

THE UNVEILING

Session 2

To the Churches, Part I

Revelation 2: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira

A Fourteen-Session Inductive Study for Young Adults

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 2:7, RSV2CE)

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the seven letters follow a deliberate pattern, that Christ knows each church intimately (its city, its pressures, its sins, its endurance), and that every letter, though addressed to one church, is spoken to all: what the Spirit says to the churches.

Catholic Touchstone. Christ addresses churches that are simultaneously holy and in need of purification. The Church has always confessed exactly this about herself: holy because Christ is her holiness, yet embracing sinners in her bosom and always in need of being purified (CCC 827). The letters are not an argument against the Church; they are the Lord loving his Church enough to correct her.

What You Need to Know

The seven cities lie on a natural postal circuit in Asia Minor: a messenger landing at Ephesus could walk north to Smyrna and Pergamum, then inland and south through Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The order of the letters is the order of the road.

Each letter follows a common pattern worth having the group find for themselves: (1) an address to the angel of the church; (2) a self-title of Christ, almost always lifted from the chapter 1 vision; (3) I know: Christ's assessment, commendation or diagnosis or both; (4) where needed, a charge: but I have this against you; (5) a call to repent, or to hold fast; (6) the refrain, he who has an ear; (7) a promise to him who conquers. The verb to conquer, *nikaō*, runs through the whole book and returns in its final chapters; flag it now and let the study track it.

Local color, offered honestly: these identifications are the common judgment of commentators, drawing on archaeology and ancient sources, not matters of doctrine. Ephesus was the great harbor metropolis, home of the temple of Artemis and, by the 90s, of a provincial temple to the emperor; its church, shaped by St. Paul's years of ministry there (Acts 18–19), was doctrinally vigilant but had abandoned the love it had at first. Smyrna was a fiercely loyal ally of Rome with a substantial synagogue community in tension with the Christians; its letter is one of only two with no rebuke. Pergamum was the province's ancient royal capital, dense with pagan shrines and an early center of the imperial cult; where Satan's throne is (2:13) most likely evokes that concentration of pagan and imperial worship, though commentators have proposed specific referents (the great altar of Zeus among them) and certainty is not available. Thyatira, the least famous of the seven, was a town of trade guilds (Lydia, a seller of purple goods from Thyatira, appears in Acts 16:14); guild membership commonly brought guild feasts, and guild feasts meant food sacrificed to idols, which is likely the pressure the letter names.

Two named adversaries need careful handling. The Nicolaitans (2:6, 2:15) are otherwise unknown; the letters condemn their works and teaching without describing them, and the context (Balaam, food offered to idols, immorality) suggests a party of accommodation with paganism. Say honestly: we do not know more than the text tells us. Jezebel (2:20) is likely a symbolic name, branding a self-styled prophetess in Thyatira with the name of the Old Testament queen who promoted Baal worship (1 Kings 16:31; 2 Kings 9:22). The issue in both cases is the same: teachers reassuring Christians that they could share the table of idols and the table of the Lord.

Pastoral note. The letter to Smyrna promises not escape but tribulation: you will have tribulation, be faithful unto death. Some in your group may be carrying real suffering. Do not rush past 2:10; let it be what it is, a word of costly hope, and point gently toward the sacraments and the communion of saints rather than forcing a tidy resolution.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 2–3: the tree of life (2:7) returns from Eden; what was barred at the fall is promised to him who conquers, and it will return again in Revelation 22:2.
- Numbers 22–25 and 31:16: Balaam, who could not curse Israel, taught Balak to seduce Israel into idolatry and immorality instead; the letter to Pergamum (2:14) reads its accommodationists through that story.
- 1 Kings 16:31 with 18:4, 13, 19: Jezebel, royal patroness and enforcer of Baal worship (2 Kings 9:22 adds her harlotries and sorceries); the name in 2:20 imports the whole story.
- Psalm 2:8–9: rule with a rod of iron, quoted to the conqueror at 2:26–27; a messianic psalm the book will quote again (12:5; 19:15).
- Exodus 16 and the hidden manna (2:17): bread from heaven preserved before the LORD (Exodus 16:32–34; kept with the ark per Hebrews 9:4), promised again to him who conquers.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Polycarp of Smyrna · *Martyrdom of Polycarp, ch. 9*

