

# Seven Churches of Revelation

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While Bulgarian Protestant churches and missions in Northern America have been present since the early twentieth century, networking between them is a rather new phenomenon that has occurred for less than a decade. Because of its recent existence, historical records and documented information on the subject is not yet available.

However, the mission and vision of such a movement is not new to the Bible. Cross-cultural church planting is seen repeatedly in the Scriptures. The Synagogue Movement during the times of Jewish slavery is a prime Old Testament example. The New Testament church and the spread of Christianity in the ancient East and the Roman Empire are other examples. In such cases, the mission and vision of religious formation presented in the Bible are applicable to the needs of a contemporary ethnic community of believers.

Of greater significance for this research is networking among religious communities in the Bible. The fact that such process exists is obvious from regular gatherings of New Testament church leaders in councils to make decisions and find solutions for problematic situations. The best example of church networking in a context of cross-cultural ministry is the description of the Seven Churches of Revelation.

This study will examine the text of Revelation chapters two and three in order to analyze similarities in problems and solutions in relation to the problem of ministry of the Bulgarian churches in America. The Scripture review will approach the Seven Churches from Revelation in a way very similar to the larger outline of the present doctoral project. Through establishing the general characteristics of the Seven Churches of Revelation, the

Scripture review will place the cultural, economic and leadership dilemmas within the churches' context of ministry. It will then survey the churches and their relationships to the said dilemmas and will provide a statistical overview of the frequency of their occurrence. Finally, the Scripture review will analyze the results in light of the solutions proposed in the text of chapters two and three of the book of Revelation.

### ***Network of the Seven Churches of Revelation***

Although the Book of Revelation has been vastly studied and interpreted throughout church history, usually the focus is on one major issue within the text, namely, the role and future of the church. The main reason for this has been the in-depth prophetic and pastoral messages to the Seven Churches.

The value of the messages to the Seven Churches of Revelation is constituted by the fact that they are the last recorded Biblical messages to the Christian Church.<sup>1</sup> The letters to the Seven Churches obviously do not contain all of the usual elements used in the New Testament epistolary form. It is generally accepted that they were written as an application of the Revelation context and not as individual messages to the churches.

This contextual connection between the seven letters suggests a network of inter-church communication which was established between the seven churches. Several common elements are obvious from the text, the most obvious is their common geographical location as shown in Figure 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Wade H. Horton, *Lectures on the Seven Churches* (Cleveland: Pentecostal Resource Center, n/a), 6.

Figure 1: Distances between the Seven Cities of Revelation



The addressed churches are located clockwise, almost like they are forming a strategic circle of ministry.<sup>2</sup> Most churches are located thirty to forty miles from one another, which perhaps was the possible daily limit for traveling during that time. The shape of the circle of ministry, based on the order in which the churches were addressed, suggests a method of managing known today as Management by Walking Around (MBWA). The example in Revelation not only presupposes such methodology, but purposefully gives its clockwise direction in relation to the location of origin of the letters from the Island of Pathmos.

<sup>2</sup> Henry M. Morris, *The Revelation Recorded* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987), 66. Merrill Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 50. For an in-depth discussion on the geographical location of the Seven Churches, its significance for the circulation of the letters and the leadership organization see William M. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 186.

The purposeful positioning of the churches provided a common network (circle of ministry). It is also obvious from the text that at the time of writing, simplicity and democracy in organization were characteristics of the New Testament church government.<sup>3</sup> In the context of networking, each church maintained its own individuality because it is addressed separately in the text.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the seven churches shared a common context of ministry in the area of Asia Minor which consisted of a great mixture of languages, customs and religions. All of the seven churches were located in cities which were under Roman rule and combined the customs of Roman, Greek, Assyrian, Persian, Babylonian, Egyptian and Jewish cultures as well as the various languages and dialects within them. The commonality in the context of ministry continued with the presence of numerous religious groups, cults, sects and guilds which were closely interwoven with civil affairs. Universal citizenship, universal religion, and a universal church were all ideas for which the Roman Empire was beginning to prepare. In such context, the seven churches shared a common goal of ministry, namely, spreading the Christian message.<sup>5</sup>

The seven letters were inspired by one occasion and one purpose as a tool for inter-church networking.<sup>6</sup> The message was not sporadic or spontaneous but thoughtfully planned and designed for each of the churches, based on an in-depth knowledge of the individual problems, members and solutions for future development.<sup>7</sup> The text demonstrates a common structure within the church illustrated by the common structure

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<sup>3</sup> McDowell, 38.

<sup>4</sup> McDowell, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Ramsey, 120-21.

<sup>6</sup> Ramsey, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Ramsey, 39-40.

shared by each message. The letters reveal that the congregations shared similar practices of worship, ministry and teaching which were accompanied by problems and persecution.

