

# Church

**Aim:** To inspire and teach God’s plan for spiritual success through unwavering commitment to the church, the body of Christ, as an expression of His eternal Kingdom, drawing lessons from the seven churches in Revelation.

## Introduction

The Greek word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), meaning “assembly” or “called-out ones,” defines the church as God’s chosen community, set apart for His purposes. Far from a mere human institution, the church is a divine organism—the body of Christ—integral to God’s Kingdom. The Kingdom is God’s sovereign rule, inaugurated through Jesus Christ (Mark 1:15), present in believers’ lives (Luke 17:20-21), and awaiting full realization at His return (Revelation 11:15). The church, both universal and local, embodies this Kingdom, reflecting God’s will through devotion, unity, and mission. The seven churches of Revelation 2-3—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—offer vivid examples of faithfulness and failure, urging believers to align with God’s eternal plan.

## 1. Biblical Meaning of ‘Church’

### A. Definition

The term *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) denotes those called out by God to be His people, distinct from the world:

- **Universal Church:** The collective body of all redeemed believers across time, destined to dwell with God in His Kingdom (Hebrews 12:22-24, Revelation 7:9-10). This church, transcending earthly boundaries, includes all saved through faith in Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23).
- **Local Church:** Specific assemblies of baptized believers in a geographic area, devoted to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:41-47). These are visible expressions of the universal church, living out Kingdom principles.

### B. Scriptural Insights

- **Universal Church:** Jesus declared, “I will build my *ekklesia*, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). The Greek *katischyō* (κατισχύω, “prevail”) underscores the church’s eternal victory through Christ’s resurrection. Its members’ names are enrolled in heaven, part of God’s unshakable Kingdom (Hebrews 12:22-24).
- **Local Church:** Local assemblies practice communal worship and sacraments (Acts 2:42). The phrase *klasis tou artou* (κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου, “breaking of bread”) includes both hospitality and the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). As the gospel spread, local churches multiplied (e.g., 1 Corinthians 16:19), each reflecting Kingdom values.

### C. The Church and the Kingdom

The church is the present manifestation of God’s Kingdom, where His rule is exercised through believers (Colossians 1:13-14). It is not the Kingdom’s fullness, which awaits Christ’s return (Revelation 21:1-4), but a community where

God's reign is experienced. The seven churches of Revelation illustrate this: Smyrna and Philadelphia, praised for faithfulness (*pistos*, πιστός), embody Kingdom devotion, while Laodicea's lukewarmness (*chliaros*, χλιαρός) risks rejection (Revelation 3:16).

## 2. Powerful Descriptions of the Church

Scripture uses vivid metaphors to depict the church's role in God's Kingdom (Ephesians 2:19-22):

- **God's Household:** Believers are family, united under God as Father (1 Timothy 3:15). This reflects the Kingdom's relational unity, as seen in Philadelphia's steadfast love (Revelation 3:9).
- **A Building:** Built on the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the *akrogōniaios* (ἀκρογωνιαίος, cornerstone) (Ephesians 2:20). Ephesus' doctrinal strength aligns with this foundation, though their loss of *agapē prōtē* (ἀγάπη πρώτη, first love) threatens stability (Revelation 2:4).
- **A Holy Temple:** God's Spirit dwells in the church (*naos*, ναός, temple) (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Smyrna's endurance reflects this sacred space, while Sardis' spiritual death (*nekros*, νεκρός) desecrates it (Revelation 3:1).
- **The Body of Christ:** Christ, the *kephalē* (κεφαλή, head), directs the church (Colossians 1:18). Thyatira's diversity in service mirrors this, yet their tolerance of false teaching (*didachē*, διδαχή) disrupts unity (Revelation 2:20).

## 3. Unity in the Church

### A. Universal Church

All believers are baptized into one body by one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13), reflecting the Kingdom's oneness (*henotēs*, ἐνότης) (Ephesians 4:4-6). The diverse yet unified church in Revelation 7:9 fulfills this vision.

### B. Local Church

- Unity requires alignment with Scripture (*phroneō*, φρονέω, "same mind") (1 Corinthians 1:10). Pergamos' tolerance of Balaam's teaching (*krateō didachē*, κρατέω διδαχή) caused division, showing the need for biblical fidelity (Revelation 2:14).
- **Factions** (*schisma*, σχίσμα) fragment the body, as seen in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). The church's unity mirrors the Kingdom's harmony under Christ's lordship.

