

## INTRODUCTION to REVELATION chapter 2 and 3

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## 1 THE THEME

### *THE SEVEN CONGREGATIONS ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD*

## 2 THE STRUCTURE

### a. The place of Revelation chapter 2 and 3 in the book

Revelation chapter 2 is part of the first section of the book of Revelation (chapter 1 to 3) and a part of the first vision given to the apostle John (1:9 to 3:22).

### b. The number seven in the letters

In Revelation chapter 2 and 3 the following 'sevens' are mentioned: the seven stars (2:1; 3:1), the seven golden lampstands (2:1) and the seven spirits (3:1). Revelation chapter 2 to 3 is divided into seven letters written to the seven historical congregations in Asia, which existed at that time, that is, during the first century A.D. Each of the seven letters may be divided into seven parts.

### c. The structure of the seven letters

With slight modification, each letter has the same pattern, that is, has seven parts:

(1) Commission: "To the angel of the church (congregation) in ..." (the recipients). These 'angels' or messengers are the leaders (the elders) of the congregations, who represent the congregations and are responsible for what happens in these congregations.

(2) Christ's self-designation: "These are the words of him who ..." Literally: "The things (plural) says he who ..." <sup>1</sup> (the Author). Christ's self-designation has its bearing on the congregation to which the letter is addressed.

(3) Commendation: "I know your deeds ..." (the favourable comments).

(4) Condemnation: "Yet, I hold this against you ..." (the criticisms).

(5) Injunction: "Remember therefore ... or else ..." (the injunctions). The warnings, threats and injunctions are couched in the imperative mood. The congregations must act and Christ's intention is change or transformation. Christ intends his Church to continually reform to the standards of the Bible!

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<sup>1</sup> ταδε λεγει (vipa) ο ....

(6) Exhortation: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (congregations).” The letters are intended for every congregation in the world and in history.

(7) Promise: “To him who overcomes ...” (the promises). They are intended for those who rise above the temptations (seductions) and trials (persecutions) which face each particular congregation. Also the promise is adapted to the general character of each letter.

The seven letters are divided into two groups: In the first 3 letters the exhortation comes before the promise and in the last 4 letters the promise comes before the exhortation.

### **3 THE CONTENTS**

#### **a. Jesus Christ through his Spirit keeps on speaking through the seven letters**

Jesus Christ spoke through his Spirit to the Old Testament prophets and through them to his Old Testament people (1 Peter 1:9-12). Jesus Christ continued to speak through his Spirit to the New Testament apostles and through them to his New Testament people (John 14:26; 16:7-15). He sent a personal letter to the representative leader of each of the seven historical congregations in the time of the apostle John. But all the congregations in the history of the world should read those letters, *because the Holy Spirit continues to speak to all the congregations through them*. Literally: “He who has ears (and all people have ears) must hear what the Spirit continuously says to the churches (congregations)!” The letters are intended to encourage the congregations in their trials and to rebuke them in their ongoing sins. The letters give wonderful promises to every Christian that overcomes the temptations (seductions) and trails (persecutions) of the sinful world.

#### **b. All congregations in the world stand between the anxiety of threats and the joy of victory**

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 represent the great variety of the Church in the present New Testament period. It does not want to press this reality into one preset scheme, e.g. the seven periods of Church history of the historical premillennial view. The seven congregations represent the Church throughout the whole New Testament period with all the possible threats from within and possible persecutions from without. It represents the congregations which make compromises with the world that are called to repentance and conversion. It depicts God’s people in the present world from God’s point of view, clothed with the sun, crowned with the stars, holding the universe together (12:1-3), but from the world’s point of view threatened and chased by the dragon and his allies (12:4 to 13:18). During the long New Testament period between Christ’s first coming and Christ’s second coming the Church in the present world stands between anxiety and joy.

#### **c. Christ’s special message to each type of congregation**

Christ reveals himself to his congregations, commends their accomplishments, but condemns their continuing sins, warns them to repent and reform and promises them everlasting rewards.

(1) The congregation of Ephesus is an example of a dead orthodox congregation, a congregation that holds on to the Christian truth, but lacks Christian love. This is a Christian problem.

Christ’s message to congregations like Ephesus is especially, “Christ is the present and active One among the congregations and especially the protector and controller of the true church-leaders. Therefore he exhorts the congregation to repent from forsaking their devotion to Christ and he promises that they will enjoy eternal life”.

(2) The congregation of Smyrna is an example of a congregation persecuted by religion, a congregation that is something she could not yet be visibly. This is a religious problem.

Christ’s message to congregations like Smyrna is especially, “Christ is the conqueror of death, the ever Living One. Therefore he exhorts the congregation to be faithful in temptations (seductions) and trials (persecutions) even to the point of death, and he promises that they will never be hurt by eternal death”.