A significant part of the common structure was the leadership because each church had a divinely-appointed messenger,<sup>8</sup> addressed by a common “divinely-charged”<sup>9</sup> network elder, who received a transmitted divine message. Such process shows that the networking was done by means of communication, of which the epistolary form is also proof.<sup>10</sup> The written text was only a formal documentary or a contract of the holistic communication accomplished through various multimedia means including those that relied on audio, visual and other senses. It constructed a mystical, divinely-inspired, supernatural and non-virtual reality which transformed the recipient of the message in the same way it did the messenger. Through this means, the network communication was not a miscommunication, but rather an authentic translation from the divine source to the very members of the congregations.

This form of communication was absolutely necessary for the common context of ministry in which the seven churches operated. This common context was the earth, not heaven,<sup>11</sup> and their common goal was to conquer.<sup>12</sup> Yet, at the same time the text is undisputable in that each church contained people prepared to conquer. This fact makes the victory of the church inevitable. Thus, while the churches are dealing with various problems and persecutions, they are already conquerors.

This observation brings the reader to the final commonality which the seven churches share; namely, that besides the earthly network of ministry there is another

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 30. Ramsey, 69, 74ff.

<sup>9</sup> Ramsey, 80.

<sup>10</sup> McDowell, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Metzger, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Metzger, 30.

greater, divine, heavenly network which is in control. Such a conclusion is obvious from the fact that all of the churches without exception are known to the sender of the messages.<sup>13</sup> Their problems are relevant, criticism and encouragement which are prophetically delivered solutions are divinely provided and conquest of the church over the problems is definite and inevitable. This is undisputable proof that a God-centered New Testament networking of churches is the dependable and enduring model for both ministry networking and church government. Precisely this heavenly network is the supernatural source of the unique approach through which problems of the churches are to be solved. Thus, in addition to a common present reality, the churches share a future earthly applicability of the paradigm of ministry which makes their message relevant today.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Problem of Ministry Contextualized***

This doctoral project focuses on the tri-level problem of the Bulgarian Evangelical Churches in North America, namely, the cultural, economic and financial dilemmas. The presentation of the Seven Churches found in Revelation chapters two and three follows a formula that includes (1) Church, (2) Christ, (3) Commendation, (4) Problem, (5) Correction, (6) Judgment and (7) Promises as shown in Table 2:

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<sup>13</sup> Wade Horton, *Seven Golden Candlesticks* (Cleveland: Pathway Press, 1974), 72.

<sup>14</sup> Edward A. McDowell, *The Meaning and Message of the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), 35. Clovis G. Chappell, *Sermons from Revelation* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n/a), 59.

Table 2: The Seven Churches of Revelation

Church	Christ	Commendation	Problem	Correction	Judgment	Promise
Ephesus	He who holds the seven stars and walks in the midst of the lamp stands	Works, labor, patience, testing of false apostles, and hating the deeds of Nicolaitans	Loss of proper motivation for service, namely, the love of Jesus	Remember where you once were, repent, and do the first works	Removal of lamp stand	Access to the Trees of Life in Paradise
Smyrna	The First and the Last, who was dead and came to life	Works, tribulation, and poverty for Christ's sake	None	None	None	A crown of life and escape from the second death
Pergamum	The One who has a sharp sword with two edges	Faithfulness to Christ's name even in the face of martyrdom	Tolerance of promiscuous persons who taught the doctrine of Balaam and Nicolaitans	Repent!	Warfare against the church with the sword of Christ's mouth	Sustenance with hidden manna, the possession of a white stone, and a new name
Thyatira	The One with eyes like a flame of fire and feet like fine brass	Love, service, faith, and patience which has continued to grow	Tolerance of false prophetess Jezebel and her wicked practices	Repent!	Casting of Jezebel's consorts into Great Tribulation and the killing of her children	Power over the nations, and possession of the morning star
Sardis	The One possessing the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars	A few in Sardis who have not defiled their garments	A reputation for life but in actuality they were dead	Be watchful and strengthen what remains. Remember, hold fast and repent	He is coming as a thief in the night	Being clothed in white garments, permanence in the Book of Life, confession of one, name before the Father
Philadelphia	The One who is holy and true, holding the key of David	Faithfulness to the Word of Christ	None	None	None	An open door, subjection of enemies, deliverance from the Great Tribulation, permanence in the temple of God, and the new name of God
Laodicea	The Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God	None	Luke-warmness and overestimate of status before God	Seek fervently after genuine spiritual riches and repent of your sins.	Expulsion from the mouth of the Lord	Intimacy of relationship, co-rulership with Christ on His throne

A more in-depth study of the problem-solution relationship of the Seven Churches of Revelation reveals their relationship to the tri-level dilemma of the problem in ministry.

