.

Correction:

- They must heed the command or God would remove them as an assembly from their place or rank in the church;
- This requires their repentance.

If they follow the correction, they would have a reward or compensation.

Compensation:

- They would eat from the tree of life in the midst of paradise.

We see this tree in Revelation 22:2. This is a compensation not given to all the assemblies. Keep in mind that the compensations correspond to various ranks of the church, different levels of overcoming and spiritual maturity, diverse degrees of love for our wonderful Lord and Savior.

### Smyrna (Rev. 2:8–11):

#### Commendations:

- Works, tribulation, and poverty (though rich in spiritual blessings);
- God knows that the ones persecuting them, who claim to be of God, are really of Satan.

Though it appears that these have fewer commendations, they actually have a higher rank, as we shall see. They do good works, suffer persecution, and are poor in worldly goods. Definitely not addicted to a “prosperity gospel.”

#### Criticisms:

- None.

#### Commands:

- Don’t fear what you will suffer—imprisonment for the faith, persecution ten days, which signifies “to the full,” or completely;
- Be faithful to death—a Christian martyr’s death.

In the early chapters of Acts, we see that the disciples accounted themselves privileged to suffer for Christ. That same spirit was alive in the Smyrna church, and is alive today throughout the world.

#### Correction:

- None.

#### Compensation:

- A crown of life;
- Not be hurt of the second death. They would be raised and glorified as full overcomers long before the great white throne judgment of unbelievers.

We can read of these Christians, through the centuries, in *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*.

Smyrna Christians live and die today in places where they are openly persecuted for their faith in Christ, often being killed in horrible ways. Communist regimes in China and North Korea persecute them. Read the reports of Christians in northern Nigeria, Iraq, Iran, and all other Muslim countries where radical Islamic groups run wild, destroying, killing, raping, and looting. And hear the prayers the Christian martyrs utter for the salvation of the very Muslims who kill them. This Smyrna church is a group of full overcomers, those fit to be in the bridal company for their love for Jesus and for others.

### Pergamos (Rev. 2:12–17):

#### Commendations:

- Works;
- Some who were faithful to Jesus' name;
- Some who had not denied the faith in Christ, even when a faithful martyr was slain among them.

Mixed in with these commendations (v. 13) is a criticism. Imagine it being said of a church that Satan, the archenemy of the church, had a place right there among the churchgoers.

#### Criticisms:

- They dwelt where Satan's seat is (v. 13);
- The martyr Antipas was slain among them, where Satan dwells;
- They had people who held the "doctrine of Balaam," designed to destroy Israel by leading the people into sin and disfavor with God (Num. 24:14; 25:1; and 31:16). Two key acts are in that doctrine: eating things sacrificed to idols (against the apostles' directions in Acts 15:20); and committing fornication or having sexual impurity (v. 14).
- Also, they accepted the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (v. 15). They replaced Christ as head with a human head of their church, giving that human more authority than God, which thing God hates. Why does he hate it? Because it denigrates Christ, whom he has exalted.

#### Commands:

- Repent.

Repentance means an acknowledgement of sin and a turning away from that sin. They were to abandon the wickedness, disfellowship those in error, refuse the food offered to idols, and reject the sexual impurity fostered by the deceivers. There is a consequence if they didn't obey God.

Correction:

- The Lord himself would come and fight against the evildoers, with the sword of his mouth—the Word of God.

We see this sword also in Revelation 1:16. We see it in Isaiah 11:4; Ephesians 6:17; and Hebrews 4:12. With his Word, Christ will judge the rebellious and wicked ones—whether they are hiding in the church or acting as outside enemies of the church.

On the other hand, to those who heed the command and repent, there is a threefold reward which signifies their presence in heaven.

Compensation:

- They would eat of the hidden manna;
- They would receive a white stone (which symbolizes acceptance and life, whereas a black stone signals guilt and death in the Greek political and legal system, among other things as discussed below);
- They would have a new name written on that stone, which only they would know.