(3) The congregation of Pergamum is an example of a congregation persecuted by politics, a congregation that has to make a choice between Caesar and Christ. This is a political problem.

Christ's message to congregations like Pergamum is especially, "Christ is the One who fights with his Word against heresy within the Church. Therefore he exhorts the congregation to repent from harbouring false teaching and he promises that they will be truly satisfied and unique".

(4) The congregation of Thyatira is an example of a congregation plagued by false theology, a congregation that has to make a choice between acceptance with the world and acceptance with Christ. This is a sociological problem.

Christ's message to congregations like Thyatira is especially, "Christ is the observer and destroyer of every form of wickedness in the congregation, especially heresy. Therefore he exhorts the congregation to repent from heresy and to discipline (judge) heretics and he promises that they will share with Christ in his final judgement and reign of the new earth".

(5) The congregation of Sardis is an example of a sleeping congregation, a congregation absorbed by ordinary life. This is the problem of a dead congregation.

Christ's message to congregations like Sardis is especially, "Christ through his Spirit and preaching of the Word is the One who changes spiritual deadness into new life again. Therefore he exhorts the congregation to repent from sleeping, forgetting and neglecting and promises that they will never be forgotten by God in heaven".

(6) The congregation of Philadelphia is an example of a missionary congregation, a congregation that is on the offensive, saving the lost and building up the saved.

Christ's message to congregations like Philadelphia is especially, "Christ is the Sovereign One, who knows and speaks the truth and makes and executes the eternal decrees (closes and opens doors). Therefore he exhorts the congregation to endure and persevere even in the hour of trial and promises that they will permanently dwell and serve in God's presence, belong to God and share in God's blessings and privileges".

(7) The congregation of Laodicea is an example of a congregation locked in deadly self-deception, a congregation threatened by materialism, affluence and worldliness.

Christ's message to congregations like Laodicea is especially, "Christ sees and exposes pretence and self-delusion within the congregation and creates the new life he intended for the congregation. Therefore he exhorts the congregation to repent from their self-sufficiency in the present world and independence from him and promises that they will share in his reign over the present and the future new earth".

#### **d. Christ's messages to the seven congregations remain relevant throughout history**

With regard to the relationship of Revelation chapter 2 and 3 to the rest of the book of Revelation two facts show that all seven letters are very relevant to all congregations in the world today!

The exhortations in each letter are intended for all congregations in the world throughout world history.

Every letter closes with the words, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (congregations)(plural)." Jesus Christ commanded that each letter must be read by all the congregations in the world throughout the New Testament period and not merely by the seven historical congregations for which they were primarily intended (cf. 2:7,23; 3:6,13,22). The conditions of the congregations described in each letter, do not describe seven successive periods of Church history, but describe the conditions of congregations throughout the time between Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming. The conditions do not appear in one particular age of Church history, but again and again, now in this congregation and then in that congregation. All congregations must heed the warnings of Jesus.

The promises in each letter are also found in the later chapters of the book of Revelation.

Also the promises are meant for all the congregations in the world throughout the whole New Testament period! All congregations may draw encouragement from the promises of Jesus!

For example: The tree of life (2:7) is also found in Revelation 22:2,14,19. The second death (2:11) is also found in Revelation 20:14. The new name (2:17) is also found in Revelation 14:1, 22:4 and 19:12,13,16. Authority over the nations is also found in Revelation 12:5 and 20:4. The morning star (2:28) is also found in Revelation 22:16. These promises are more fully explained in the later chapters of the book. For example, the promise: "To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God" (2:7) is more fully explained later in the book of Revelation, "On each side of the river stood the

tree of life (meaning: stood trees of life), bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (22:2).

‘Dressed in white’ (3:4-5,18) is also found in Revelation 4:4; 6:11; 7:9,13,14; 19:14. ‘The book of life’ (3:5) is also found in Revelation 20:12. ‘The name of God’ (3:12) is also found in Revelation 14:1; 22:4. ‘The New Jerusalem’ (3:12) is also found in Revelation 21:2,10. ‘The throne’ (3:21) is also found in Revelation chapter 4 and 5; 6:16; chapter 7; 8:3; 12:5; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4-5; 20:11-12; 21:3,5; 22:1,3. These promises are more fully explained in the later chapters of the book. For example, “To him who overcomes I will give the right to sit with me on my throne” (3:21) is more fully explained later in the book of Revelation: Before Christ’s second coming “they reigned with Christ a thousand years” in heaven (20:4) and after Christ’s second coming “they will reign forever and ever” on the new earth (22:5).