### ***Ephesus***

Ephesus was the Asia Minor city where East and West met.<sup>15</sup> It was also called the city of Artemis (or Diana in Latin), as the cult was a central part of the city's social life.<sup>16</sup> Located less than a mile outside the walls of Ephesus, the temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the World.<sup>17</sup> Artemis was worshiped as goddess of the moon. Zodiac signs hung around her neck as a symbol of her astral authority, and she strongly resembled a number of other Asian divinities.<sup>18</sup> The focus of the cult of Artemis was purposeful sexual immorality as an element of worship.<sup>19</sup> This was a significant cultural characteristic of the context of ministry in which the Ephesian church had ministered since its very beginning in the book of Acts.

In this cultic pseudo-love context of ministry, the problem of the Ephesian church was the loss of its first love (Rev. 2:4). It is probable that the strong cultural emphasis on the cult of Artemis in the city of Ephesus had affected the church and had become its weakness which caused it to lose its first love. While the church was strong inside thus recognizing the pseudo-apostles (Rev. 2:2), it had become too open to the outside culture. The loss of its first love had resulted in the church's loss of its original identity and lack of productivity (referred to in the text as "first works" (Rev. 2:5)).

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<sup>15</sup> McDowell, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Metzger, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques M. Chevalier, *A Postmodern Revelation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 199.

<sup>19</sup> William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, n/a). 13-15.



The loss of the first love within the church was used by a group of false apostles.<sup>20</sup> Several commentators classify this group in relation to the sect of the Nicolaitans.<sup>21</sup> The Nicolaitans advocated accommodation with the surrounding social and religious order<sup>22</sup> and their abuse of Christian liberty<sup>23</sup> were seen as related to the practice of Balaam.<sup>24</sup> In summary, the Ephesian church faced cultural problems which were further affecting its organization and leadership, but most of all these problems were changing its identity causing the loss of its first love.

### *Smyrna*

The church in Smyrna was generally considered one of two of the seven churches (Philadelphia being the second) that was without need of correction. However, this fact alone did not make the church problem free. Two of the three dilemmas in ministry were present in Smyrna, namely, the cultural and economic ones.

Zeus and Cybele were deities worshiped in Smyrna since its very beginning. Having openly embraced the Imperial cult, Smyrna was the first city to build a temple in

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<sup>20</sup> Hemer, 41.

<sup>21</sup> “The term “Nicolaitans” is used to describe problematic groups in Ephesus (Rev. 2:6) and Pergamum (Rev. 2:15). Even though “Jezebel” and her followers at Thyatira are not labeled Nicolaitans, their teachings and practices were similar to those of the Nicolaitans at Pergamum. “Jezebel” was perhaps a Nicolaitan prophet. The origin of the name “Nicolaitan” is unknown. Later church writers (Irenaeus, Haer. 1.26.3; Hippolytus, Haer. 7.24; Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 2.29.1-3) connected the term with Nicolaus, one of the seven men chosen in the book of Acts to help supervise the distribution of goods to the widows in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5). However, there is no evidence that this Nicolaus or his followers had any connection with the groups mentioned in Revelation. Another suggestion for the origin of the name “Nicolaitans” draws upon the possible etymology of the Greek word Nikolaiton, explaining it as derived from two Greek words nika laon, meaning “he has conquered the people.” If this derivation is correct, it likely arose because of the comparison of the Nicolaitans to Balaam (Rev. 2:14), whose name was sometimes explained to mean “he has consumed the people.” The name “Nicolaitans” would then be the Greek version of “Balaamites.” This explanation for the origin of the name is possible, but it is equally plausible that the group was named for one of its leaders.” Mitchell G. Reddish, *Smyh & Helwys Bible Commentary: Revelation* (Macon: Smyh & Helwys, 2001), 61.

<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Wall, *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 70. Hemer, 104-105.

<sup>23</sup> Terence Kelshaw, *Send This Message to My Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 56.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Barker, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 101. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966), 39.

honor of Dea Roma<sup>25</sup> and Emperor Tiberius.<sup>26</sup> Street of gold around Mount Pagus led to the latter. It is absolutely imperative to consider the influence of the Imperial cult on the cultural context of the city and the effect it had on the mission of the Smyrna church. The resistance of the believers against the Imperial cult led to severe persecutions (Rev. 2:9-10).

Another reason for the persecution of the Smyrna church was the synagogue, which added additional cultural emphases. The descriptive phrase, “the synagogue of Satan” was used in the text as both a linguistic and scriptural precedent to describe the uniqueness of the problem.<sup>27</sup> The contrast of the church and the synagogue as religious centers constituted a cultural contrast between Christians and Jews. Apparently, such was unintended by the text and presupposes that the church and the synagogue were expressions of the same Scripture-based culture. For the author, the people of God were a spiritual group, not an ethnic one.<sup>28</sup> Through persecuting the church, the synagogue had become an anti-Scriptural culture; thus, the text considered such type of culture not simply to be Jewish only by name but satanic as well (Rev. 2:9).