Smyrna's church was told: be faithful unto death. Within living memory of this letter, its own bishop did exactly that. Standing in the stadium and ordered to curse Christ, the aged Polycarp answered that for eighty-six years he had served Christ, who had done him no wrong, and asked how he could now blaspheme his King who saved him. Condemned to the pyre around A.D. 155, he stood unconsumed as the flames arched around him, the account says, until the executioner's blade completed his martyrdom (Martyrdom of Polycarp, chs. 15–16). The letter to Smyrna is not theory.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Antioch · *Letter to the Ephesians, ch. 13 (summary)*

Not long after Revelation, on the common dating, St. Ignatius, being marched to his death in Rome, wrote to this same church of Ephesus. He praises, in substance, their famous faith and their unity with their bishop, and urges them to gather frequently for the Eucharist, where the powers of Satan are broken. The church that had abandoned its first love was still being called, by another martyr, back to the altar where love is rekindled.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Victorinus of Pettau · *Commentary on the Apocalypse (summary)*

The earliest surviving Latin commentary on Revelation, written by the martyr-bishop St. Victorinus before about A.D. 304, teaches in substance that what Christ says to one church he says to all: the seven churches, being seven, stand for the one universal Church in her fullness. That is why each letter ends, hear what the Spirit says to the churches, in the plural. The Church has read these letters as her own mail ever since.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 827: the Church, holy and yet embracing sinners, always in need of purification, always following the path of penance and renewal. This is the theological frame for every rebuke in chapters 2 and 3.

- CCC 1428: Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians; this second conversion is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church. Repent (2:5, 2:16, 2:21–22) is addressed to the baptized.
- CCC 2113: idolatry is not confined to false pagan worship but remains a constant temptation; whatever a person prefers to God becomes an idol. The guild-feast pressure of Thyatira has modern names.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Conqueror thread, planted tonight: every promise is to him who conquers (*nikaō*). Track the verb; it develops in Sessions 6 and 9 (the Lamb's victors) and resolves in Sessions 13 and 14 (the Lamb who conquers, 17:14, spoken over the Rider's war; he who conquers shall have this heritage, 21:7).

Numbers thread continues quietly: seven letters, one pattern.

Furniture of Heaven, entries tonight (silent): the hidden manna (2:17) and the tree of life (2:7). Add them without comment. If someone spots bread from heaven, smile, have them write it down, and let your list grow in silence. Confirm that every My Sunday Guess came back written and sealed.

Sealed guesses from Session 1 should now all be written and sealed. Do not mention the contents again until Session 8.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers the seven-part pattern of the letters by comparing two of them side by side.
2. The group can explain how each self-title of Christ comes from the Session 1 vision.
3. The group grasps the both-and of commendation and rebuke: Christ knows, Christ loves, Christ corrects.
4. The group connects Balaam and Jezebel to their Old Testament stories by opening the passages.
5. Each participant identifies one first love practice to recover this week.

Timed Plan (75–90 minutes)

- Opening prayer: 5 min
- Win questions: 10 min
- Build (four letters, with discovery passages): 45–55 min
- Send questions: 8 min
- Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer, distribute Take-Home 2: 7–10 min

Pre-chosen cuts if time runs short: drop the Dig Deeper box, and treat Pergamum and Thyatira together in Question 5 rather than separately.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, you walk among the lampstands and you know us: our work, our endurance, and what we have abandoned. Give us ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, and hearts willing to repent and to hold fast. For you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Win

1. Think of a coach, teacher, or mentor who both praised you and corrected you. What made you able to receive the correction?
2. When you hear that Jesus has something against a church, does that unsettle you or reassure you? Why?

