

The Seven Churches of Asia Minor

If you have ever moved to a new community and had to select a new church home, you know how difficult it is to examine and evaluate a church and its ministry. Imposing buildings may house dying or dead congregations, while modest structures might belong to virile assemblies on the march for the Lord. The church we think is “rich” may turn out to be poor in God’s sight (Rev. 3:17), while the “poor” church is actually rich (Rev. 2:9).

Only the Head of the church, Jesus Christ, can accurately inspect each church and know its true condition, because He sees the internals, not only the externals (Rev. 2:23b). In these special messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor, the Lord gave each assembly an “X ray” of its condition. But He intended for *all* the churches to read these messages and benefit from them. (Note the plural “churches” in Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.)

But the Lord was also speaking to *individuals*, and this is where you and I come in. “He that hath an ear, let him hear.” Churches are made up of individuals, and it is individuals who determine the spiritual life of the assembly. So, while reading these messages, we must apply them personally as we examine our own hearts.

Finally, we must keep in mind that John was a pastor at heart, seeking to encourage these churches during a difficult time of persecution. Before Christ judges the world, He must judge His own people (Ezek. 9:6; 1 Peter 4:17). A purified church need never fear the attacks of Satan or men. “It is a very remarkable thing,” wrote G. Campbell Morgan, “that the church of Christ persecuted has been the church of Christ pure. The church of Christ patronized has always been the church of Christ impure.”

If Rev. 1:19 is the inspired outline of the book, then Rev. 2–3 deals with “the things which are.” In other words, Christ selected seven churches out of many in Asia Minor in order to get across His specific message. Certainly there were sins in the other churches, but the matters discussed in these seven churches cover all possible circumstances. Christ selected these seven churches to illustrate the spiritual conditions possible in the churches until He returns.

Some students believe these churches also illustrate the “prophetic history” of the church from apostolic times until the end of the age: Ephesus was the church of apostolic times, starting to lose that first love for Christ; Smyrna was the persecuted church of the first centuries (c. A.D. 100–300); Pergamos was the church joined to Rome, the state church; Thyatira represented the dominance of Roman Catholicism; Sardis symbolized the Reformation church; Philadelphia (“brotherly love”) the missionary church of the last days; and Laodicea was the lukewarm, apostate church of the last days. However, keep in mind that all of the conditions named were present in the churches at that one time, and they are present with us today. Furthermore, if this sequence is a “prophetic history” of the church, then Jesus could not return for His people until the era of the Laodicean church; and this would make His imminent return impossible. While the seven churches may illustrate the general development of the church through the ages, that was not the main purpose of these seven letters.

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Note that a special word is spoken to the “overcomers” in each church (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). These “overcomers” are not the “super-saints” in each church, a special group that will receive special privileges from Christ, but the true believers in each of these churches. We dare not assume that every member of every local church in every period of history is a true child of God. Those who truly belong to Christ are “overcomers” (1 John 5:4–5). In every period of history, there have been true saints in the professing church (often called “the invisible church”). Christ speaks a special word of encouragement to them, and certainly we may apply these words to ourselves today.

Note too that Satan is mentioned in connection with four churches: (1) he causes the persecution at Smyrna, 2:9; (2) he has his throne (“seat”) at Pergamos, 2:13; (3) he teaches his “deep doctrines” at Thyatira, 2:24; and (4) he uses his “synagogue” of false Christians to oppose the soul-winning efforts at Philadelphia, 3:9.

Christ points out several dangers in these churches:

A. The Nicolaitanes (2:6, 15).

The name “Nicolaus” means “conquer the people” and suggests a separation of clergy and laity in the churches. This sin began as “deeds” in Ephesus (v. 6) but became a doctrine in Pergamos. So it goes: deceivers introduce false activities into the church, and before long these activities are accepted and encouraged.

B. Satan’s synagogue (2:9; 3:9).

This refers probably to assemblies of people who claim to be believers but are really children of the devil (John 8:44). The word “synagogue” simply means “to bring together”; it is an assembly of religious people. Satan, then, has a church!