In addition to the cultural dilemma which resulted in persecution, the church in Smyrna dealt with the economic dilemma as well. The physical poverty of the church in Smyrna was not viewed as a problem in ministry (Rev. 2:9). On the contrary, the text considered the lack of physical economic success as riches of a different kind, considering it as a solution to the economic dilemma. Although the solution to the economic dilemma was found in the current context of ministry, it denied the current

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<sup>25</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 91.

<sup>26</sup> Sean P. Kealy, *The Apocalypse of John* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 86.

<sup>27</sup> Kealy, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Hemer, 67.

reality as anti-reality and presented the solution through a divinely recognized reality which was true for the church. This type of solution, as seen later in this research, became a paradigm for solving problems in ministry within the network of the Seven Churches of Revelation.

### ***Pergamum***

Citizens of Pergamum claimed that the city was founded by the Arcadian hero Telephus.<sup>29</sup> Pergamum was often called the “city of Zeus”<sup>30</sup> because its high raised altars were dedicated to the Greek god for continuous worship with sacrifice.<sup>31</sup> The Imperial cult had been strongly present there since 27 B.C.<sup>32</sup> along with temples to Roma and Augustus, both located on a sharp hill near the city.<sup>33</sup>

Another peculiar characteristic of the religious life of Pergamum was the communication of religious ideas through symbols and types.<sup>34</sup> The Greek gods Dionysus represented by a bull and Askleopis represented by a serpent, who were worshiped in Pergamum, were chief examples of such practices,<sup>35</sup> and illustrate the cultural context for which vivid imagery of the book of Revelation was employed.

The strong religious practices were a major part of the life and development of the local culture, as the text categorized it as the “seat of Satan” (Rev. 2:13), perhaps referring to one or all of the above religious practices.<sup>36</sup> This context was combined with another vivid prophetic Old Testament image, namely the false-prophet Balaam (Rev. 2:14). A peculiar characteristic of Balaam’s false-ministry was used as a descriptive

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<sup>29</sup> Hemer, 78.

<sup>30</sup> McDowell, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Metzger, 34.

<sup>32</sup> McDowell, 48.

<sup>33</sup> Kealy, 89. Metzger, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Ramsey, 288.

<sup>35</sup> Ramsey, 287.

<sup>36</sup> Reddish, 59.

mechanism by the text to relate his practices to the idol worship through eating sacrifices which were definitely relative to the Pergamum context of ministry.

Finally, the practices of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:15), known to the reader from the message to the Ephesian church was added to constitute another peculiarity common to both the surrounding culture and the church. Although the Nicolaitans from the Ephesian church were known by their works (Rev. 2:6), in Pergamum they were known by their teachings (Rev. 2:15).<sup>37</sup> In a similar way, although the rest of the churches are known by their works, the Pergamum church was known by its living (Rev. 2:13). It is evident, then, that the results of this church were not works or accomplishments, but rather a lifestyle. To prove this point, the text approaches its cultural context differently. Although the typical Pauline style was to attack legalism, John spoke against the exaggeration of the law into liberal practices in the community.<sup>38</sup> It is evident that the church could not produce results (works) because of the fact that it was under strong persecution. This is evident from the mentioning of the first martyr in Revelation, Antipas, which means “against all” (Rev. 2:13). The fact that the church was under heavy persecution and could not produce works was not an excuse for liberalization and idolatry. The church was required to maintain a lifestyle of righteousness which served as an anti-culture or a culture against all secular cultures.

### ***Thyatira***

Thyatira was founded by Seleucus I as a military outpost to his empire.<sup>39</sup> Kept safe by the army and strategically located on the crossroad of several ethnic groups, the

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<sup>37</sup> Tenney, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Chevalier, 211-12.

<sup>39</sup> Mounce, 101.

city soon became an important market center where manufacturing was the citizens' predominant occupation.

As a central economic factor, the manufacturing guilds held an important place in the social dynamics of the city, strongly influencing its culture. Manufacturers united themselves in societies of common trade called guilds.<sup>40</sup> Members of the guilds shared meals which often included sacrificial animals. To reject even minimal requirements for guild membership was economic suicide.<sup>41</sup> Based on the gathered teachings of Paul, Peter and Jude on secret societies and orders, many church members were involved in such guilds.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the difficult combination of cultural and economic factors present in the context of ministry, the church in Thyatira was a successful church, as its last works were more than the first (Rev. 2:19). Such success in ministry presupposes a problem-free organization. However, Thyatira's organization had a flaw described in the text as accommodating Jezebel (Rev. 2:20).

