

If You Can Hear, Listen to What the Spirit is Saying

A Devotional Resource for
Church Boards and Pastors

Five Smooth Stones

CONSULTING LTD.

Governance Consulting for Churches and Christian Ministries

A Devotional Resource for Evaluating Church Ministry



A generation ago, the Canadian church was respected in society. Today, the church is often viewed quite differently—its role and importance has decreased significantly. This change in environment is causing pastors and church board leaders to take a fresh look at what it means to be the church and how the ministry of the church should be evaluated.

This devotional resource has been prepared to encourage pastors and church board leaders to take a closer look at Christ's evaluation of the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Scripture readings, contextual information, and reflection questions are provided to help generate good discussion around your church board table. The questions will cause you to think about Canadian churches in general as well as your own church.

I hope this devotional resource is a blessing to you as you listen to what the Spirit is saying to your church.

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Comments About This Devotional Resource?

I would love to hear your stories about how you are using this devotional resource and your suggestions to make it better! Provide your feedback at fivesmoothstones.ca/seven-churches-devotional.

Understanding the Context

The Roman Empire was held together because of its ability to demonstrate its power in every facet of life. Loyalty to the empire was demanded, and there were constant visual reminders about the power of Rome in the form of coins, temples, altars, and festivals. Trade guild associations promoted business and social relationships as well as the worship of emperor and patron deities. If you refused to join in these festivities, you would be viewed as a social outcast and likely suffer financially too.

The seven churches in the book of Revelation were located in the wealthy province of Asia, which had been part of the Roman Empire for more than two hundred years. The well-developed Roman road system allowed excellent trade routes to form, which allowed goods to be distributed and sold with ease. The presence of Roman military on the seas also reduced piracy, which allowed sea ports and merchants to thrive. In return for this stability, citizens were expected to show their gratitude and loyalty by offering worship to the emperor.

The Christian communities within

Asia Minor included a mixture of Jewish Christians as well as Gentile believers. During this period Judaism enjoyed a special exemption from emperor worship because it was considered to be an ancient religion. Because Christians claimed a Jewish heritage and connection, they also enjoyed this privilege.

Around 70 CE the Roman government imposed a special tax on Jewish people for rebuilding their temple. Payment of this tax assured them of their continued special status and exemption from emperor worship. Christians refused to pay this tax, which caused an increasingly hostile response from Jewish communities. Over time this taxation issue and key theological differences led to a separation between the two communities, which made the protected status of Christians less secure. This increased the pressure to participate in emperor worship and prove their allegiance to the Roman Empire. While there was no systemic persecution of Christians in the province at this time, trouble was looming on the horizon.

It was into this context that the messages to the seven churches were written.

The Church in Ephesus

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:1–7

Ephesus was the largest city in Asia Minor and an important economic hub of the Roman Empire. It had an impressive seaport, a well-established road system, and a huge marketplace. Worship of the emperor was thoroughly entrenched into the daily life of the people. The massive temple dedicated to Artemis was considered one of the most spectacular structures of the ancient world.

The church in Ephesus was commended for the purity of their teaching and was specifically praised because they had tested the teachings of those who claimed to be apostles (Rev 2:2).

The Ephesians were also commended for their hard work and endurance. Staying on top of false teaching was difficult, draining work. The fact that the church needed to work hard could suggest that the false teachings were not obvious—that the differences were subtle. Alternatively, the Ephesians may have been praised because there was so much false teaching that the church had to pay close attention at all times.

Despite the praises received, the church was severely rebuked for having lost their first love (Rev 2:4). Jesus taught

that the greatest command was to love God and the second greatest command was to love others (Matt 22:37–40). Jesus also indicated that love toward others was the way people would recognize the church as genuine disciples (John 13:34–35). Many commentators suggest that it is the love for “neighbour” that the Ephesians have lost.

Because the church in Ephesus lacked love, it was in danger of losing its witness to the world, its prominence among the Asian churches, or perhaps even its existence. Christ urged them to repent and to return to their former practices.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. How well do you think churches handle the issue of false teaching in a world where so much information and teaching are available online? How does your church handle this issue?
2. In general, how do you think Canadian churches show love for others? How would Christ commend your church for its love for others? In what ways might Christ challenge your church in this area?
3. As you read the account of the Ephesian church, what do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to your church?

The Church in Smyrna

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:8–11

Smyrna was a harbour city of approximately 100,000 people with majestic buildings upon its hillside. Smyrna was loyal to Rome and one of the judicial centres of Asia Minor. It also had a substantial Jewish population.

The Christians in Smyrna were experiencing hardship from the Jewish community (Rev 2:9). The source of hostility between Jews and the church in Smyrna likely resulted from the belief that the Christians were blaspheming Yahweh because they believed Jesus was God. The reference to the “synagogue of Satan,” then, likely refers to the fact that Christians were no longer welcome in the Jewish synagogue. Not only that, but it is probable that the Jews began to report Christians to the authorities, which caused increased persecution.