C. The doctrine of Balaam (2:14).

Read Num. 22–25. Balaam led Israel into sin by telling them that because they were God’s covenant people, they could mix with the heathen and not be judged. Balaam could not curse them, but he could tempt them with sins of the flesh. This doctrine, then, is the idea that the church can be married to the world and still serve God.

D. Jezebel (2:20).

Read 1 Kings 16 through 2 Kings 10. Jezebel was the heathen wife of King Ahab, a woman who led Israel into Baal worship. She seduced Israel with her false teaching.

The Personal Message

Note the spiritual problems in these churches and what Jesus instructed them to do if they were to have His blessing:

A. Ephesus.

Busy working for the Lord, but no sincere love for Him. Program without passion. This is the busy church with the great statistics, but one drifting away from heartfelt devotion to Christ.

B. Smyrna.

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This church gets no criticism from the Lord, but a danger is still present. This was a poor and suffering church. How easy it would have been to compromise, become rich, and escape persecution. How discouraged they might have been because they were not as “rich” as the Laodicean church.

C. Pergamos.

This church had members who held the false doctrine that it was easy to profess Christ while living in sin at the same time. Also, the people were under the heavy hand of spiritual dictators who promoted themselves, not the Lord.

D. Thyatira.

This woman was out of place in teaching doctrine; her doctrine led the people into sin. We must maintain God’s order in the local church (1 Tim. 2:11–15).

E. Sardis.

Reputation without life. Her best days were behind her. This is the “has-been” church, a great name in the past, but no ministry today. It is ready to die, but it can receive new life if it will but strengthen what it has.

F. Philadelphia.

The church before the open door, taking the Gospel to the world. This is the church that holds the Word and honors Christ’s name. But Satan’s synagogue is not far away, and there is always the danger of compromise.

G. Laodicea.

The lukewarm, apostate church, with a big budget and no blessing. This is the church that is materially rich and spiritually poor. And the tragedy is, the people do not know how poor and miserable they really are! Christ stands outside the church, calling for even one believer to yield to Him.

REVELATION 2

Ephesus, the Careless Church (Rev. 2:1–7)

Each of the seven messages begins with a personal description or designation of Jesus Christ taken from the vision of Christ given in Revelation 1. (In the case of Ephesus, see Rev. 1:12, 16, 20.) The Ephesian assembly had enjoyed some “stellar” leadership—Paul, Timothy, and the Apostle John himself—but the Lord reminded them that *He* was in control of the ministry, placing the “stars” where He pleased. How easy it is for a church to become proud and forget that pastors and teachers are God’s gifts (Eph. 4:11) who may be taken away at any time. Some churches need to be cautioned to worship the Lord and not their pastor!

Approval (vv. 2–3, 6). How gracious of the Lord to start with words of commendation! To begin with, this was a *servicing* church, busy doing the works of the Lord. No doubt their weekly schedule was filled with activities. It was also a *sacrificing* church, for the word *labor* means “toil to the point of exhaustion.” The Ephesian Christians paid a price to serve the Lord. They

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were a *steadfast* assembly, for the word *patience* carries the meaning of “endurance under trial.” They kept going when the going was tough.

The Ephesian church was a *separated* people, for they carefully examined the visiting ministers (see 2 John 7–11) to see if they were genuine. Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would come in from the outside and even arise from within the church (Acts 20:28–31), and John had instructed them to “try the spirits” (1 John 4:1–6). Indeed, Satan has his false ministers and the church must be constantly alert to detect them and reject them (2 Cor. 11:1–4, 12–15).

Ephesian Christians separated themselves not only from false doctrine but also from false deeds (Rev. 2:6). The word *Nicolaitan* means “to conquer the people.” Some Bible students believe this was a sect who “lorded it over” the church and robbed the people of their liberty in Christ (see 3 John 9–11). They initiated what we know today as “clergy” and “laity,” a false division that is taught nowhere in the New Testament. All God’s people are “kings and priests” (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6) and have equal access to the Father through the blood of Christ (Heb. 10:19ff). We shall meet this dangerous sect again when we study the message to the church at Pergamos.