The identity of Jezebel is a controversial issue.<sup>43</sup> It has been suggested by various commentators that she was the wife of a bishop, "the angel of Thyatira,"<sup>44</sup> Lydia of Acts

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<sup>40</sup> "Guilds and Associations in the Roman World: Clubs and associations afforded opportunities of common worship, enjoyment of social intercourse, and in some cases the satisfaction of holding office. These societies further promoted a spirit of comradeship and mutual aid in time of difficulty. Most of them tended to funerary responsibilities and provided tombstones. Associations formed the natural organization for foreigners and foreign worship entering a city. Clubs were associated with a deity, often met in a temple, offered libations and sacrifices, and ate meat from idol temples. Political, economic, and family life and public entertainment were organized around the pagan deities; so also were the ordinary social groupings." Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 136.

<sup>41</sup> Metzger, 36-37.

<sup>42</sup> Barker, 100; Ramsey, 346; Barclay, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Hemer, 128.

<sup>44</sup> Mounce, 103; Ramsey, 341.

16:14<sup>45</sup> or the local oracle, Sambathe.<sup>46</sup> Because of similar characteristics, Jezebel has also been compared with the “great whore” of Revelation chapter seventeen.<sup>47</sup>

A more important question with which the text deals is the role of Jezebel in the Thyatira church. It is certain that the text draws a parallel between the Jezebel of Revelation and King Ahab’s wife from 1 Kings because of the common means of their influence and manipulation. Besides the similarities, the Jezebel of Revelation claimed to be a prophetess and a teacher promoting adulatory and idolatry (Rev. 2:20).<sup>48</sup> She further claimed her teachings and practices to be “deep things” spirituality, perhaps related to early Gnosticism<sup>49</sup> causing a serious leadership problem and organizational dysfunction of the Thyatira church.<sup>50</sup>

The correlation of the cultural, economic and leadership dilemmas is perhaps most obvious in the case of the Thyatira church. The final leadership crises led by Jezebel was a problem that resulted from a rather interesting mechanism which began with the

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<sup>45</sup> Ramsey, 325.

<sup>46</sup> Barclay, 58.

<sup>47</sup> “The woman of ch. 17 and the Jezebel figure of 2:20-23 have several characteristics in common. Both are accused of fornication; both have followers whom they have seduced; both are doomed, along with their followers, to punishment. In essence, both figures are manifestations of the same sin: they encourage people to worship other gods, either through participation in the religious aspects of pagan culture or through the imperial cult.” Reddish, 326.

<sup>48</sup> Hemer, 120, 128.

<sup>49</sup> “The theological problems confronting the churches in Asia Minor are sometimes viewed as a form of Gnosticism. The term “Gnosticism” refers to a variety of religious systems in the ancient world that offered salvation through knowledge. (The Greek word for “knowledge” is *gnō̄sis*.) Gnostic systems viewed the physical world as evil. A person gained salvation by acquiring the knowledge that the material world, created by a lesser god, was evil and transient and that the spiritual realm was the true goal of the enlightened. Salvation involved a deliverance from the evil of the physical body. Some gnostics taught avoidance of the physical world and its pleasures through asceticism; others took the opposite approach, advocating a libertine lifestyle. They argued that because the material world was not important, one could do whatever one chose with the physical body as long as one was properly attuned to the spiritual world. The Nicolaitans and followers of “Jezebel” mentioned in the messages to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira were guilty of eating food sacrificed to idols and “practicing fornication” (2:14, 20). Their argument, like that of some gnostics, could have been that their physical behavior was inconsequential. They had achieved the higher knowledge (“the deep things,” 2:24), that is, the knowledge that the true child of God was concerned only with spiritual realities.” Reddish, 64

<sup>50</sup> Ramsey, 65.

economic dilemma of the context of ministry. Through influencing the local culture, the last emerged into a religious problem, which affected the leadership and organization of the church. Despite these crises, the church increased its resoluteness. Although this fact was not underestimated in the text, it was further noted that quality in ministry is an equal requirement.

### ***Sardis***

Sardis was a city with past glory. As the capital of the Lydian Empire during the seventh and sixth centuries BC, Sardis was legendary for its wealth. Gold was prevalent in the region surrounding Sardis.<sup>51</sup> The city was consecutively captured by Cyrus, Alexander the Great, Antiochus III and the Roman Empire, leaving stories of lost battles and describing the city was a necropolis or “City of Cead.”

In resonance, all pagan religions present in Sardis were preoccupied with the subject of death.<sup>52</sup> The goddess Cybele was worshiped as a main deity of Sardis<sup>53</sup> as a cult toward creation and death. Roman celebrations in her honor were on the cycle of the seasons and life after death.<sup>54</sup>

Similar to the existing cultural context and its strong orientation toward death and dying, the church in Sardis had a reputation of being alive but was dead. The church had been successful in keeping this reputation not only in the world but also among its

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<sup>51</sup> Reddish, 69.