This means that Christ intended that all congregations in the world and in world history should receive these seven letters. Christ also intended the contents of the whole book of Revelation to be an encouragement for all these congregations! This proves that the seven letters are not merely letters directed to the seven historical congregations during the first century A.D., but that the nature of these congregations and their particular struggles recur throughout the whole New Testament period. Therefore these seven letters are very relevant to all the congregations in the world throughout history!

This proves that the seven letters to the congregations are not simply a prefix to a book dealing mainly with Israel (as the futurist view maintains), but that they belong to the very essence of the book of Revelation. Conclusion: the book of Revelation is a unity and deals with the Church. This is the biblical view!

## **4 THE BACKGROUND**

### **a. The trade guilds**

The cities in those days had many trade guilds: wool-workers, linen-workers, garments industries, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, etc. These trade-guilds functioned like trade-unions and were associated with the worship of tutelary-deities. Each trade had its own guardian god. If a person wished to get ahead in the world, he had to belong to a guild and this implied that he worshipped its guardian god. He was expected to attend the guild-festivals and to eat the food as a gift from this guardian god. After the meal he was expected to participate in the gross immoral fun. Thus, on the one hand, if a Christian refused to participate, he became the object of ridicule and persecution. And if he quit the trade-union, he lost his job and his status in society. But, on the other hand, if a Christian remained within the guild, he had to participate in the idolatry and immorality. Then he denied the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **b. The Nicolaitans**

#### Scripture passages.

The cities of Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira were plagued by this religious group (2:6,14-15,20-24). Also the apostle Peter and Jude wrote about their teachings (2 Peter chapter 2 and Jude). Jesus Christ condemned the detestable practices (2:6) and teachings (2:15) of the Nicolaitans.

#### Their history.

The Nicolaitans were not simply a weakness among the Christians, but definitely a sect or cult, with liberal false teachings connected to the Gnostic dualism. They had a definite view of life and a theory, a system and practices, a way of thinking, speaking, acting and living.

They were probably widely spread. Early Church fathers, Irenaeus (A.D. 130-200), Tertullian (A.D. 190-216) and Hippolytus (A.D. 240) thought that Nicolaus, the founder of this sect, was one of the seven deacons mentioned in Acts 6:5. This could be only conjecture, because Nicolaus was a common name, meaning ‘conqueror of the people’. However, Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-216) said that the Nicolaitans based their teachings wrongly on a statement made by Nicolaus. Apparently Nicolaus had said, “One must rigidly discipline the flesh”, which the Nicolaitans misinterpreted as: “One must misuse the flesh”. Thus, the Nicolaitans wrongly based their libertine practices and teachings on Nicolaus. The Nicolaitans (2:6,15) and those who held to the teaching of Balaam (2:14) and the followers of the woman Jezebel (2:20) were in general the same group or school of heretics. They were a group with liberal tenets and were probably associated with the false apostles mentioned (2:2).

### Their teaching.

The main characteristic of their practices and teaching seems to have been a violation of the apostolic injunction in Acts 15:28-29, “to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality”, precisely the practices of the heathen religions (cf. 1 Peter 4:4-5). Their teaching was similar to the teaching of the false prophet Balaam in Numbers 25:1-2 and 31:16. He was forbidden to curse Israel, but forced to bless Israel. He gave the enemy advice to organise a great heathen idol festival and to invite the Israelites to it. Thus, Israel participated in eating the sacrifices made to idols and committed spiritual and sexual immorality with the heathens.

Through false teachers, false prophets like Jezebel and false apostles the Nicolaitans recommended the members of congregations to participate in the heathen idolatrous feasts and sexual immorality. They recommended, prophesied, taught and tried to justify their false doctrines and practices. According to the letters of Peter and Jude, they apparently had great influence on members of the congregations. In an age of much persecution of Christians, such a compromise seemed a very attractive alternative for members of congregations, because the teachings and practices of the Nicolaitans provided an escape from persecution! Thus, certain members of the congregations, unwilling to make sacrifices for Christ, made compromises with the world around them and formed the sect of the Nicolaitans. The eating of meat sacrificed to idols was understood by many people as bringing one in connection with demons (1 Corinthians 10:14-22).

### c. Different ways in which Christ is ‘coming’ (cf. 1:8; 3:11; 16:15; 22:17; Luke 12:35-40).

Christ makes use of prophetic foreshortening when he speaks of his coming. He regards his entire state of exaltation, from his resurrection to his second coming, as a unit. In Matthew 26:64 he says, “From now on you will see the Son of Man *continually* sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and *again and again* coming on the clouds of heaven”<sup>2</sup>! In Matthew 16:28, he describes *the beginning* of his coming and in Matthew 16:27 *the consummation* (end) of that coming! The beginning of his continual coming will be witnessed by people living at his first coming (the disciples). But the time of the consummation of his coming at his second coming cannot be known.