## 4. ASSESSMENT OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 provide a sobering assessment of their spiritual state, offering lessons for today's church. Below is an evaluation of each church's faithfulness to God's Kingdom, with estimated scores reflecting Jesus' satisfaction and the estimated percentage of members likely saved in their current state, based on the Greek text:

### • Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)

- **Assessment:** Praised for rejecting false apostles and hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans but rebuked for abandoning their *agapē prōtē* (ἀγάπη πρώτη, "first love")—the passionate, honeymoon-like devotion to Christ that had cooled into mere doctrinal orthodoxy. The imperative *metanoēson* (μετανόησον, "repent") signals urgency, or the lampstand will be removed (Revelation 2:5).
- **Cryptic elements & interpretations:**
  - \* **Nicolaitans:** The Nicolaitans appear here and in Pergamum (Revelation 2:6, 15). Possible interpretations include:
    - **Hierarchical domination** (most common view): From Greek *nikao* ("to conquer/overcome") + *laos* ("the people/laity"), they were power-hungry leaders attempting to set up a clergy-laity di-

vide, lording it over ordinary believers instead of serving as equals (contradicting Matthew 20:25-26 and 1 Peter 5:3).

- **Moral compromise / antinomianism:** Early church tradition links them to Nicolas, one of the seven deacons chosen in Acts 6:5 (a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”). Some fathers (e.g., Irenaeus) said Nicolas or his followers degenerated into teaching that Christians could freely indulge in idolatry and sexual immorality because grace covers the body while the spirit remains pure—turning liberty into license. This “conquering” of moral boundaries opened the door to pagan compromise. Jesus **hates** their deeds (not just dislikes), finding them repulsive, because they destroy equality (equal footing before Christ) in the body and invite the very sins that leaven the whole church (1 Corinthians 5:6).

- \* **Lampstand:** Jesus walks among the lampstands (2:1). The “lampstand” (*lychnia*, λυχνία) symbolizes the church itself (Revelation 1:20). Removing it means Jesus no longer acknowledges or recognizes that particular local assembly as a legitimate, light-bearing church in His Kingdom. The church may continue outwardly, but its corporate status and witness as Christ’s outpost are revoked—its light is extinguished or relocated. This echoes the tabernacle lampstand (Exodus 25:31-40) and the ten virgins’ readiness (Matthew 25:1-13). Losing “first love” risks the same drifting warned against in Hebrews 2:1.

- \* Rewards for overcomers: access to the “tree of life” (Genesis 3 echo).

- **Estimated Score:** 45/100 – Strong doctrine but lacking devotion.

- **Estimated Percentage Saved:** 40% – Many risk losing their standing without repentance.

- **Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)**

- **Assessment:** Commended for enduring persecution (*thlipsis*, θλίψις), with no rebuke. Exhorted to be *pistos achri thanatou* (πιστός ἄχρι θανάτου, faithful unto death) (Revelation 2:10).

- **Cryptic elements:** The “synagogue of Satan” identifies false claimants slandering believers (Romans 2:28-29). Reward: “crown of life” (James 1:12).

- **Estimated Score:** 95/100 – Near-perfect faithfulness.

- **Estimated Percentage Saved:** 95% – Most are in right standing.

- **Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17)**

- **Assessment:** Faithful in a hostile environment but criticized for *krateō didachē* (κρατέω διδαχή, holding false teaching) (Revelation 2:14).

- **Cryptic elements & sins:**

- \* “Satan’s throne” points to pagan/imperial strongholds (Ephesians 6:12).

- \* The “teaching of Balaam” (Numbers 22–25, 31) involved seducing Israel into idolatry and sexual immorality at Baal Peor (Numbers 25:1-9)—eating idol-sacrificed food and committing porneia (illicit sex, including cult prostitution). This exactly matches the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21: porneia, eidōlōlatreia) that, unrepented, bar inheritance of the Kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Revelation 21:8 lists “sexually immoral... idolaters” for the lake of fire) and spread like leaven, risking community-wide apostasy (1 Corinthians 5:6-13: “purge the evil person”).

- \* Nicolaitan teaching is linked here, blending domination with moral license. See also Ephesus

- \* Rewards for overcomers: “hidden manna” and “white stone” (Isaiah 62:2).

- **Estimated Score:** 35/100 – Compromised by heresy.

- **Estimated Percentage Saved:** 30% – Many are led astray.

- **Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29)**

– **Assessment:** Noted for love and service but condemned for allowing *Iezabel* (Ἰεζάβελ), leading to immorality. A faithful *loipoi* (λοιποί, remnant) remains (Revelation 2:24).