<sup>52</sup> Hemer, 151.

<sup>53</sup> McDowell, 53.

<sup>54</sup> Cybele - Mother Goddess: Cybele is the Anatolian Mother Goddess. She represented the Earth in its primitive and power state and was celebrated as a Mother Earth Goddess – a mother of all living and dead. Her lover Attis castrated himself and bled to death. The initiation rites for Cybele’s priests required them to castrate themselves. Romans adopted Cybele in 205 BC. They added a woman's body and honored her as Great Mother of the Gods (Magma Mater Deum Idea). She became one of the leading deities in Rome and was addressed as a Virgin (one unto herself). Cybele is worshipped by Anatolians and Romans on March 15 as beginning of the spring festivals.

members, and was therefore often called “the church of the dead.”<sup>55</sup> The text dealt with its spiritual death, proving that a church dies when it loses its spiritual vitality.<sup>56</sup> The main concern in the message was the church’s faithfulness and its inability to fulfill its calling.<sup>57</sup> Although the church in Sardis dealt with the cultural problem of the surrounding context of ministry, its organization and effectiveness were affected as well. Only a few in the congregation were able to deal with the cultural and leadership dilemmas (Rev. 3:4).

### *Philadelphia*

Philadelphia was founded by Attalus II Philadelphus<sup>58</sup> as a missionary city established to promote Greco civilization in Asia.<sup>59</sup> Attalus was a brother of the king of Pergamum Eumenes II; hence, the name of the city “brotherly love.”<sup>60</sup>

The church in Philadelphia generally was considered unproblematic by the commentators and perhaps the most successful of the seven. It was the church, which being weak in resources had proven strong in effectiveness.<sup>61</sup>

However, the text does point out a pre-existing cultural problem which the church had overcome. Similar to the church in Smyrna, the church in Philadelphia had dealt with the “synagogue of Satan,” but had overcome this problem. This outcome will be examined in detail later in this chapter.

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<sup>55</sup> McDowell, 54.

<sup>56</sup> Kealy, 97.

<sup>57</sup> Reddish, 70.

<sup>58</sup> Chevalier, 214.

<sup>59</sup> McDowell, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Chevalier, 215.

<sup>61</sup> McDowell, 56.



## *Laodicea*

Laodicea was founded by the Seleucid Antiochus II, who named the city after his wife.<sup>62</sup> The city was established as a settlement of Syrians and Jews brought from Babylon. Because it was more strategically situated for commerce than war, the city soon became a prominent banking and medical center.<sup>63</sup> It was widely known for its medical school in connection with the temple of Men Carou and Phrygian powder mixed with oil for ointment of eyes and ears.<sup>64</sup>

Obviously, the church had benefited from the economic success of the city. However, this fact does not impress the text, which considers the church both economically and spiritually bankrupt.<sup>65</sup> The description of the church's status includes over-confidence, excessive materialism, false self-sufficiency,<sup>66</sup> hopelessness, misery, poverty, blindness and nakedness. But these characteristics were only consequences of the actual problem which was the absence of the presence of God.

Jesus taught His disciples that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is present among them (Mat. 18:20). Unfortunately, this is not the case with the Laodicea church, where Christ stands outside of its door (Rev. 3:20). It is safe to conclude that while focusing on solving the economic dilemma, the church of Laodicea had lost its own identity as a church.

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<sup>62</sup> Reddish, 79.

<sup>63</sup> Kealy, 103. Caird, 56.

<sup>64</sup> Mounce, 123.

<sup>65</sup> Reddish, 82.

<sup>66</sup> Hemer, 208.

### *Statistical Results*

Examination of the Seven Churches of Revelation and their relationship to the tri-level dilemma of the present problem of ministry reveals that the range of problems can be attributed to external and internal causal factors, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Problems

Externally Caused Problems	Internally Caused Problems
False morals (adultery)	False teachings
False finances	False church leadership
False worship (idolatry)	False prophecy

The externally caused problems are introduced to the church in order to change its identity, while the internal set emerges from its corporate identity and organizational structure. A comparison of the first three to the contemporary MTV culture which focused on sex, money and mysticism is self-explanatory. The internal factors directly relate to leadership/organization, location/culture and theology/praxis. Collectively, the six factors question identity, authority and/or future. Such an approach in a contemporary setting can be characterized as postmodern.