Build

Read Revelation 2:1–7 (Ephesus) and 2:8–11 (Smyrna) aloud.

3. Compare the two letters side by side. What structural elements do they share? Build the pattern together on paper or a whiteboard.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The pattern: address to the angel of the church; a self-title of Christ; I know (commendation); where needed, a charge against; a command (repent, or fear not and be faithful); the refrain, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches; and a promise to him who conquers. Note two things: the refrain is plural (the churches), so every letter is for everyone, including us; and Smyrna receives no rebuke at all. The poorest and most persecuted church gets the gentlest letter, and Christ tells her she is rich (2:9).

4. Look at each letter's opening self-title of Christ (2:1, 2:8; then glance ahead at 2:12, 2:18). Where have we seen these images before? Why might each church get the title it gets?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Every title is drawn from the Session 1 vision: who holds the seven stars and walks among the lampstands (2:1; compare 1:13, 16); the first and the last, who died and came to life (2:8; compare 1:17–18); who has the sharp two-edged sword (2:12; compare 1:16); whose eyes are like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze (2:18; compare 1:14–15). And each may fit: the church tempted to think Christ distant hears that he walks among the lampstands; the church facing death hears from the one who died and came to life; the church tolerating false teaching hears about the sword of his mouth; the church with a hidden corruption faces the eyes of fire. Christ addresses each church out of who he has already been unveiled to be.

5. Ephesus is commended for testing false apostles and hating the works of the Nicolaitans, yet charged with abandoning the love it had at first (2:4). How can a church be doctrinally right and still be dying? What is the prescribed remedy (2:5)?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Orthodoxy without charity hardens into something under the gravest warning in the seven letters: I will remove your lampstand. The remedy is threefold and concrete: remember from where you have fallen, repent, and do the works you did at first. Not feel the feelings you felt at first: do the works. Love is rekindled by acts of love. This is a deeply Catholic instinct: grace works through concrete

practice, and the road back to first love runs through the things you did when you first believed (prayer, Mass, confession, service, generosity).

6. Smyrna is promised tribulation, prison, and possibly death, and told: be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life (2:10). What does Christ NOT promise this church? Why is this still good news?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He does not promise rescue from suffering; he promises himself on the far side of it, and he can, because he is the one who died and came to life (2:8). The second death (2:11) has no power over those who share his victory. Handle this question gently; if the group sits in silence for a moment, let it. Some of the truest hope in Scripture is unsentimental. St. Polycarp, bishop of this very city, lived this letter to its end; his story is on tonight's Take-Home.

Read Revelation 2:12–17 (Pergamum) and 2:18–29 (Thyatira) aloud.

7. Both letters condemn a similar sin under two Old Testament names. Discovery: one group open Numbers 25:1–3 with Numbers 31:16; the other open 1 Kings 16:30–31. Who were Balaam and Jezebel, and what is the modern-day shape of the sin these names are branding?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Balaam, unable to curse Israel, taught Balak to seduce Israel instead: draw them into the feasts and beds of paganism and their God will judge them himself (Numbers 25 with 31:16). Jezebel was the royal patroness who made Baal worship respectable at the top of society. In both churches, teachers were reassuring Christians that they could eat at the guild feasts of the idols, share the city's compromises, and still belong to Christ. The sin has a timeless shape: not open apostasy but accommodation, belonging to Christ on Sunday and to the idols of career, status, and appetite the rest of the week. The letters are severe because the stakes are real, and yet even here the door is open: I gave her time to repent (2:21).

8. List the promises to him who conquers in this chapter (2:7, 2:10–11, 2:17, 2:26–28). Which one most catches your attention, and what do you think it points to?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The tree of life in the paradise of God (Eden reopened; watch for Revelation 22:2). The crown of life and immunity from the second death. The hidden manna (bread from heaven kept in the ark, Exodus 16:32–34; note where this bread from heaven was kept: hidden with God in the ark, promised as food for the victor; the ark itself returns later in this book) and a white stone with a new name. Authority over the nations with the words of Psalm 2, and the morning star, which the book will finally identify in its last chapter (22:16): the morning star is Christ himself. Every promise is, in the end, a form of the same promise: himself.