The believers at Ephesus were a *suffering* people who patiently bore their burdens and toiled without fainting. And they did all of this for His name’s sake! No matter how you examine this congregation, you conclude that it is just about perfect. However, the One among the lampstands saw into their hearts, and He had a different diagnosis from ours.

Accusation (v. 4). This busy, separated, sacrificing church really suffered from “heart trouble”—they had abandoned their first love! They displayed “works... labor... and patience” (Rev. 2:2), but these qualities were not motivated by a love for Christ. (Compare 1 Thes. 1:3—“work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope.”) What we do for the Lord is important, *but so is why we do it!*

What is “first love”? It is the devotion to Christ that so often characterizes the new believer: fervent, personal, uninhibited, excited, and openly displayed. It is the “honeymoon love” of the husband and wife (Jer. 2:1–2). While it is true that mature married love deepens and grows richer, it is also true that it should never lose the excitement and wonder of those “honeymoon days.” When a husband and wife begin to take each other for granted, and life becomes routine, then the marriage is in danger.

Just think of it: it is possible to serve, sacrifice, and suffer “for My name’s sake” and yet not really love Jesus Christ! The Ephesian believers were so busy maintaining their separation that they were neglecting adoration. Labor is no substitute for love; neither is purity a substitute for passion. The church must have both if it is to please Him.

By reading Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians, you discover at least twenty references to *love*. You also discover that Paul emphasized the believer’s exalted position “in Christ... in the heavenly places.” But the Ephesian church had fallen and was not living up to its heavenly position in Christ (Rev. 2:5). It is only as we love Christ fervently that we can serve Him faithfully. Our love for Him must be pure (Eph. 6:24).

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Admonition (vv. 5–7). “First love” can be restored if we follow the three instructions Christ gave. First, we must *remember* (literally “keep on remembering”) what we have lost and cultivate a desire to regain that close communion once again. Then we must *repent*—change our minds—and confess our sins to the Lord (1 John 1:9). Third, we must *repeat the firstworks*, which suggests restoring the original fellowship that was broken by our sin and neglect. For the believer, this means prayer, Bible reading and meditation, obedient service, and worship.

In spite of the privileges it had enjoyed, the church of Ephesus was in danger of losing its light! The church that loses its love will soon lose its light, no matter how doctrinally sound it may be. “I will come” (Rev. 2:5) is not referring to the Lord’s return, but to His coming judgment *then and there*. The glorious city of Ephesus is today but a heap of stones and no light is shining there.

Revelation 2:7 makes it clear that individual believers within the church may be true to the Lord, no matter what others may do. In these seven messages, the “overcomers” are not a “spiritual elite,” but rather the true believers whose faith has given them victory (1 John 5:4–5). Sinful man was banned from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–24), but in Christ we have eternal abundant life (John 3:16; 10:10). We enjoy this blessing now, and we shall enjoy it in greater measure in eternity (Rev. 22:1–5).

The church of Ephesus was the “careless church,” made up of careless believers who neglected their love for Christ. Are we guilty of the same neglect?

Smyrna, the Crowned Church (Rev. 2:8–11)

The name *Smyrna* means “bitter” and is related to the word *myrrh*. The city remains a functioning community today called Izmir. The assembly at Smyrna was persecuted for the faith, which explains why the Lord emphasized His death and resurrection as He opened His message. No matter what experiences God’s people may have, their Lord identifies with them.

Approval (v. 9). The church at Smyrna was not having an easy time of it! The members were persecuted, probably because they refused to compromise and say, “Caesar is Lord.” Smyrna was an important center of the Roman imperial cult, and anyone refusing to acknowledge Caesar as Lord would certainly be excluded from the guilds. This would mean unemployment and poverty. The word used here for *poverty* means “abject poverty, possessing absolutely nothing.”

A large Jewish community also thrived in Smyrna. The Jews, of course, did not have to patronize the imperial cult since their religion was accepted by Rome; but they certainly would not cooperate with the Christian faith. So, from both Jews and Gentiles, the Christians in Smyrna received slander and suffering.