The overcomers are assured of feasting in heaven, for manna was to Israel the bread from heaven that sustained them in the wilderness. See Exodus 16:4, 14, 15, 31. A portion of it was placed in the Ark of the Covenant as a remembrance. See Exodus 16:32–33 and Hebrews 9:4. Those who refused the food offered to idols could look forward to heavenly food.

The white stone symbolizes several things, as mentioned above. Besides being used to show a legal verdict of innocent, it also was given to the winner in an athletic contest and to gladiators who had impressed the public, thus earning the right to retire from the games/combat.

With a new name upon the stone, signifying the individual's relationship to and favor with God, the white stone functions as a symbol of victory over the devil and his workers.

Thus, this church had allowed the Nicolaitans to prosper and rule in their midst. They allowed idolatry and fornication to run rampant. Do we not see that today among some denominations which have ordained gays as pastors or which use titles like “Reverend, Vicar,

Father, Patriarch, High Priest, and Your Eminence” to name a few? Some denominations even go so far as to declare—falsely—that Muslims worship the same God as do Jews and Christians.

The instruction for the believer in such a church is to repent of having allowed that heresy to come in, and to remove the heresy and heretics from among them. If they fail, a day will come when God himself shall remove them (v. 16).

The church degenerates from Pergamos to Thyatira. Moreover, whereas Ephesus was told to do again the first works, Thyatira is said to have first works less than the last. In other words, they were deficient in loving God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. Their commitment was to their own works for others, rather than to God and to letting him work through them to bless others.

### Thyatira (Rev. 2:18–29)

Commendations:

- Works;
- (Agape) love;
- Service;
- Faith;
- Patience;
- And their works (as different from God’s works in them and through them).

Notice that “works” are mentioned twice. Thyatira churches are so busy *doing* works that they don’t rest and *let God do his work* in them.

Do we know assemblies like that today? They may be shining examples of serving others, of appearing to have great faith or patience as they labor hard to show love. Sometimes their motives are genuine. Sometimes they are just virtue signaling. But they lack a fervent love for Jesus. They are merely following his example rather than running the race to win him as bridegroom. Instead of Christ living in them, they are living for others, not even really living for Christ. And the criticism against them is singular but weighty.

Criticisms:

- They allowed “Jezebel” to teach and mislead individuals, seducing them to commit fornication (sexual impurity) and to eat things sacrificed to idols (idolatry), contrary to the disciples’ instructions.

Doesn't this sound like the doctrine of Balaam, spoken of in v. 14 regarding Pergamos? Note that in Pergamos, eating things sacrificed to idols was listed first and fornication second. However, with Thyatira, fornication is first and eating things sacrificed to idols is second. This reveals a greater departure from the righteousness of God.

Also, note that in Pergamos, it was an outsider who came in and taught the leaders to do such sins, just as Balaam was an outsider who was hired to curse Israel. He could not curse them but only issued blessings. So, he told the person paying him, Balak, to entice the Israelites to commit idolatry and fornication. His thought was that God would have to remove the blessing then and punish them. He didn't know a thing about grace or God's plan.

However, in Thyatira, it is a leader (Jezebel)—someone within—who calls herself a prophet, who teaches the people to sin. Paul warned of these two kinds of enemies in Acts 20:29–30: “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” Enemies from without and from within.

Paul's solution then is the same as the solution now: God and the Word. He writes, “And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

Commands:

- Hold fast to what you have as far as faith, salvation, and devotion (v.25).

“Hold fast” means to not give it up, to cling to it securely, to lose no ground, to not surrender to evil forces. I think of the movie *Facing the Giants*, where the defensive line were told to make a “stone wall.” That's holding fast.

Correction:

- For Jezebel and her followers, the outlook is grim. God has given time for repentance. Without it will come sickness, tribulation, and death (vv. 21–23).

The Old Testament Jezebel was a wicked queen who reigned with the wicked king Ahab. We read of those shameful rulers of Israel in 1 Kings 16:29—22:40; and 2 Kings 9. Jezebel was idolatrous, hated the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and urged Ahab to commit wicked deeds. Just as God gave her time to repent, so in this church does he give the rebellious unbelievers time to

repent. Jezebel refused to repent. And, in the church age, those who refuse to repent will be severely judged, as unbelievers.