Christ comes in his human nature at his first and second coming and in his Spirit throughout the New Testament period.

#### (1) His coming in his lowly human nature.

*At his first coming* at the beginning of the New Testament period Christ came in his lowly divine-human nature, as God who took on the weak and mortal human nature, entered his creation and the history of the world to reveal himself to us, to make atonement for our sins and to conquer Satan (John 1:14; 6:38; 12:46; Romans 1:3; Philippians 2:6-8; 1 John 3:8). This was a physical, visible and personal coming.

#### (2) His coming in his glorious human nature.

*After his resurrection* from the dead Christ came in his powerful and glorious resurrected nature and appeared to his disciples (Matthew 16:27; 28:16-20; John 16:16; 20:19-29; Romans 1:4). This was a physical, visible and personal coming.

#### (3) His coming through the Holy Spirit.

*After his ascension* into heaven, on the day of Pentecost Christ came to his disciples. This was a spiritual, visible and personal coming. He did not leave his disciples as orphans, but returned to live in them through his Spirit, to equip, enlighten and empower them (John 14:16-18,23,28; Acts 1:8; Acts chapter 2; Romans 8:9-10; Colossians 1:27).

#### (4) His coming to establish his kingdom, his Church.

*After his outpouring of the Holy Spirit* Christ through his Spirit came to his disciples in a way that they saw him coming in his kingdom (establishing his royal reign as King, not only in Israel, but in the world) (Matthew 16:28; 26:64; 1 Corinthians 15:25). This invisible reign of Christ from heaven would visibly change people (Luke 17:20-21; 1 Timothy 1:15-17), would visibly make people disciples of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20), would visibly establish congregations all over the world (Matthew 16:18-19) and would visibly

<sup>2</sup> απ αρτι οψεσθε τον υιον του ανθρωπου καθημενον (νρηη) εκ δεξιων της δυναμεως και ερχομενον (νρηη) επι των νεφελων του ουρανου

turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6) as described in the book of Acts. It was a coming which some of his disciples witnessed in their own lifetime! This was a spiritual, invisible and personal coming. It was the beginning of his coming that continues throughout the whole New Testament period until the consummation of his coming at his second coming. This is what Christians pray for when they say, "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10)!

(5) His coming to save believers.

*Throughout the whole New Testament period* Christ through his Spirit comes again and again to call people through his Word to eternal life (John 5:24-26), to live in the hearts and lives of Christians all over the world (3:20), to gather them into his Church (Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:13), to control them from the inside (Romans 8:9-10,16; Colossians 1:27), to make them his disciples and to remain with them until the end (Matthew 28:19-20). This is a spiritual, invisible and personal coming. To those who receive him, who love and obey him, he reveals himself spiritually to them and comes and makes his home spiritually with them (John 14:21,23). And he stays spiritually in the midst of Christians who gather together in his name (1:13; 2:1; Matthew 18:20; Ephesians 2:22).

(6) His coming to judge.

*Throughout the whole New Testament period* Christ through his Spirit comes again and again to his congregations to judge their sin (2:5; 3:3; cf. John 5:22,27). This is a spiritual, invisible and personal coming. If congregations do not wake up, repent and do the things they did at first, then Christ will come unexpectedly and remove their lampstand, that is, they will cease to be a congregation (a light in the world)! And he again and again comes to judge the false apostles, false prophets and false teachers (2:16) and those who persecute the Church (chapter 8 and 9).

(7) His coming to gather the souls.

*Throughout the whole New Testament period* at the time a person dies Christ comes to that person either to welcome him into heaven (2:25; cf. Luke 16:22; Philippians 1:23) or to throw him into hell (cf. Luke 12:20; 16:23-24). This is a spiritual, invisible and personal coming.

(8) His coming to gather the bodies.

*At his second coming* at the end of the New Testament period Christ will come visibly in his glorious divine-human nature (Matthew 16:27; 24:3,27,30-31,36-44; 25:31-32; 1 Corinthians 11:16), win the final battle (16:14-16), resurrect the bodies of all the dead (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17), gather the elect (14:14-16; cf. Matthew 24:30-31,40a,41a; 2 Thessalonians 1:10), reward the righteous (2:25; 11:18b; cf. Matthew 25:34-40) or judge the wicked (6:17; 11:18a,c; 14:17-20; cf. Matthew 25:41-48), renew the earth and descend with all his people as the New Jerusalem onto the new earth in order to visibly live with them forever (21:1-3; cf. Acts 3:21; 2 Peter 3:3-13)! This will be a physical, visible and personal coming. Up to that time, the gospel will be spread, not only to all the nations, but also in Israel (Matthew 10:23).