But they were rich! They lived for eternal values that would never change, riches that could never be taken away. “As poor, yet making many rich” (2 Cor. 6:10; 8:9). In fact, their suffering for Christ only increased their riches.

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Our struggles are not with flesh and blood, but with the enemy, Satan, who uses people to accomplish his purposes. The Jewish synagogue was actually a synagogue of Satan. A true Jew is not one physically or racially, but spiritually (Rom. 2:17–29). Any religious group, Jewish or Gentile, that does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as God’s Son is certainly acting contrary to God’s will.

Admonition (vv. 10–11). No words of accusation are given to the congregation in Smyrna! They may not have enjoyed the approval of men, but they certainly received the praise of God. However, the Lord did give them solemn words of admonition as they faced increased suffering: “Don’t be afraid!”

He assured them that He knew the devil’s plans and was in complete control of the situation. Some of the believers would be imprisoned and tried as traitors to Rome. Yet their tribulation would not be long; in the Bible, *ten days* signifies “a brief time” (Gen. 24:55; Acts 25:6). The important thing was *faithfulness*, standing true to Christ no matter what the government might threaten to do.

The “crown of life” is the winner’s crown awarded at the annual athletic games. Smyrna was a key participant in the games, so this promise would be especially meaningful to believers living there. The Lord reinforced the promise given by James (James 1:12) and assured His people that there was nothing to fear. Because they had trusted Him, they were overcomers—victors in the race of faith (Heb. 12:1–3)—and, as overcomers, they had nothing to fear. Even if they were martyred, they would be ushered into glory, wearing crowns! They would never face the awful judgment of the second death, which is the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14; 21:8).

It costs to be a dedicated Christian, in some places more than others. As end-time pressures increase, persecution will also increase; and God’s people need to be ready (1 Peter 4:12ff). The world may call us “poor Christians,” but in God’s sight we are rich!

Pergamos, the Compromising Church (Rev. 2:12–17)

Called “the greatest city in Asia Minor,” Pergamos had the first temple dedicated to Caesar and was a rabid promoter of the imperial cult. This is probably what is meant by “Satan’s seat” in Revelation 2:13. The city also had a temple dedicated to Aesculapius, the god of healing, whose insignia was the entwined serpent on the staff. (This is still a medical symbol today.) Satan, of course, is likewise symbolized as the serpent (2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:2).

Approval (v. 13). Like their brothers and sisters in Smyrna, the believers in Pergamos had suffered persecution, and one of their men had died for the faith. In spite of intense suffering, this church had remained true to God. They refused to drop incense on the altar and say, “Caesar is Lord.” The Lord’s description of Himself (“He which hath the sharp sword,” Rev. 2:12) would surely encourage the people, for the sword was also the symbol of the Roman proconsul. It was more important that the church fear Christ’s sword than the Roman sword (Rev. 2:16).

Accusation (vv. 14–15). Despite their courageous stand against persecution, the believers in Pergamos were not faultless before the Lord. Satan had not been able to destroy them by coming as the roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), but he was making inroads as the deceiving serpent. A group of

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compromising people had infiltrated the church fellowship, and Jesus Christ hated their doctrines and their practices.

These infiltrators are called “Nicolaitans,” whom we met already at Ephesus (Rev. 2:6). The name means “to rule the people.” What they taught is called “the doctrine of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14). The Hebrew name *Balaam* also means “lord of the people” and is probably synonymous with *Nicolaitans*. Sadly, this group of professed believers “lorded it over” the people and led them astray.

Understanding the story of Balaam helps us interpret this insidious group more accurately (see Num. 22–25). Balaam was a true prophet who prostituted his gifts in order to earn money from King Balak, who hired him to curse the people of Israel. God prevented Balaam from actually cursing the nation—in fact, God turned the curses into blessings!—but Balak still got his money’s worth. How? By following Balaam’s advice and making friends with Israel, and then inviting the Jews to worship and feast at the pagan altars. “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em!”