The presence of the tri-level dilemma of the present problem of ministry within the Seven Churches of Revelation is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Problem Comparison of the Seven Churches of Revelation

Church	Cultural	Economic	Leadership
Ephesus	Rev. 2:6	--	Rev. 2:6
Smyrna	Rev. 2:9	Rev. 2:9	--
Pergamum	Rev. 2:13	--	Rev. 2:14-15
Thyatira	Rev. 2:20	--	Rev. 2:19-20
Sardis	Rev. 3:1	--	Rev. 3:1-2
Philadelphia	Rev. 3:9	--	--
Laodicea	Rev. 3:17	Rev. 3:17	Rev. 3:15
Percentile	100%	29%	71%

After reviewing the relationship of the presence of the tri-level dilemma of the problem of ministry within the Seven Churches of Revelation, several conclusions about their context of ministry can be made (Table 5).

Table 5: General Statistical Overview of the Seven Church of Revelation

Churches with presence of sin <sup>67</sup>	100%
Churches with present/undealt problems in ministry	100%
Churches with leadership	100%
Churches with results (works, both finished and unfinished)	86%
Churches with need for solutions	86%
Churches with need to repent <sup>68</sup>	71%
Churches for which the leadership dilemma is related to the economic dilemma	57%
Churches for which the cultural dilemma is related to the economic dilemma	29%
Churches under persecution with martyrs	14%
Churches that have found solutions	14%
Perfect and problem-free churches	0%

Finally, each church has one central characteristic that differentiates it from the other churches and which is a central factor in the formation of its identity and ministry (Table 6).

<sup>67</sup> McDowell, 38.

<sup>68</sup> Metzger, 45.

Table 6: Individual Description of the Seven Churches of Revelation

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Ephesus	The church of loveless orthodoxy
Smyrna	The church faithful in persecution
Pergamum	That church that practiced indiscriminant tolerance
Thyatira	The church that compromised in the bad sense
Sardis	The church where professing Christians were complacent
Philadelphia	The faithful church with a promise for deliverance
Laodicea	The church with deficiency caused by lukewarmness. <sup>69</sup>

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### *Analyses and Solutions*

A correlation between the tri-dimensional dilemmas of culture, economics and leadership and the Seven Churches of Revelation is obvious from the comparison shown in Table 4. It must be noted in the very beginning that the three dilemmas are related to the churches as a religious community. The dilemmas never deal distinctly with cultural, economic or leadership factors but always relate to or result in a religious (even spiritual) problem in ministry. In relationship to the churches, these dilemmas are present both internally and externally.<sup>70</sup>

The statistics from Table 4 further show that all churches, without exception, either directly or indirectly dealt with problems related to the cultural dilemma. To understand the strong cultural influence, it may be helpful to show how each church was influenced by the local culture. Table 7 presents the relationship between the location of the seven churches and the imperial cults. The letter X indicates literary or archeological evidence of a temple, altar or priest during the 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

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<sup>69</sup> C. Marvin Pate, *Four Views of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 216.

<sup>70</sup> Caird, 30-31.

Table 7: The Imperial Cult<sup>71</sup>

Church	Temple	Altar	Priest
Ephesus	X	X	X
Smyrna	X	X	X
Pergamum	X	X	X
Thyatira	X	X	X
Sardis	X	X	X
Philadelphia	X	--	--
Laodicea	X	--	--
Percentile	100%	71%	71%

The 100% presence of the cultural dilemma designates it as the predominant source for problems experienced by churches. Its relationship as a cause for the other two dilemmas is also obvious. The relationship between culture and economics is well known and proven as both a past and present historical formational factor within society. In the case of Sardis, for example, archeological evidence shows coinage representing the connection between the cultural and economic dilemmas.<sup>72</sup>

The influence of culture on church leadership, organization and practice is also a historically present factor. The text clearly shows such dependability in each of the cases related to leadership and organization i.e. Jezebel, Nicolaitans and Balaamites. Therefore, to claim that culture is a formative factor within the community of believers seems normal and natural.

The text advocates a much different and rather antagonistic approach, proposing that instead of agreeing with the present culture and its influence on the church, the church must create an anti-culture through *imitio Christi*.<sup>73</sup> This is evident with the

<sup>71</sup> Reddish, 252.

<sup>72</sup> Hemer, 138.

<sup>73</sup> Reddish, 61.

churches of Pergamum and Antipas, which means “anti-all,” and the hating of the works of the false apostles by the church of Ephesus.<sup>74</sup>

Satan is viewed as the presiding genius of imperial tyranny.<sup>75</sup> Revelation does not allow a medium perception. In an analogy of the practices of the Roman emperors, Christ requires that one choose a side in order to remain faithful to Him or to Rome. Political tyranny which is represented by the beast and economic exploitation, represented by the harlot of Babylon, were the two basic forming dynamics of the Roman Empire which created its culture.<sup>76</sup> The book of Revelation undoubtedly stands against both of them.

