

THE MESSAGES TO THE CHURCHES

Revelation 2; 3

There are some general facts concerning John's messages to the seven churches which can be presented to all but the youngest children. These have to do with the similarities of all the messages: (1) Each picks out a particular feature of the vision of the Lord; (2) Each commends the church for what it is doing that is good; (3) Each rebukes the church for its particular evil and shows what the resulting punishment will be if the evil persists; (4) Each offers a special promise if the evil is put away; (5) Each closes with the words, "He that hath an ear, etc.," leaving the church free to choose whether it will obey or not.

Doctrinal Points

We can see the rightness and wrongness in our lives to the extent that we are "in charity and faith."

The church in itself is one, but various according to reception.

The Lord is always standing at the door knocking. It is up to us to open it to Him.

Notes for Parents

We remember that the Lord told John that the seven golden lampstands among which He stood were "the seven churches" and that the seven stars in His right hand were "the angels of the seven churches." The word *angel*, we recall, means "messenger." Now He gives John a special message for each of the churches.

The seven churches mentioned were actual churches. They had been founded in Asia Minor by the early Christians, and had developed especially after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70, when the remaining apostles and their followers were dispersed. The messages sent to them by the Lord

through John show us plainly that the early Christians were much like ourselves, prone to differences of opinion, to worldliness, and to spiritual laziness. We have already seen how little even the twelve apostles understood of the Lord's teachings, and how easily they were induced to save themselves rather than to remain faithful. Although the resurrection gave them new faith and courage and some of them afterward suffered martyrdom for their faith, they did not suddenly become perfect and infallible. The Christian Church almost from its beginning went astray because it looked to men for its teaching rather than to the Lord, relying on the Epistles rather than on the Gospels, and in later times basing its whole structure on decisions arrived at by men at the Council of Nicea three hundred years after the time of the Lord. We need to go to the four Gospels and the book of Revelation for our knowledge of what the Lord actually teaches.

But the messages to the seven churches are of more than mere historical interest to us. The seven churches show us seven types of people. Each one of us has his own special qualities and abilities and also his own special weaknesses and faults. The Lord sees both, and in these messages He says to us, "Hold fast the good which has developed in you, but recognize also the evil and repent and change your ways, lest you lose the place prepared for you in heaven." Each one of the churches was given a special promise if it was faithful, as each one of us has a special heavenly character which it is possible for him to attain. And we might notice that the church of Laodicea, which received the most severe condemnation because it was "lukewarm," was promised the greatest reward for overcoming its fault. This is because their fault was the hardest to overcome. Is not this same "lukewarmness" in spiritual things the besetting sin of most of us? We acknowledge what we ought to do but we excuse ourselves for not doing it. We take the easy way. The Lord is always standing at the door of our souls. We often hear His knock. But how often we are too busy with our own affairs to open the door!

The Lord has a special message for each one of us. He tells us

plainly that if we go our own way, we shall find only unhappiness in the end, and that if we follow His way, it will lead us to eternal joy; but He leaves us free to make our own choice. He says to each one of us, as He said to each of the seven churches, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

Primary

Spend a little time recalling to the children’s minds John’s vision of the Lord, ending with the explanation given in the letter of the stars and lampstands. Then tell them that there really were seven churches and that the Lord gave John a different message for each one. Read them the following verses, stopping at each to make the connection with John’s vision: 2:1, 8, 12, 18 and 3:1, 7, 14. Then tell them that the closed door is the little door which we close in our minds when we are naughty and do not want to hear what is right, and make the connection between this and the memory verse. Also call attention to the five similarities in all the messages, and illustrate by reading the messages to the churches in Philadelphia and Laodicea (3:7-22).

The book we are studying now is about a wonderful vision which was given to the apostle John when he was an old man.

Where was John at this time?

What was the first thing he saw?

What did the Lord say about Himself?

To how many churches was John given messages?

They were the seven Christian churches which had been founded in Asia Minor, over which John was the head.

Our lesson today is about messages which the Lord gave to John for these seven churches—a different message for each church.

The Lord sees what is in the heart of every one of us—what is bad and what is good—and does His best to lead every one of us to heaven. We all have good things in us but we also have bad ones, and we cannot get to heaven unless we are willing to be told when we are doing wrong and to admit it and try to change. So the Lord told each of the seven churches what its good qualities were and also what its bad ones were and what it must do to be truly heavenly. Finally He made each church, if it would be faithful, a special beautiful promise.