The Jewish men fell right into the trap and many of them became “good neighbors.” They ate meat from idolatrous altars and committed fornication as part of heathen religious rites. Twenty-four thousand people died because of this disobedient act of compromise (Num. 25:1–9).

Why did this bit of ancient history apply to the believers at Pergamos? Because a group in that church said, “There is nothing wrong with being friendly to Rome. What harm is there in putting a pinch of incense on the altar and affirming your loyalty to Caesar?” Antipas refused to compromise and was martyred; but others took the “easy way” and cooperated with Rome.

It is unlikely that “things sacrificed to idols” is the same problem Paul dealt with in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. The accusation here left no room for personal choice as did Paul. The Lord accused the Christians in Pergamos of sinning, of committing “spiritual fornication” by saying, “Caesar is Lord.” Of course, this compromise made them welcome in the Roman guilds and protected them from Roman persecution, but it cost them their testimony and their crown.

Believers today also face the temptation to achieve personal advancement by ungodly compromise. The name *Pergamos* means “married,” reminding us that each local church is “engaged to Christ” and must be kept pure (2 Cor. 11:1–4). We shall see later in Revelation that this present world system is pictured as a defiled harlot, while the church is presented as a pure bride. The congregation or the individual Christian that compromises with the world just to avoid suffering or achieve success is committing “spiritual adultery” and being unfaithful to the Lord.

Admonition (vv. 16–17). Antipas had felt the sword of Rome, but the church at Pergamos would feel the sword of Christ—the Word (Heb. 4:12)—if they did not repent. This is not a reference to our Lord’s return but to a *present* judgment that comes to a church when it is disobedient to the Word of God. The Lord had presented Himself as “He which hath the sharp sword” (Rev. 2:12), so the church could not have been ignorant of its danger.

As with the previous churches, the closing appeal is to *the individual*: “*He* that hath an ear.... To *him* that overcometh” (Rev. 2:17, italics added). God fed the Israelites with manna during their

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wilderness travels, and a pot of the manna was placed in the ark of the covenant (Ex. 16:32–36; Heb. 9:4). Instead of eating “things sacrificed to idols” (Rev. 2:14), the believers in Pergamos needed to feast on God’s holy food, the bread of life found in Jesus Christ through the Word (Matt. 4:4; John 6:32ff). The ark of the covenant was the throne of God (2 Sam. 6:2; Ps. 80:1; Isa. 37:16; all NASB), in contrast to Satan’s throne which held authority in Pergamos (Rev. 2:13).

In those days, a white stone was put into a vessel by a judge to vote acquittal for a person on trial. It was also used like a “ticket” to gain admission to a feast. Both would certainly apply to the believer in a spiritual sense: he has been declared righteous through faith in Christ, and he feasts with Christ today (Rev. 3:20) and will feast with Him in glory (Rev. 19:6–9).

Thyatira, the Corrupted Church (Rev. 2:18–29)

The longest message was sent to the church in the smallest city! Thyatira was a military town as well as a commercial center with many trade guilds. Wherever guilds were found, idolatry and immorality—the two great enemies of the early church—were almost always present too.

The city boasted a special temple to Apollo, the “sun god,” which explains why the Lord introduced Himself as “the Son of God” (the only time in Revelation this title is used). John had to deliver a message of severe warning and judgment to this congregation, which explains the description of the Lord’s eyes and feet.

Approval (v. 19). The believers in Thyatira were a busy lot! They were involved in sacrificial ministry for the sake of others. What’s more, their works were increasing and characterized by faith, love, and patience; so the church was not guilty of mere “religious activity.”

Accusation (vv. 20–23). Alas, the Lord found much to expose and condemn in the assembly at Thyatira. No amount of loving and sacrificial works can compensate for tolerance of evil. The church was permitting a false prophetess to influence the people and lead them into compromise. It is not likely that this woman was actually called “Jezebel,” since such an infamous name would not be given to a child. The name is symbolic: Jezebel was the idolatrous queen who enticed Israel to add Baal worship to their religious ceremonies (see 1 Kings 16–19). The seductive teaching of Jezebel was similar to the “doctrine of Balaam” that the Lord condemned in the church of Pergamos (Rev. 2:14). She taught believers how to compromise with the Roman religion and the practices of the guilds, so that Christians would not lose their jobs or their lives.

