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* (ἀκρογωνιαῖος, 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 ($henot\bar{e}s$, $\dot{e}v\acute{o}\tau\eta\varsigma$) (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.ASSESMENT 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 but rebuked for abandoning their *agapē prōtē* (ἀγάπη πρώτη, first love). The imperative *metanoēson* (μετανόησον, repent) signals urgency (Revelation 2:5).
- **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, θλῖψις), with no rebuke. Exhorted to be pistos achri thanatou (πιστός ἄχρι θανάτου, faithful unto death) (Revelation 2:10).
- **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).
- **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* (Ἱεζάβελ), leading to immorality. A faithful *loipoi* (λοιποί, remnant) remains (Revelation 2:24).
- **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).
- **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 (ὁλίγη δύναμις, little strength) (Revelation 3:8).
- **Estimated Score**: 90/100 Highly faithful.
- **Estimated Percentage Saved**: 90% Most are saved.

· Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)

- Assessment: Rebuked as *chliaros* (χλιαρός, lukewarm), facing rejection (*emesai*, ἐμέσαι, spit out) (Revelation 3:16).
- **− 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 *metanoēson* (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.