Like the seven churches, each one of us does some good things and some bad ones.

So the Lord has a special message for each of us, and we need to listen and obey.

And for each of us He has some special beautiful thing in store, if we are faithful.

What two doors are mentioned in our lesson? (verses 8 and 20 of chapter 3)

The open door is the door of heaven.

The closed door is the one we close in our minds when we do not want to hear what the Lord is trying to tell us.

Verse 20 of chapter 3 is a very important one, for each one of us has to choose whether he will just do as he pleases—in which case he cannot possibly get to heaven—or take the right way, the Lord's way, which is harder but which leads to true happiness. The Lord is always standing near us ready to come into our minds and hearts if we will just open the door to Him.

Junior

The Juniors are old enough to understand that the messages are to us as well as to the churches of long ago, although they will be interested in looking at a map which shows the location of those churches and the relative position of Asia Minor and the Holy Land. Be sure to point out Patmos. Something of the spiritual meaning can be given simply by pointing out that we are all different and that the Lord treats each of us in a special way, that we all have some good things in us which the Lord tries to encourage and some bad ones which He points out to us so that we can fight them, and that the choice of what we become must be our own.

Where was the vision recorded in the book of Revelation given?

To whom was it given and when?

What was the beginning of the vision?

What was John commanded to do?

What were the seven stars said to be?

What were the seven lampstands?

Find these seven cities on a map. John was in charge of the church at Ephesus, but he was probably head of all seven. Find the island to which he had been banished when he received his vision.

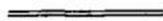
The business of every church on earth is to uphold the truth the

Lord has given it, so that it will give light to men's minds. So each church is like a lampstand. And also each church has a special spiritual character, a living spirit which connects it with heaven and the Lord; this is its "angel"—its "messenger." It was to this living spirit in each church that John's message was given.

The seven churches were different from each other just as the churches of today are, and just as individual Christians are. Each had some virtues and some faults, and the Lord commended the virtues and pointed out the faults, and to each church He gave a special promise if it would overcome its faults. Philadelphia was described as the most faithful of them all, though there were some in it who were hypocrites. The door of heaven was said to be open to the people of this church and it was told only to hold fast its truth and goodness. Notice that those who did hold fast were to take the name "New Jerusalem."

Laodicea, on the other hand, was severely rebuked because it was "lukewarm." We are lukewarm Christians when we slide along through life not trying very hard to learn what the Lord would have us do, but always taking the way that seems to us easiest at the moment. It is to such people that the Lord says, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock," because they are keeping the doors of their minds closed to the truths which they need. But if they will open the door and change their ways, He makes them one of the best of the promises. This is because it is very hard to overcome the temptation to take the easy way, and victory over that temptation brings a high reward. If you will stop to think, you will realize that it is the people who are willing to work hard and to stand firmly for what is right who become great.

Now read verse 13. We all have ears, haven't we? But do we always hear what is said to us? Did you ever try to hear—for instance when your mother wanted you to stop playing and do something for her? All people who really want to be good must listen and obey.



Intermediate

Develop in some detail, with illustrations from any one of the seven messages, the general outline suggested, and emphasize the fact that we are all different and that the Lord expects each of us to do his best to develop his individual capacities and to fight his particular temptations. Encourage the young people to read the two chapters carefully at home for themselves.

Everything in the Word has, in addition to its literal sense, three major inner meanings, one within the other, relating (1) to the spiritual history of the human race, (2) to the development of our own individual souls, and (3) to the life of the Lord. This is just as true of the book of Revelation as of the Old Testament and the Gospels.

In the first sense, which is called the internal historical sense, the seven churches in Asia Minor picture various types of Christian organizations which developed as a result of the spread of the Gospel by the apostles and early Christian leaders and the various types which will exist in every age. In the second sense, which is called the spiritual sense, they picture the various states in which each one of us may find himself at one time or another as to his religious life. In the third sense, which is called the celestial sense, they picture the Lord's dealing with churches or individuals in these various states, the accommodation of His love and wisdom to meet all human needs and to lead all men to the highest states which they will freely choose to attain.

In general we can see that the Lord is telling each of us in what ways he is right and in what ways wrong. This rightness or wrongness depends on how far we are "in charity and faith"; that is, how far we have the Lord's unselfish love in our hearts and the truths of His word in our minds. And these must go hand in hand. If we have more love than truth or if we have more truth than love, we fall into certain temptations and need to repent and restore the true balance. And if we recognize and fight our temptations, we prepare ourselves for the very place in heaven which will give us the greatest happiness.

Notice that in each of the messages the Lord describes Himself

in a slightly different way. All the attributes He mentions are details of John's original vision of Him, but in each He stresses just the divine qualities which will most appeal to the people in the state described by that particular church. For example, to the church of Philadelphia—which, Swedenborg tells us, pictures those “who are in truths from good from the Lord”—the things mentioned (3:7) all have to do with truth, and it said of these people that the “door” is open before them. But the church of Laodicea, which pictures those who “alternately believe from themselves, and from the Word, and so profane holy things,” is reminded that the Lord is the source of all things and told to open the doors of their minds to Him. The temptation to trust in our own wisdom instead of in the Lord's truth is the deepest of all temptations, but if we overcome it, the Lord will guide all things for our eternal welfare. This is what is meant by the promise, “To him that overcometh will I give to sit with me in my throne.”

Just as the Lord presents Himself in a different way to each type of person—each of the seven churches—so the promise of reward for victory is a different promise for each. Each of us has his own possibilities, his own weaknesses, and his own temptations; no two people are ever just alike. The Lord knows each one of us through and through and deals with each in a little different way, to give each the best chance of attaining the stature and place for which he was created. And He says to each one of us: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

Basic Correspondences

- Ephesus = those who regard truths of doctrine, not good of life
- Smyrna = in good of life but falsities as to doctrine
- Pergamos = place everything in good works, nothing in truths
- Thyatira = both faith from charity and faith separate from charity
- Sardis = dead worship

Philadelphia = in truths from good

Laodicea = those who profane holy things

Senior

Study with the class the meaning of each of the seven churches as stated in the quotation in their notes, discussing different types of churches in the world today and different types of minds, in the effort to help the young people to see themselves and other people more clearly. Study the message to Laodicea in more detail, showing them what is meant by “lukewarm” in their religion.

In the *Apocalypse Revealed* Swedenborg says of the opening chapter of the book of Revelation: “This Revelation is from the Lord alone; and it is received by those who will be in His New Church, which is the New Jerusalem, and who acknowledge the Lord as the God of heaven and earth.”

And he tells us there briefly, as well as in detail elsewhere, that the messages to the seven churches are messages to the churches in the Christian world: “To those there who primarily regard truths of doctrine, and not goods of life, who are meant by the Ephesian Church. To those who are in goods as to life, and in falsities as to doctrine; who are meant by the church of Smyrna. To those there who place all of the church in good works, and not anything in truths; who are meant by the church in Pergamos. And to those who are in faith from charity, as also to them that are in faith separated from charity; who are meant by the church in Thyatira. All these are called to the New Church, which is the New Jerusalem. . . . They in the Christian world who are in dead worship, which is without charity and faith, who are described by the church in Sardis. They who are in truths from good from the Lord; who are described by the church in Philadelphia. They who alternately believe from themselves, and from the Word, and so profane holy things; who are described by the church in Laodicea. All these likewise are called to the New Church of the Lord.” The general meaning of the messages and their application to us could not be stated more briefly and clearly than this.

With this quotation at hand each of us can study the messages in detail for himself. In making this study note that in each case the Lord identifies Himself by signs which, by correspondence, would touch a responsive chord in the minds of people of that particular character; that He calls attention to the special good qualities and the special temptations of each; and that in return for fidelity He promises a reward exactly suited to the highest desire of those of that type. Swedenborg tells us that the heavens are divided into many societies, each society being made up of congenial people and each society performing a particular use to the whole heaven which no other could perform. No two societies are alike, yet all work together in harmony because all accept the Lord alone as their God and desire above everything else to do His will.

Further we need to remember that each one of us is, as Paul said, “a temple,” or as Swedenborg says, “a church in its least form.” The messages are not only to groups associated into churches but to each individual who desires to be good or who in any way recognizes the necessity of religion. So as we study these two chapters, we are studying ourselves, our particular virtues and weaknesses, the particular aspect of the Lord we need to dwell on, and the particular goal of character toward which we should strive. Each one of us is a child of God and has a direct personal relationship to Him, a special set of faculties and possibilities, and a special place to fill both in this world and in heaven. Our highest happiness will be in the attainment of this place and use.

But we must also realize that the Lord has left it to our own free choice whether or not we shall strive for and attain this place. Our freedom of choice is the thing which the Lord has given us as the essential human quality, which distinguishes man from the animals, and in everything He does He guards this freedom of choice for us. It is an inner freedom—we know that many things prevent our carrying out in external life all our desires. But each of us is free to desire and to think as he pleases and to try to accomplish his own desires. Our fundamental choice is between self and the Lord. If we choose to put self first, we shall reject belief in the

Lord and in His Word, so closing our ears to His warning voice. If we choose to believe in the Lord, we shall study the Word to find the way of life, and we shall find it. So each of the seven messages ends with the words, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

Adult

This is a lesson in which the teacher may well use the passages from the writings quoted in the Adult notes as the basis for discussion. Call attention to the fact that, although the seven types are discussed with reference to the beginning and mission of the New Church, they already existed before the end of the first century A.D. To find the truth for the Christian Church we must go to the Gospels, not to the decisions of later church leaders.

In the first chapter of Revelation we are given the clue to the meaning of our lesson for today: “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.” In numbers 65 and 66 of the *Apocalypse Revealed* Swedenborg says: “*The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, signifies the New Church in the heavens, which is the New Heaven. The church is in the heavens equally as on the earth; for the Word is in the heavens equally as it is on the earth, and there are doctrines from it, and preachings from it . . . In the spiritual world there appears an expanse full of stars, as in the natural world, and this appearance is from the angelic societies in heaven. Each society there shines like a star before those who are below; hence they know in what situation the angelic societies are . . . by ‘angels of the seven churches,’ is meant the entire church in the heavens, consequently the New Heaven in the aggregate. And the seven lampstands which thou sawest are the seven churches, signifies the New Church on earth, which is the New Jerusalem descending from the Lord out of the New Heaven . . . by ‘the seven lampstands’ are not meant seven churches, but the church in the aggregate, which in itself is one, but various according to reception. Those varieties may be compared to the various jewels in the crown of a king; and they may also be compared to the*

various members and organs in a perfect body, which yet make one. The perfection of every form exists from various things being suitably arranged in their order. Hence it is, that the whole New Church is described as to its varieties by ‘the seven churches.’ ”

This is the ideal picture, and we note that although the church is one, there are varieties within it which are distinct, as are the societies in the heaven with which they are associated. We should keep this in mind today when we are considering the ecumenical movement. Also we should note that it is not said that the churches on earth were ideal in themselves, for the messages actually point out how far each had fallen from the ideal. And although it was undoubtedly true that the Christian organizations which by the end of the first century after the Advent had developed in the seven cities of Asia Minor were actually in the various states described in the letter of the Word, in the internal historical sense our attention is directed to the states existing in the various branches of the first Christian Church as it was at the time of the Second Coming and the conditions on which the people of these branches might be expected to respond to the invitation to the New Church. And in the spiritual sense we are to think of the various types of Christians today to whom the message of the New Church is offered and to the same types as we find them also in the organized New Church.

We should note the similarity in pattern of all seven messages: (1) the presentation of the Lord in the particular aspect which would appeal most strongly to the type of person addressed; (2) the Lord’s commendation of the good characteristics of that type; (3) the pointing out of the evils to which that type is most subject, and the command to recognize these and repent; (4) the promise to each of that particular “place in the sun” which it is possible for him to attain if he does repent and regenerate; (5) the reminder that our reception or rejection of the message will be of our own free choice: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

Swedenborg’s own words—from the contents at the beginning

of chapters 2 and 3 of the *Apocalypse Revealed*—are the clearest and briefest possible statement of the distinct meaning of the seven churches: “To the churches in the Christian world: To those there who primarily regard truths of doctrine and not good of life, who are meant by the church of Ephesus. To those there who are in goods as to life and in falsities as to the doctrine, who are meant by the church of Smyrna. To those there who place the all of the church in good works, and not anything in truths, who are meant by the church in Pergamos. To those there who are in faith from charity, as also to those who are in faith separated from charity, who are meant by the church in Thyatira. . . . (Chapter 3) This chapter treats of those in the Christian world who are in dead worship, which is without charity and faith; who are described by the church in Sardis. Those who are in truths from good from the Lord; who are described by the church in Philadelphia. Those who alternately believe from themselves, and from the Word, and thus profane holy things; who are described by the church in Laodicea. All of these likewise are called to the New Church of the Lord.”