– **Cryptic elements & sins:**

\* “Jezebel” evokes the OT queen who pushed Baal worship, idolatry, and sacred prostitution (1 Kings 16:31–32; 2 Kings 9)—spiritual adultery and *porneia*. In Thyatira’s guild culture, this meant joining pagan feasts for business (idol food + immorality). This is the same *porneia* and *eidōlolatrea* warned against as works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21) and sins excluding from the Kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Revelation 21:8).

\* “Deep things of Satan” ironically contrasts true depth in God (1 Corinthians 2:10). Unrepented, such sins foster apostasy through the spirit of error (Jude 1:4; 1 Timothy 4:1).

\* Rewards: authority over nations (Psalm 2) and the “morning star.”

– **Estimated Score:** 30/100 – Serious moral failure.

– **Estimated Percentage Saved:** 25% – Only a minority remain faithful.

• **Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6)**

– **Assessment:** Called *nekros* (νεκρός, dead), with only *oliga onomata* (ὀλίγα ὀνόματα, few names) faithful (Revelation 3:1, 4).

– Cryptic elements & expanded explanation:

\* Sardis was an ancient, once-great city with a storied past—capital of the Lydian empire under Croesus (famous for wealth), but by Roman times it had declined significantly. It fell twice in its history due to overconfidence: once to Cyrus the Persian (547 BC) when defenders slept and the city was taken by surprise, and again later. The city was built on a steep hill with seemingly impregnable walls, yet it was vulnerable because of complacency—people relied on reputation and past glory rather than vigilance. Jesus uses this history against the church: “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (v. 1).

\* Like the city, the Sardis church rested on its former reputation—perhaps early zeal or notable members—while spiritually lifeless. Their “works” were “incomplete” before God (v. 2), meaning unfinished, half-hearted, or hypocritical—outward activity without inward reality. “Soiled garments” (v. 4) symbolize defilement through compromise or neglect—stained by the world, unfit for the King (contrast the “white garments” of purity and resurrection glory given to the faithful remnant). The city’s reputation for fine wool dyeing (white garments were prized) makes the irony sharper: they had material “white” but spiritually soiled. The warning echoes Old Testament calls to wakefulness: “Wake up!” (v. 3) recalls Sardis’s historical falls through sleepiness, and Jesus says He will come like a thief (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4; Matthew 24:43)—unexpected judgment on the unprepared.

\* Yet a faithful remnant exists: “a few names” (v. 4) whose names are not blotted from the book of life (v. 5; cf. Exodus 32:32-33; Psalm 69:28; Philippians 4:3)—assurance of eternal security for those who remain undefiled. Overcomers walk in white garments (purity, victory) and have their names confessed before the Father and angels (v. 5; cf. Matthew 10:32).

\* Sardis is the most severe warning after Laodicea—mostly dead, with only a tiny remnant alive. It cautions against resting on past achievements, reputation, or outward forms while the heart grows cold and works remain incomplete. True life requires vigilance, completion of what God started (Philippians 1:6), and undefiled faithfulness.

– **Estimated Score:** 10/100 – Mostly lifeless.

– **Estimated Percentage Saved:** 5% – A tiny remnant is saved.

• **Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13)**

- **Assessment:** Praised for keeping Christ’s word (*tēreō logos*, τηρέω λόγος) despite *oligē dynamis* (ὀλίγη δύναμις, little strength) (Revelation 3:8).
- **Cryptic elements & explanation:**
  - \* Philadelphia was a small, earthquake-prone city (frequent tremors destroyed buildings, so stability was valued). Jesus commends them for holding fast to His word with limited human power—emphasizing dependence on divine strength rather than worldly might (cf. Zechariah 4:6: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit”). The “synagogue of Satan” identifies false claimants persecuting the faithful (Romans 2:28-29).
  - \* Christ holds the “key of David” (Isaiah 22:22)—sovereign authority to open and shut doors of opportunity, mission, and access that no one can reverse.
  - \* The promise to overcomers—“I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never go out from it again” (v. 12)—is powerful imagery: pillars symbolize permanence and stability (contrast the city’s earthquakes). In God’s eternal temple (Revelation 21:22), the faithful become fixed, unshakable parts of His presence. They receive three names written on them: God’s name, the name of the new Jerusalem (the city descending from heaven, Revelation 21:2), and Christ’s new name—full belonging, citizenship, and intimate identity in the Kingdom (Isaiah 62:2; Revelation 2:17).
- **Estimated Score:** 90/100 – Highly faithful.
- **Estimated Percentage Saved:** 90% – Most are saved.