The ones who do repent and the ones not entering “the depths of Satan” (those sins and the affiliation with Jezebel), together, are to hold onto what they have and to overcome and keep God’s works to the end. For this they would receive an earthly reward (vv. 26–28).

Compensation:

- Power over the nations during the Millennial Kingdom, when Israel will be the head of the nations;
- Ruling with a rod of iron (judgment);
- Destroying God’s enemies like breaking pottery to bits;
- Receive the morning star—Jesus (Num. 24:17; and Rev. 22:16)—as their light and life.

Some who fit this church will doubtless be Christians who are born again after the rapture of the first two ranks of the church. They will go through the tribulation period, and it will be difficult for them. But as they endure to the end, they will be greatly rewarded with life on earth during the millennium and then eternal life.

### Sardis (Rev. 3:1–6):

With this church, it’s difficult to separate out the commendations from the criticisms.

Commendations:

- Works;
- Has a name that suggests life, but they were spiritually dead;
- A few of them were undefiled with the error that consumed the rest (v. 4); these were truly born again.

Criticisms:

- Spiritually dead, for the most part, as nominal Christians;
- Their works are imperfect, incomplete before God.

Many churches today are filled with nominal Christians. Many have nominal Christians in their pulpits—men who enter the ministry as a career choice, not a divine calling. Nominal

Christians lack a knowledge of the basics regarding the gospel. Many don't even accept Jesus as the Son of God and Savior, for they reject the concept of sin.

Commands:

- Be watchful; (v. 2)
- Strengthen any bit of spiritual life that is present;
- Remember the true gospel they heard and hold onto that Word (v. 3);
- Repent of disbelief and deadness, of apathy and lack of response.

Correction:

- If they don't heed the commands, the Lord will come as a thief in the night, and they will not know of his coming.
- That means they may be too late for salvation.

The example of the thief in the night appears several places in the Word. Read Luke 12:35–47. There Jesus gives two examples, in parables, and then explains the parable. The point is that if we're watching when the Lord returns, he will reward us with the opportunity to rule with him. If we are not watching, but are living as though he isn't going to return, when he does return, we will receive punishment or discipline, depending on our spiritual relationship with God (i.e., are we born again?).

In Matthew 24:42–44, we see an example of the importance of watching. If we don't know when a thief is coming, and we don't watch, then the thief will break in when we aren't expecting him. And he will steal whatever he wants. So, we need to be watchful. Likewise, regarding the return of Jesus. If we aren't expecting him, he will come and rapture those who are ready and waiting, and we will be left behind.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:2–6, Paul exhorts the believers to be spiritually awake and watching for the return of Christ, which will come “as a thief in the night.” People will not be expecting him. But we, who are in the light, should expect him. We should be watching soberly and eagerly.

Compensation:

- Those who have not defiled their garments by disbelief and apathy will walk with the Lord in white (v. 4) which speaks of salvation and righteousness;
- They will be clothed in white (v. 5);
- They will not be blotted out of the roll call of heaven—the book of life;

- In heaven, Jesus will confess their names as belonging to him. They will have a place in heaven, but they will not have the best place of the bride, who will rule and reign with Christ.

It is important to note that the Greek word translated “white” in these letters to the churches (Rev. 2 and 3) means simply “light” or “white.” It’s the basic white or a “flat white.” The word translated “white” in Revelation 19:8, regarding the garments of the bride—the group of full overcomers—means “radiant; magnificent; bright.” It’s like a metallic white, or white with glitter.

Like Smyrna, this next church has no criticisms and no command to repent.

### Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7–13):

Commendations:

- Works (v.8);
- A little strength;
- Have kept his Word;
- Have not denied his name;
- Kept the word of his patience (v. 10).

Criticisms:

- None.

Commands:

- Hold fast what you have that no man take your crown.

Correction:

- None.

