

**Seven Letters to Seven Churches: Part 2 - Smyrna**  
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Scripture: Revelation 2:8-11

## **I. The Synagogue of Who?!**

Was John of Patmos, the author of the Book of Revelation, anti-Semitic? It might seem that way when he warns the congregation of Smyrna, "I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." However, don't jump to conclusions. As we are discovering in this series, appearances can be misleading when it comes to the Book of Revelation!

To understand, we need to shed some assumptions about what the earliest Christians believed or thought about Jews and Judaism. We also need to walk in their sandals for a moment, considering the historical context in which the Christians in Smyrna found themselves.

So, let's travel back in time to the bustling city of ancient Smyrna, shall we? Smyrna (modern-day Izmir) lies 35 miles north of Ephesus, where we visited last week. Founded in 1200 B.C.E., Smyrna enjoyed a rich history, with many illustrious figures counting it as their birthplace – including Homer. Smyrna was the second-largest city in Asia Minor. While it was slightly smaller than Ephesus, with approximately 200,000 residents compared to Ephesus's 250,000-300,000, many considered it to be first in quality, like San Francisco is to Los Angeles – or St. Petersburg is to Tampa, if I may betray a bias.

In John's day, Smyrna was an extremely prosperous city. Part of what made it so was that Smyrna and Rome had enjoyed a special relationship for nearly 300 years. Romans considered Smyrna the "glory of Asia" and treated it accordingly.

Their unique relationship began in 195 B.C.E. when Rome fought for its life against the Carthaginian Empire. Rome had suffered a significant defeat at the city of Cannae, which many believed was Rome's death blow. The military commander responsible for this defeat, incidentally, was Hannibal, who led his famous war elephants over the Alps and launched a surprise attack from the north.

With Rome so soundly defeated, many of its allies switched sides and began to support Carthage. Smyrna did the opposite.

Smyrna doubled down on its allegiance to this "dark horse" Rome, building a prominent temple to the goddess Roma and swearing uncompromising loyalty to the emperor. Considering the odds of Rome emerging victorious, they took an incredible risk! It paid off big time.

When Smyrna later experienced severe decline, the Romans remembered Smyrna's courageous loyalty, showering Smyrna with so many gifts and building projects that Smyrna regained its title

as the “glory of Asia.” Roman nobility regularly visited and vacationed there. Smyrna also became known as “the city that was dead but came back to life” – a phrase we hear echoed in Christ’s words to the church in Smyrna, reminding them that he was dead and came to life and promising that the second death would not harm them.

A century after Smyrna’s first act of fidelity to Rome, the public assembly of Smyrna heard that the Roman army was once again in great distress in their war against Mithridates of Pontus (now eastern Turkey). The citizens of Smyrna responded by stripping themselves of their clothes and sending them to the freezing Roman soldiers.

When Rome finally gained control over the entire Mediterranean Basin, and everyone wanted to be Rome’s friend, the Romans remembered Smyrna once again. Cicero called Smyrna “the most faithful of our allies.”

Thus, when it came time to choose a city in which to build a magnificent temple to the Roman Emperor Tiberius – a project that would bring great political, cultural, and economic benefits along with it – Rome chose Smyrna over other prominent cities like Ephesus and Sardis for the privilege. This boon brought Smyrna’s patriotism and emperor worship to a whole new level.

This love affair with Rome and its emperor directly affected the Christians who lived in Smyrna. When the emperor persecuted Christians for refusing to offer the required yearly sacrifice, the good citizens of Smyrna were all too enthusiastic in carrying out his wishes.

In fact, one of the most famous martyrs in Christian history was a man named Polycarp, who was the bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp refused to renounce his faith even when faced with the threat of being bound and burned alive. “Eighty and six years I have served Christ, and He has done me no wrong,” responded Polycarp. “How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” It is said that Polycarp offered a prayer of thanksgiving to God as the flames overwhelmed him.

Now, Smyrna was a highly multicultural city that attracted many of the Jewish diaspora who relocated there after the fall of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 C.E. Given that the Jews also refused to make the required yearly sacrifice to the emperor, one would think that Rome-loving Smyrna would be the last place they’d want to live. Jews, however, were the only group granted an official exemption from the yearly sacrifice by the Roman government. The Romans had found out the hard way that enforcing such a rule led to perpetual, widespread revolts among the Jews – which had triggered the conflict in 70 C.E. in the first place. The Romans learned that the Jews would accept Roman rule so long as they didn’t interfere with their religious beliefs.