BUILD, THEN PRESS: DO THESE LETTERS DISPROVE A UNIVERSAL CHURCH?

Present this at full strength before answering. A serious Protestant reading says: notice that Christ writes to seven distinct local congregations, each addressed on its own, each responsible for itself, with no mention of any earthly headquarters, hierarchy, or universal structure. The one universal Church the New Testament knows is invisible, the company of all true believers; on earth, the church is the local assembly. Whatever these letters establish, it is not a single visible hierarchy with universal jurisdiction, and Rome's claims are later developments this text quietly refutes.

9. What is genuinely right in that observation? And what in the text itself points beyond it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

What is right: the local church is real and matters enormously to Christ. He addresses Ephesus as Ephesus; Catholic teaching agrees, and the Church is truly present in each local church gathered around its bishop.

But the text points beyond the local at every turn. One and the same Christ walks among all the lampstands (1:13; 2:1); the churches are not seven free-standing fellowships but seven lamps around one Lord. Every letter ends in the plural: what the Spirit says to the churches, so Smyrna's mail is Ephesus's business. Seven, the number of completeness, makes the group a figure of the whole Church, which is how the Church's earliest commentators read it. And the letters assume authoritative structure rather than refute it: they are addressed to the angel of each church, and they condemn false apostles and false prophets, which only makes sense if there are true ones whose authority can be tested (compare Acts 20:17, 28, where St. Paul charges the Ephesian elders to shepherd the flock as overseers). The letters show us the one Church in her many places, under one Lord, with real shepherds: which is what Catholic ecclesiology claims the New Testament shows in seed, not its refutation. The letters do not by themselves settle the shape of universal governance (the identity of each church's angel is disputed, and the full case rests on other texts; our study *Unless Someone Guides Me* makes it at length); what they refute is the idea that the local assembly is the whole story: one Lord, one plural refrain, one sevenfold Church.

DIG DEEPER

The white stone and the new name (2:17). Commentators have proposed many backgrounds (a juror's acquittal pebble, an admission token to a feast, a victor's prize); no one knows with certainty, and it is honest to say so. What the text itself gives us is the pattern of God renaming those he claims: Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter. To receive a new name from God is to receive a new identity known fully only to the giver and the receiver. Baptismal and confirmation names carry this instinct forward in Catholic practice.

Send

10. Which of the four churches tonight is most like you right now: right but cold, poor but rich, tolerant of compromise, or generous but drifting? What would Christ's I know sound like addressed to you?
11. What is one work you did at first, when your faith was young or newly serious, that you have quietly dropped?

Live It This Week

- Do one first-love work this week: the practice you named in the Send questions. Do it once, concretely, before we meet again.
- Read Revelation 3 in preparation for next session.
- Memorize the memory verse below.

Memory Verse

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10, RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, you know our works. Thank you for what you see in us that is good; give us honesty about what you hold against us, courage to repent, and strength to be faithful unto death. Our Father, who art in heaven... Amen.

Distribute Take-Home 2 as people leave.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 2, in order:

- Revelation 2:1–7 (Ephesus, read aloud)
- Revelation 2:8–11 (Smyrna, read aloud)
- Revelation 2:12–17 (Pergamum, read aloud)
- Revelation 2:18–29 (Thyatira, read aloud)
- Numbers 25:1–3 and 31:16 (discovery, group A)
- 1 Kings 16:30–31 (discovery, group B)
- Exodus 16:32–34 (leader background, hidden manna)
- Psalm 2:8–9 (leader background for 2:26–27)
- Acts 16:14 (leader background, Lydia of Thyatira)
- Acts 20:17, 28 (steelman answer, Ephesian overseers)
- Memory verse: Revelation 2:10