The effectiveness of this approach toward contemporary secular culture is obvious in the comparison of the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia through their common cultural context of the “synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). While Smyrna deals with the cultural problem, Philadelphia had already dealt with it. In this case, the protest against secular culture is viewed as a test for the church, and its outcome is a triumph for the church. According to the text, when the church creates an anti-culture to stand against the wrong and evil in the context of secular culture, the result can be only one – victory of Christ over culture.

The second most prominent problem for the Seven Churches of Revelation is the dilemma of leadership and organization which is present in 71% of the churches (Table 4). The dependence between leadership and organization is expressed in the text through the word “works.” It seems natural to assume that the effectiveness of a church’s ministry

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<sup>74</sup> Hemer, 85.

<sup>75</sup> Rev. 13:4; Caird, 52.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of The Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 35.

is dependent on its finished works. However, the text accents the quality of ministry vs. quantity of ministry.

The works of both Sardis and Thyatira are included in the text. Sardis had begun a number of works, but none of them were completed. Thyatira had finished works which alludes to the effectiveness of its organization. It is obvious that Sardis has a problem finishing its works because of flaws in organization or leadership. On the other hand, because Thyatira has finished its works it should not have any organizational problems. However, this is hardly the case. Thyatira is addressed with a leadership problem as seen when a person in the church through the false prophetic manipulation and practices had gained leadership over the church. While the church is commended for its quantity of ministry, it is rebuked for the quality of its works. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that while the text requires results from each church, it further demands that the organization which produces the results be free from unauthorized leadership which diminishes the quality of the work.

The third problem is the economic dilemma, present in 29% of the churches (Table 4). While finances are frequently the focus of 21<sup>st</sup> century church culture, it appears that they were not of a major concern for the ministry of the Early Church. The text further shows that financial prosperity, as understood in the context of the Roman Empire, neither indicates nor cultivates Christian spirituality.

Two churches, Smyrna and Laodicea, had problems relevant to the economic dilemma. Although Smyrna had not yet dealt with the economic dilemma, Laodicea was rich and appeared to have already successfully dealt with it. The text has a much different opinion on the subject.

Although rich and obviously without financial needs, Laodicea had a heavy economic dilemma. The dilemma affected spiritual sight, emotions and spirituality, righteousness and integrity, eschatological future, and most controversial of all, its actual economic status (Rev. 3:16-18). Furthermore, extreme focus on solving the economic dilemma has compromised results in ministry and identity as a church (Rev. 3:15).

Smyrna, on the other hand, had not dealt with the economic dilemma due to extensive persecution. Its economic status, as seen by the local culture, is of little concern for the text. Smyrna is declared rich by the text, which denies secular reality and replaces it with a spiritual but much more realistic one, thus changing the way richness is to be understood, experienced and used in the ministry of the early church.

### ***Practical Applications***

The similarities between the Seven Churches of Revelation and the Network of Bulgarian Churches in North America are many, especially with respect to the tri-level dilemma from the context of ministry. Based on the examined text, all church problems demand solutions which are spiritual in nature. Indeed, though the text shows that there is hope for every church, it further confirms that because the church is a spiritual community, a real solution for its problems can be provided only through spiritual means.

The solution to each of the problems of the Seven Churches of Revelation is found in the text of Revelation. It is the strong conviction of this research that practice of the recommended solutions will lead to resolution of the tri-dimensional dilemma experienced by the Bulgarian Churches in North America.

With this in mind, the text gives each church a particular, specific and uncommon solution (Table 8).



Table 8: Uncommon Spiritual Solutions for the Seven Churches of Revelation

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Ephesus	The loss of first love can be corrected with repentance and return
Smyrna	No solution needed
Pergamum	The solution to unfaithfulness is the Word of God or Biblical teaching
Thyatira	Tolerance to secular manipulation is corrected with repentance and endurance.
Sardis	The solution to having a reputation of being alive, but in fact dead in need of revival requires remembrance, repentance, strengthening and reformation
Philadelphia	No solution needed
Laodicea	Lukewarmness needs fervent seeking after genuine spiritual riches through renewal of spiritual values.

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It is obvious that through their problems in ministry, churches are connected in a spiritual network which is in a search of solutions. After dealing with the tri-dimensional cultural, economic and leadership dilemmas, the central problems in ministry remain related to the church's identity as an alternative to the secular context of ministry.<sup>77</sup>

***Toward a Network of Bulgarian Churches in the United States***

Like the network of churches in the book of Revelation, the network of Bulgarian Churches in the United States presently deals with three main problems: cross-cultural, economic and organizational. Finding the proper solution will reflect on the future growth and organization of the network. Like the case of the Seven Churches of Revelation, the true answer comes from the Word of God and from listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a cross-cultural context and under the influence of postmodernity, once again the Scripture is a relevant solution to church dilemmas. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Rev. 2:7).

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<sup>77</sup> Reddish, 85.