Compensation:

- He will make those unbelievers who claim to be God’s people to come and worship before the feet of these believers, and to know that he loves them (v. 9). This suggests they will be beside Jesus when all are made to bow before him and confess him as Lord (Phil. 2:10–11);
- He will keep these from the tribulation, which will cover the earth in judgment (v. 10);
- He will come quickly (v. 11);
- They will have a crown (v. 11);

- They will become a pillar in the temple of God in heaven—that is, they will have a prominent place (v. 12);
- They will be there forever (v. 12);
- They will have God’s name, the name of heaven (new Jerusalem), and the new name of Jesus written on them. What is his new name? Perhaps *Bridegroom* or *Husband*.

Can we see how the things spoken to the different churches reflects their degree of love, extent of yielding to God, and, consequently, their rewards in heaven?

The final church is full of criticism but has no commendations, though they think they are successful and self-sufficient.

### Laodicea (Rev. 3:14–22):

Commendations:

- None.

Criticisms:

- Their works are lukewarm, not done in love for God or others (v. 15);
- They are lukewarm in attitude toward God—apathetic, without fervent love or intense hatred, just neutral and bland (v. 16);
- They are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (v. 17);
- Jesus stands outside of them, which signifies that they are not born again (v. 20).

Think about people who claim to be agnostic or about churchgoers for whom church is a social club. Perhaps they say that there may be a God and maybe not, who can tell? They might claim that all religions lead to heaven. The life of Christ is not in them. They have no interest in Jesus. No attention to his Word. They just claim to be good people, based on their own assessment of their works and lives and on their own definition of being good.

The Laodiceans claim they are rich, increased with goods, and need nothing. They prosper in financial affairs and the acquisition of property. Their measure for goodness is the quantity of possessions. (This makes me think of today’s politicians—the ones who came into office as middle class people, stayed a long time, and left—or will be leaving—as multimillionaires.)

This church is told in two ways that they need to be saved.

Commands:

- Buy gold tried in the fire (speaking of the divine nature which becomes ours upon being born-again), and white raiment, which speaks of the righteousness of God imputed to us by faith in Christ; and to anoint their eyes with eye salve, or the Holy Spirit's presence, so they can see spiritually (v. 18);
- Be zealous (intentional) and repent (v. 19);
- Hear his voice and open the door to him, inviting him in (v. 20).

#### Correction:

- God will spit them out—totally reject them, as disgusting (v. 16);
- Yet, because he's the God of love, he knocks on their heart's door to gain entrance (v. 20). This appears to be their last chance.

#### Compensation:

- If they let him in, he will dine with them and they with him (v. 20). This speaks of relationship with the Father and fellowship with the Son;
- The overcomers (ones who heed his commands) will sit with him in his throne (v. 21). That means they will have a role in ruling the world during the Millennial Kingdom on earth.

All of these churches together represent the history of the church and the condition of the church, as it functions in the world. As we see levels of maturity in different groups, we also see different groups in heaven in the book of Revelation (Rev. 4, 5, 7, 14, and 6:9). In Revelation 19, we see the innumerable multitude celebrating the marriage of the Lamb and his Bride, and the guests and servers at the wedding feast. Then we see companies of armies returning with the Lord to rescue Israel and to establish the Millennial Kingdom. These armies are the ranks of resurrected believers.

This is a deep study. There are scholars who disagree with some of it and others who are more dogmatic about it. I offer it here as something for you to study on your own, seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance, and searching out what the rest of Scripture says concerning these things. And, of course, if you have questions, feel free to email me at [victoria@carrolldorshorn.com](mailto:victoria@carrolldorshorn.com).

---

## Bible Translations

Scripture marked KJV is taken from *The Holy Bible, King James Version*.

Scripture marked MEV ® is taken from the *Modern English Version*. Copyright © 2014 by Military Bible Association. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked NKJV ® is taken from *The Nelson Study Bible: New King James Version*. Copyright © 1997 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. New King James Version ®. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked NLT is taken from the *New Believer's Bible: New Living Translation*, Copyright © 1996, 2006, 2019, Tyndale House Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked RSV is taken from the *Revised Standard Version*, Copyright © 1946, 1952, American Bible Society, A. J. Holman Co. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked NASB is taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by the Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved.