

The seven churches are seven actual churches in John's time but they obviously represent some ideal or typical representation. What do the seven churches stand for?

1. Each church represents an approach to cultural pressure. Some churches have victory, some defeat, but most have elements of each.
2. Jesus encourages and/or calls each church to stand strong and to repent. The penalty is loss of salvation (i.e., not sharing in the blessings when he returns). The reward is something that happens after his return (that is mentioned at the end of Revelation). Therefore, these letters are meant to reference chapters 19-22 and connect the church to the end of the book.
3. Jesus specifically tells one church that, if they stand strong, they will avoid the timeframe of the tribulation (Rev 3:10). This is proof the churches are not merely historical but also represent the church at the time of his return.
4. In light of the penalties, rewards, and promises, it is clear that these churches reflect the struggle of God's people. We therefore take these as general warnings as we wait for the culmination of Revelation.

To the Church in Ephesus (Rev 2:1-7)

Type: The faithful church that started well but has struggled to remain close to God. But still knows and rejects moral corruption.

Challenge: Not losing love for the Lord (drifting away from God); return to the same love we had when we first became followers.

Penalty: Loss of lampstand (i.e., no further identity as the people of God)

Reward: To the one who is victorious: If you persevere, you will eat from the tree of life (i.e., eternal life) – Rev 22:2, 14, 19.

To the Church in Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11)

Type: The suffering church, under persecution.

Challenge: Remain faithful and don't be afraid of opposition, even if it leads to death, because you will be victorious in the end.

Penalty: None.

Reward: The one who is victorious will not be thrown in the lake of fire (the second death). – Rev 20:14-15

To the Church in Pergamum (Rev 2:12-17)

Type: The “tolerant” church that exists in a hostile, demonic culture, where some have slid into immorality and sexual sin, but most remain true to Jesus’ name.

Challenge: Repent of those sins.

Penalty: Jesus will oppose those who have fallen with the sword of his mouth. – Rev 19:15 (the judgment against the world at his return)

Reward: The one who is victorious: you will receive hidden food from God (rather than the corrupt idolatrous food) and a new identity. – John 6:58; Rev 3:12; 19:12

To the Church in Thyatira (Rev 2:18-28)

Type: The church who serves God and grows in its service, but has tolerated a counterfeit spirituality that leads to immorality.

Challenge: None. Time for repentance is over.

Penalty: Jesus will eradicate this corruption from the church.

Reward: Those who are victorious until the end will reign over the nations (in the coming kingdom). – Rev 20:6; 22:5

To the Church in Sardis (Rev 3:1-6)

Type: The empty/superficially spiritual/cultural church that has no real works.

Challenge: They must wake up, repent, and strengthen what little works they have before it is too late and Jesus has returned. But a few (among them) have remained holy, and will walk with Jesus, dressed in white.

Penalty: (Not explained, but same as those who are not ready for Jesus’ return)

Reward: To the one who is victorious, he will (like the ones in Sardis) be dressed in white and his name will not be blotted from the book of life. – Rev 19:14; 20:15

To those who are victorious, their name will remain in the book of life (at the judgment).

To the Church in Philadelphia (Rev 3:7-13)

Type: The obedient church that faces opposition and doesn't back down; it cannot be stopped because God provides an open door for his work.

Challenge: None.

Penalty: None (only for those who persecute and oppose them)

Reward: They are kept from the hour of trial (the tribulation, the day of the Lord) that is coming on the whole world. – Rev 4:19

To the Church in Laodicea (Rev 3:14-22)

Type: The wealthy church that has no real works and is (spiritually) blind and naked, and will be spit out of God's mouth (i.e., rejected as legitimate).

Challenge: Acquire the (heavenly) wealth and holiness that Jesus offers (rather than the substitute wealth of this world). Repent and be earnest. Jesus stands at the door and knocks (i.e., there is still time).

Penalty: Jesus spits them out (i.e., rejects their spirituality).

Reward: Those who are victorious are given the right to rule with Jesus. – Matt 19:28

The Heavenly Scene

Third major movement in the outline of the book: Future

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” (Rev 4:1)

Elements in the heavens leading to the beginning of the final seven years:

- God the Father
- Elders wearing crowns (12 x 2)
- Spirit (sevenfold)
- Angelic host (living creatures)
- Lamb who was slain

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.” (Rev 4:2-8)