• **Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)**

- **Assessment:** Rebuked as *chlarios* (χλιαρός, lukewarm), facing rejection (*emesai*, ἐμέσαι, spit out) (Revelation 3:16).
- **Cryptic elements & expanded explanation:**
  - \* Laodicea was wealthy (banking center, black wool textiles, famous eye salve) and self-reliant (rebuilt after AD 60 earthquake without Roman help). The church mirrored this: “You say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’” (v. 17). Jesus exposes the irony: they are “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”
  - \* “Lukewarm” draws from the city’s water: piped via aqueduct from hot mineral springs, it arrived tepid and nauseating—neither hot (healing/therapeutic like Hierapolis) nor cold (refreshing like Colossae). Lukewarm water was useless and vomit-inducing. The church’s deeds were the same—neither spiritually invigorating nor purifying/healing; self-sufficiency produced unproductive, complacent faith.
  - \* Jesus’ prescription uses their pride points ironically: “buy from Me gold refined by fire” (true riches through purified faith, 1 Peter 1:7), “white garments” (Christ’s righteousness covering shame, Revelation 19:8), “eye salve” (spiritual sight to see their true state). He disciplines those He loves (v. 19), calling them to zealous repentance (*zēloe*). The invitation—“Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (v. 20)—offers personal fellowship (shared meals = intimacy) to any who open. Overcomers sit with Christ on His throne (v. 21).
- **Estimated Score:** 5/100 – Nearly irredeemable.
- **Estimated Percentage Saved:** 5% – Few are in right standing.

**Overall Estimate:** Approximately 40% of members across these churches are likely saved, reflecting the Greek text’s balance of praise and rebuke (e.g., *metanoēson* for repentance, *nekros* for spiritual death).

## 5. Leadership and Authority in the Local Church

God’s Kingdom operates through appointed leadership:

- **Respect for Leaders:** Elders (*presbyteroi*, πρεσβύτεροι) are honored for shepherding (1 Timothy 5:17). Smyrna’s endurance under trial reflects submission to godly leadership.
- **Imitate Their Faith:** Leaders model faithfulness (*pistis*, πίστις) (Hebrews 13:7), as seen in Philadelphia’s obedience.
- **Submit to Authority:** Submission to overseers (*episkopoi*, ἐπίσκοποι) fosters Kingdom order (Hebrews 13:17), countering Laodicea’s self-reliance.

## 6. Devotion to Fellowship

- **Purpose of Gathering:** Believers meet to *paroxysmos* (παροξυσμός, spur on) one another toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25). Ephesus’ failure to maintain *agapē* shows the cost of neglecting fellowship.
- **Commitment to Giving:** Contributing to the body (*koinōnia*, κοινωνία) reflects Kingdom selflessness (Acts 2:44-45), unlike Laodicea’s self-sufficiency.

## 7. The Church as the Expression of God’s Manifold Wisdom

- **Eternal Purpose:** The church reveals God’s *polypoikilos sophia* (πολυποίκιλος σοφία, manifold wisdom) (Ephesians 3:10). Philadelphia’s faithfulness showcases this wisdom.
- **Confidence in God:** Believers approach God with *parrēsia* (παρρησία, boldness) through the church (Ephesians 3:12), unlike Sardis’ spiritual deadness.
- **Call to Commitment:** Full devotion—through attendance and service—aligns with God’s plan, as seen in Acts 2:42.

## 8. The Church and the Kingdom: A Deeper Exploration

The Kingdom is:

- **Present and Future:** Inaugurated (*ēngiken*, ἤγγικεν, has come near) through Christ (Mark 1:15), yet future (Revelation 11:15).
- **Spiritual and Visible:** In believers’ hearts (Luke 17:20-21) and through the church’s mission (Matthew 5:14-16).
- **Transformative:** The church, as the Kingdom’s outpost, transforms lives (*metanoia*, μετάνοια, repentance) (Matthew 28:19-20).
- **Eternal:** The church anticipates God’s eternal reign (Revelation 22:1-5). The seven churches’ mixed record—Smyrna’s faithfulness, Laodicea’s failure—urges steadfast commitment.

## Conclusion

The church is God’s instrument to manifest His Kingdom. The seven churches of Revelation warn against spiritual drift (*nekros*, *chliaros*) and commend faithfulness (*pistos*). Commitment to the local church—through attendance, fellowship, and submission to leadership—ensures spiritual growth and aligns with God’s eternal plan. Only about 40% of the seven churches’ members were likely in a saved state, urging believers to heed Jesus’ call to *metanoēsōn* (repent).

## Scriptural Tips for Application

- **Colossians 1:18:** Submit to Christ, the *kephalē* (head) of the church.
- **1 Corinthians 12:12-27:** Embrace interdependence in the body.

- **Hebrews 10:24-25:** Prioritize *koinōnia* (fellowship) to avoid drift.
- **Acts 2:42-47:** Model the early church’s devotion.
- **Ephesians 2:19-22:** Build on Christ, the *akrogōniaios* (cornerstone).

## Call to Action

Commit fully to the local church, as the seven churches teach. Attend all gatherings, serve selflessly, and align with God’s Kingdom, avoiding the failures of Sardis and Laodicea while emulating Smyrna and Philadelphia.

Summary Table: The Church as God's Kingdom Expression – Core Biblical Teachings

Theme / Section	Key Biblical Concept / Metaphor	Core Scriptural References	Practical Application / Call to Commitment	Positive Example from Seven Churches	Negative Warning from Seven Churches
<b>Biblical Meaning of Church</b>	Ekklesia = called-out assembly; universal & local	Matt 16:18; Acts 2:41-47; Eph 1:22-23; Heb 12:22-24	Be part of visible local assembly devoted to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer	Smyrna, Philadelphia (faithful)	Laodicea (lukewarm detachment)
<b>Church &amp; Kingdom Relationship</b>	Present manifestation of God's rule; anticipates full future reign	Mark 1:15; Luke 17:20-21; Col 1:13-14; Rev 11:15, 21:1-4	Live out Kingdom values now through devotion, unity, mission	Smyrna, Philadelphia	Sardis (dead), Laodicea (self-reliant)
<b>Powerful Descriptions</b>	Household, Building (Christ cornerstone), Holy Temple, Body of Christ	Eph 2:19-22; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 1 Tim 3:15; Col 1:18	Build on Christ; maintain purity; function interdependently	Philadelphia (pillar promise)	Ephesus (lost love threatens stability), Sardis (soiled garments)
<b>Unity in the Church</b>	One body by one Spirit; same mind; avoid factions	1 Cor 12:12-13; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Cor 1:10	Pursue biblical alignment ( <i>phroneō</i> ); reject division	—	Pergamos (false teaching caused division)
<b>Leadership &amp; Authority</b>	Honor elders/presbyters; submit to overseers	1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:7,17	Imitate faithful leaders; submit for order	Smyrna, Philadelphia	Laodicea (self-sufficiency ignored authority)
<b>Devotion to Fellowship</b>	Spur one another to love & good deeds; share resources	Heb 10:24-25; Acts 2:44-45	Prioritize gathering, giving, <i>koinōnia</i>	—	Ephesus (neglected love), Laodicea (self-focused)
<b>Manifold Wisdom &amp; Eternal Purpose</b>	Church reveals God's <i>polypoikilos sophia</i> ; boldness in access	Eph 3:10,12	Approach God confidently; serve as outpost of eternal Kingdom	Philadelphia (manifold wisdom shown)	Sardis (deadness hides wisdom)
<b>Overall Call</b>	Full commitment aligns with God's plan	Acts 2:42-47; Col 1:18; Eph 2:19-22	Attend faithfully, serve selflessly, repent where needed	Smyrna & Philadelphia ( <i>pistos</i> )	Sardis & Laodicea ( <i>nekros, chliaros</i> )

Summary table: Assessment of the Seven Churches in Revelation 2–3

<b>Church</b>	<b>Key Praise</b>	<b>Key Rebuke / Critical Failure</b>	<b>Estimated Score (Jesus' Satisfaction)</b>	<b>Estimated % Likely Saved</b>	<b>Primary Spiritual Warning / Lesson</b>
Ephesus	Strong doctrine, rejected false apostles & Nicolaitans	Abandoned first love (agapē prōtē); risks lampstand removal	45/100	40%	Doctrine without passionate devotion is insufficient
Smyrna	Faithful under persecution; no rebuke	None	95/100	95%	Endurance through trials pleases Christ
Pergamos	Held fast in Satan's stronghold	Tolerated Balaam/Nicolaitan teaching (idolatry & immorality)	35/100	30%	Compromise with false teaching spreads like leaven
Thyatira	Love, service, growing works	Tolerated "Jezebel" (porneia, idolatry, deep things of Satan)	30/100	25%	Tolerance of immorality/doctrine threatens the whole body
Sardis	A few faithful names remain	Spiritually dead (nekros); incomplete works; rested on reputation	10/100	5%	Past glory without present life leads to judgment
Philadelphia	Kept Christ's word despite little strength	None	90/100	90%	Faithfulness with dependence on God opens doors
Laodicea	None	Lukewarm (chliaros), self-sufficient; risks being spit out	5/100	5%	Complacency and self-reliance are nauseating to Christ
<b>Overall</b>	—	—	~40/100 (avg.)	~40%	Mixed record urges repentance (metanoēson) and vigilance