It is possible that the Christians in Smyrna were poor compared to the general population because Christians often came from poorer classes and were generous in giving their resources to others. The Christians in Smyrna also likely refused to participate in trade guilds because emperor worship was an integral part of the meeting ritual. At that time, it was

extremely difficult to make a living without belonging to one of these trade guilds.

Even though they were poor economically, the Christians in Smyrna were rich in faith. There are no rebukes for this church, but Christ reveals that there will be more trouble on the horizon—suffering, hardship, and possibly death (Rev 2:10). The letter closes by encouraging them not to be afraid, but to remain faithful.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. What does it look like to have a church that is rich in faith? How might Christ evaluate the faith of your church?
2. What sources of hostility exist in Canada between Christians and other religious or non-religious groups? How might your church build bridges with other groups while still holding fast to your beliefs?
3. As you read the account of the church in Smyrna, what do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to your church?

The Church in Pergamum

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:12–17

The city of Pergamum was home to many temples, altars, and shrines for Zeus (king of the gods), Athena (goddess of victory), Dionysus (god of the dynasty), and Asklepios (god of healing). Pergamum was a thoroughly pagan city. It is no wonder, then, that this city was identified as the place where Satan's throne is (Rev 2:13).

The church in Pergamum was facing opposition from outside, in the form of persecution, and pressure inside, in the form of false teaching. Pergamum was facing the most intense challenge of all the seven cities because it was the only one that specifically mentioned that someone had been killed because of their faith.

But the church is challenged by Christ because some of the believers there were following Balaam's teachings. Balaam is an Old Testament figure who was summoned by the King of Moab to curse the Israelites. Although Balaam did not curse Israel, he advised the king to have Moabite women seduce and marry Israelite men (Num 31:16), which eventually caused the nation of Israel to worship idols. The church in Pergamum was challenged to repent or be at war against Christ.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. What are some idols that are worshipped in our contemporary culture?
2. Have contemporary idols found their way into the ministries of your church? How might you address this situation?
3. As you read the account of the church in Pergamum, what do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to your church?

The Church in Thyatira

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:18–27

The city of Thyatira was a thriving centre for business and was especially well-known for its trade guilds which included everything from wool workers, linen workers, garment manufacturers, to dyers, tanners, potters, bakers, salve dealers, and bronze smiths. The Roman Empire was especially suspicious of private clubs and other places where conspiracies against Rome could be developed. Therefore, trade guilds promoted not only worship and sacrifice to their patron gods, but also appropriate loyalty and worship to the emperor.

Christians in Thyatira were in a really difficult position: how would they survive economically without joining a trade guild and caving in to the pressure of emperor worship? This was a lifestyle that was the opposite of Christian belief and practice.

Christ commended the church in Thyatira for its love, faithfulness, service, and endurance (Rev 2:19). Not only has the work of the church in Thyatira been an example for others, but it had also significantly increased its activity over time (Rev 2:19). It had done this all in a context of intense hostility and pressure.

Despite these positive qualities, Christ admonishes the church for putting up

with false teaching within their ranks, specifically a prophetess named Jezebel. It is likely that the name Jezebel was used to make a connection back to the wife of Ahab, an Old Testament king of Israel. The original Jezebel promoted the worship of the god Baal. It is possible that the Thyatiran Jezebel was suggesting that participation in the trade guilds (and idol worship) was acceptable.

Thyatira is almost the opposite of the Ephesian church. They have love, but they have not held their teachers accountable. It is a message that warns against tolerance and assimilation with culture.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. What are some ways that churches can express love and service, both within the congregation and in the broader community? Which of these expressions are found in your church? What are some expressions of love and service that you would like to add?
2. In what ways has the Canadian church assimilated with contemporary culture? Which of those are cause for concern in your church?
3. As you read the account of the church in Thyatira, what do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to your church?

The Church in Sardis

Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:1–6

The city of Sardis had seen better days. It was prosperous enough, but its current wealth was nothing like it had been in its ancient past with its plentiful gold deposits and rich kings. It was still a centre for trade, industry, and trade guilds, but it was a shadow of its former self.

Despite having contexts like the other cities, there is no mention of external hostility toward the church, internal doctrinal challenges, or Jewish opposition. Christ is direct and to the point with this church: they are dead, even though they had the reputation of being alive (Rev 3:1). Their reputation of being alive was based on their past—but did not reflect their present condition. They were living off yesterday’s glory. Christ judged that their works or actions were “far from complete” (Rev 3:2). They were urged to wake up to the reality of their condition and strengthen what was left.

There are several clues that indicate how these Christians had fallen short. First, the Christians in Sardis had forgotten the gospel they originally received, or if they did remember it, it was not an integral part of how they lived. Their actions failed to provide a credible witness of their

Christian faith. Another problem Christ identified was that the church was not attentive or watchful.