The last sentence points to the fact that each of the seven emphases can be useful in the New Church, indeed is necessary to the perfection of the church. It is only when one aspect is emphasized at the expense of the others that condemnation is pronounced. It is useful to any church to have within it some whose primary interest is in doctrine, some who emphasize good will, some who insist on good works, some who wish to define the relation between faith and charity, some who love the ritual of the church, some who are well-balanced Christians, and some whose shortcomings keep the church reminded of the necessity of self-dedication and sincere, steady devotion. But if the church is to work together in harmony and perform its full use each of these types must recognize and applaud the contribution of all the others. None must assume that his own emphasis is sufficient in itself. One of the most noticeable characteristics of both the Word and the writings is the constant insistence on the balanced life. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), which can so

easily be interpreted to mean that external good works are the all-important thing, is immediately followed in the Word by the incident of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) in which Martha, who was “cumbered about much serving,” is told that Mary, in sitting at the Lord’s feet hearing His words, has chosen “the better part.” And in the writings statements on the importance of truth and those on the importance of good works are so constantly alternated that one cannot exalt one at the expense of the other except by lifting sentences or parts of sentences entirely out of their context.

The most scathing condemnation of all is meted out to the church of Laodicea which is “lukewarm.” And yet to him who overcometh in Laodicea is promised the highest reward of all, “to sit with me in my throne.” Does not this point to the fact that the most universal and persistent of our temptations and the most difficult to overcome is the temptation to take the easy way, to refuse to take up wholeheartedly and courageously the Lord’s cause, to see how little responsibility we can assume instead of how much, how small a contribution we can “get by with” instead of how much we can give, to travel the path of religion with our ear to the ground! It is to this church that the Lord says, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock.” To look for the easy and popular way closes the door against the Lord’s truth. Read what Jeremiah says of Moab (Jeremiah 48:11). The heavenly character is not attained by “settling on our lees,” by taking the easy way. The Lord gives each of us special abilities, particular opportunities, an individual use to serve, and a particular crown to attain—if we will. He has for each one of us a direct, personal message, searching and challenging—if we have ears to hear.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Revealed, nn. 202-204 (concerning the church in Laodicea): “*That thou art neither cold nor hot*, signifies that they who are such, sometimes deny that the Word is Divine and holy, and at other times acknowledge it. . . . They are also such concerning God, at one time they deny, and at another time acknowledge Him; in like manner as to all things of the church;

for which reason they are sometimes with those who are in hell, and at other times with those who are in heaven. They fly as it were between both, up and down, and wherever they fly, thither they turn the face. They become such who have confirmed with themselves the belief in the existence of God, of heaven and hell, and of life eternal, and afterwards recede from it. When the first confirmation returns, they acknowledge, but when it does not return, they deny. They recede because they afterwards think only of themselves and the world, continually aspiring to pre-eminence, and thereby they immerse themselves in their proprium; thus hell swallows them up. I would thou wert cold or hot, signifies that it is better for them either from the heart to deny the holy things of the Word and the church, or from the heart to acknowledge them. . . . The reason is, because they have mixed truths with falsities, and goods with evils, thus holy things with profane, even so that they cannot be separated. And since man cannot then be prepared, either to be in heaven or in hell, the whole of his rational life is destroyed, and the ultimates of life alone remain, which, when separated from the interiors of life, are mere phantasies.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Who saw the vision described in the book of Revelation? *the apostle John*
J. Where was John when he saw it? *Patmos*
P. At the beginning of the vision whom did he see? *the risen Lord*
P. Can you describe how the Lord looked? [*see Chap. 1*]
P. What did John see around the Lord? *seven lampstands*
J. What did the Lord tell John the seven lampstands were? *churches*
J. Where were these seven churches? *Asia Minor*
J. What is our lesson today about? *messages to those churches*
J. How were all the messages alike? *praised good, condemned faults, made promise*
J. How were they different? *different faults and rewards*
J. Which church is described as the most faithful of all? *Philadelphia*
P. In the message to Philadelphia what is said about a door? *open*
J. What was wrong with the church of Laodicea? *lukewarm*
P. What did the Lord say to that church about a door? *closed*
J. With what words does each of the seven messages close? *He that hath an ear . . .*
J. What do these words mean? *obey, if you are willing*
I. How do these two chapters apply to us? *we are free to open or close “door”*
S. Why is the condemnation of Laodicea’s “lukewarmness” so severe? *hardest fault to overcome*