It is interesting to contrast the churches at Ephesus and Thyatira. The Ephesian church was weakening in its love, yet faithful to judge false teachers; while the people in the assembly at Thyatira were growing in their love, but too tolerant of false doctrine. Both extremes must be avoided in the church. “Speaking the truth in love” is the biblical balance (Eph. 4:15). Unloving orthodoxy and loving compromise are both hateful to God.

Not only was the church at Thyatira tolerant of evil, but it was proud and unwilling to repent. The Lord gave the false prophetess time to repent, yet she refused. Now He was giving her followers opportunity to repent. His eyes of fire had searched out their thoughts and motives, and He would make no mistake.

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In fact, the Lord threatened to use this assembly as a solemn example to “all the churches” not to tolerate evil. Jezebel and her children (followers) would be sentenced to tribulation and death! Idolatry and compromise are, in the Bible, pictured as fornication and unfaithfulness to the marriage vows (Jer. 3:6ff; Hosea 9:1ff). Jezebel’s bed of sin would become a bed of sickness! To *kill with death* means “to kill with pestilence” (see NASB). God would judge the false prophetess and her followers once and for all.

Admonition (vv. 24–29). Not everyone in the assembly was unfaithful to the Lord, and He had a special word for them. They had separated themselves from the false doctrine and compromising practices of Jezebel and her followers, which Christ denounces as “the depths of Satan” (note the contrast in 1 Cor. 2:10). The Lord had no special demands to make; He simply wanted them to hold fast in their resistance to evil. “Till I come” refers to Christ’s return for His people, at which time He will reward them for their faithfulness (see Rev. 3:3; 16:15; 22:7, 17, 20). This is the first mention in Revelation of the Lord’s coming for the church, the event we commonly call the Rapture (see 1 Thes. 4:13–18). In contrast, the reference in Revelation 1:7 is to Christ’s return to earth in judgment, to defeat His enemies and establish His kingdom (see Rev. 19:11ff).

The believers in Thyatira are promised authority over the nations, which probably refers to the fact that God’s people will live and reign with Christ (see Rev. 20:4). When the Lord sets up His kingdom on earth, it will be a righteous kingdom with perfect justice. He will rule with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:8–9). Rebellious men will be like clay pots, easily broken to pieces!

Jesus Christ is “the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev. 22:16). The promise in Revelation 2:28 suggests that God’s people shall be so closely identified with Christ that He will “belong” to them! But perhaps there is also an allusion here to Satan, who wanted the kingdom for himself and who offered the world’s kingdoms to Christ if He would worship him but once (Matt. 4:8–11). In Isaiah 14:12, Satan is named *Lucifer*, which in Hebrew means “brightness, bright star.” The compromising people in Thyatira were following “the depths of Satan,” which would lead to darkness and death. God’s overcomers, on the other hand, would share the Morning Star!

As you review these first four messages to the churches, you can see the dangers that still exist for the people of God. Like Ephesus, we can be zealous and orthodox, but at the same time lose our devotion to Christ. Or, like Thyatira, our love can be increasing yet lacking in the kind of discernment that is necessary to keep the church pure (see Phil. 1:9–11). Like Pergamos and Thyatira, we may be so tolerant of evil that we grieve the Lord and invite His judgment.

Would we have selected Smyrna as the most spiritual church of the four? Probably not, yet the Lord did! We need to remind ourselves not to judge God’s people by wrong standards, because only the Lord can see the heart (see 1 Cor. 4:5).

God’s exhortation to these churches (except Smyrna) is, “Repent! Change your minds!” It is not only lost sinners who need to repent, but also disobedient Christians. If we do not repent and deal with sin in our lives and in our assemblies, the Lord may judge us and remove our lampstand (Rev. 2:5). How tragic it is when a local church gradually abandons the faith and loses its witness for Christ!

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“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches!”