There is an indication that their lack of attentiveness has led to sin. However, Christ reveals that there are “a few people” who have not stained their clothing (Rev 3:4), which likely refers to idol or emperor worship. It is possible that the Christians in Sardis were casually participating in the idol worship of the culture—that they were perhaps trying to fly under the radar. Christ urged this church to change their lives and promised that those who remained faithful would be given white clothing, which represents purity, holiness, and honour.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. What are some of the characteristics of a church that appears to be alive, but is actually dead? Do you see any of these characteristics in your own church?
2. In what ways can your church leadership monitor the vital signs that provide an indication about the spiritual condition of your church?
3. As you read the account of the church in Sardis, what do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to your church?

The Church in Philadelphia

Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:7–13

Although the city of Philadelphia was a big hub for trade, it was prone to earthquakes, which made the area vulnerable economically. It was also known for its many athletic competitions.

The main challenge for the church in Philadelphia came from the Jewish synagogue. Jews were pressuring the Christians to deny the Lordship of Christ or be excommunicated from the synagogue. With excommunication would come increasing pressure to participate in emperor worship because the Christians would no longer have the exemption that the Jewish faith provided. The church is in a difficult situation with little power (Rev 3:8), yet they have been a faithful witness. The fact that the church has little power is not viewed negatively here—it likely refers to the size or influence of the church, not spiritual weakness.

Like Smyrna, the church in Philadelphia receives no word of rebuke from Christ, only encouragement to endure and to take advantage of the opportunities of the “open door” that Christ will provide for them. The reference to the open door within this letter might be seen as a missionary opportunity within

the city, potentially for both Jews and Gentiles. The idea of an open door could also be seen as a comfort and affirmation for those who had been excluded from synagogue worship. The image of the open door would assure them that they belonged to the true temple of God.

The image of the crown reaches back to the idea of the athletic games that were popular in the city and could be seen as a symbol of victory for the believer. Christ promised that all who persevered would be victorious.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. What are some examples of “open doors” the Canadian church has been given in their communities? How well has your church taken advantage of these types of opportunities?
2. Would you characterize your church as having great power or little power economically? Spiritually?
3. As you read the account of the church in Philadelphia, what do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to your church?

The Church in Laodicea

Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:14–22

Laodicea was a wealthy city, strategically located for successful commercial trade. It was known for its banking centres, unique black wool and garment production, and medicinal eye compounds. Like other cities in the region, it was prone to earthquakes, but it prided itself on being able to rebuild the city itself, without help from Rome. There is no indication that the church in Laodicea had conflict with Roman authorities, the Jewish synagogue, or within its own assembly.

There is no praise for this church. Christ chastised them for being neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. Some scholars suggest that this picture of being lukewarm mirrors problems with the city's water supply. If Laodicea lacked its own water supply, it would need to pipe in its water from nearby hot or cold springs. By the time the water reached the city, it was lukewarm, which was disgusting. Other scholars think references to hot and cold could refer to a Roman banquet setting. It was a custom that water and wine would have been heated or cooled to be served as a refreshment. In both examples, the idea of "hot" and "cold" is that it is useful, whereas being lukewarm is of no value at all.

The Laodiceans had "become" wealthy, which implies that they have actively participated in the Roman trade guild

system to obtain their wealth. The church in Laodicea was deceived by the culture of the empire and had become blind to the ideas behind it. As a result, their spiritual health and witness was bankrupt. The contrast of being poor, blind, and naked is a clever word play in comparison to the economic strength of the city in terms of its financial wealth, medicinal ointment for eyes, and luxurious clothing.

Despite the significant weaknesses exhibited by this church, Christ declared that he loves them, and because of that love, he was motivated to discipline them. His desire was to draw the church back to spiritual health. Here, in a church with many problems, we see a tender picture of Christ knocking at the door with the desire to have intimate fellowship with the Laodicean church.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. What are the typical characteristics of a church that is lukewarm? Of a church that is useful?
2. When you evaluate the witness of your church, would you say that it is "lukewarm" or useful to the kingdom?
3. As you read the account of the church in Laodicea, what do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to your church?

Jesus Evaluates the Churches

Scripture Reading: Review Revelation 1–3

The messages to the seven churches in Asia were an evaluation of each church's spiritual health and contained both encouragement and exhortation. Christ's evaluation came from an intimate knowledge of their circumstances and their inward motivation (Rev 2:23).

The exhortations contained in the messages are motivated by love with the end goal of disciplining and strengthening the church (Rev 3:19). Christ identified the problem and urged the churches to respond.

The main message was that each church would hear what the Spirit was saying to them. Though the circumstances for each were different, the same Spirit was available to help them understand the message, look at their spiritual condition, and take concrete steps toward change.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. As you review the Scripture passage, what do you notice about the way that Christ evaluates the churches?
2. In what ways could Christ's approach inform your own ministry evaluation process?
3. How might your church board cultivate attentiveness to what the Holy Spirit is saying in your context?

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