Some of you are undoubtedly recognizing the irony in this situation. The earliest Christians were all Jews who simply believed Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah. They did not think they were creating a new faith but fulfilling their present Jewish faith. It would be years before Gentiles would even be allowed to join churches without undergoing conversion to Judaism and, for the males, circumcision.

Thus, when Rome began actively enforcing the requirement of yearly sacrifice to the emperor, followers of Jesus initially fell under the Jewish exemption from sacrifice and were thus safe from persecution. However, this began to change when traditional Jews became more vocal about Jesus' followers not being "true" Jews. They started calling Jesus-followers "Christians," and the name stuck. Given that "Christians" were a minority faith, within or outside of Judaism, with no power (and seemingly no will) to create widespread revolt, Rome denied Christians the Jewish exemption. Hence, the persecutions.

Can you imagine how Jewish insistence that Jesus-followers were not real Jews might have rubbed Christians the wrong way – especially in Smyrna? If Jesus-followers wanted to retain their citizenship, their jobs, and even their lives, they would either need to renounce their faith in Jesus and join a synagogue or commit what they considered to be blasphemy by making the yearly sacrifice to a false god. The only other way to remain alive was by dropping out of any form of economic or vocational activity requiring citizenship documentation (i.e., a certificate of sacrifice) and keeping their faith a deeply held secret.

Now, can you hear John's words as they originally would have sounded in the letter to Smyrna? "I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan." According to John, the Spirit of Jesus has no issue with Jews who are content to live and let live, allowing Jesus-followers to simply remain a sect within Judaism. The problem is with those who refuse to allow Jesus-followers to identify as Jews. These folks surely would have known their refusal's bitter consequences for the faithful.

You may wonder, "What does all this historical stuff have to do with us today?" We don't have to offer sacrifice to our political leaders as gods, and we're not persecuted for our faith. Before moving on, I invite you to consider if there are other ways that a Christian in modern times might suffer economically, socially, or even risk their safety for the faith. Or are we beyond the point where our loyalty to Jesus is controversial anymore?

## **II. Jesus's Top Three Promises**

When I was a teenager, I walked into church one day to find a poster hanging in the sanctuary that read, "If a power hostile to Christianity arose and put you on trial for being a Christian, would they have enough evidence to convict you?"

The famous biblical commentator William Barclay once observed, "Jesus promised his disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble." Surely, this characterization matched the Church Profile of the congregation of Smyrna. A Profile, incidentally, that the Spirit of Jesus found quite admirable in the letter to the church in Smyrna, giving it the equivalent of an A+ grade and finding nothing to criticize.

The big question is, where do we find the church of Smyrna today? Admittedly, it is easier to find modern parallels to the "synagogue of Satan" – only the synagogues have become churches.

I find the "church of Satan" wherever I see congregations that actively exclude those who are lovers of Jesus but happen to hold views that the majority define as being not "truly" Christian.

Often, this leads to much more than being ostracized from a particular church. I'll never forget, for instance, all the people I met in tiny, rural communities when I walked across the country in 2006 who had a gay child or friend or who were gay themselves. Many of these were entirely in the closet about their identity or beliefs. Why? Because they risked not only becoming pariahs within their faith community but losing their social network and even losing their jobs.

While beliefs regarding LGBTQ people have gradually been changing in certain conservative evangelical congregations, even now, it is hard to imagine being a climate activist in these churches, or an employee of Planned Parenthood, or, "god forbid," a *Democrat*!

It's not just conservative churches that can resemble the "synagogue of Satan." Imagine being a fiscal conservative in some very liberal faith communities, or a pro-life activist, or, "god forbid," a *Republican*! I'll never forget, on that same walk across the country, my group of "progressive" Christians were turned away from a liberal church in Champaign, IL. They criticized us for not being vocal enough in our criticism of conservative evangelical churches. They even reminded us that Martin Luther's 95 Theses sparked the Thirty Years War. We had the distinct impression that they were disappointed our walk wasn't leading to the next war.

No, it's easy to find the "church of Satan" these days in liberal and conservative churches alike. But where does one find the Church of Smyrna?

In the 1800s, you could find equivalents to the Smyrna church among those who were leading the abolitionist movement or the women's suffrage movement.

In the 1900s, you could find Smyrna equivalents among churches leading the charge for civil rights and, eventually, LGBTQ equality.

What would the Church of Smyrna look like in 2024? Would they be advocating for policies to reverse human-caused climate change, no matter what the political or economic cost? Would they be Christian Pluralists, claiming fully the path of Jesus without denying the legitimacy of other paths God creates for humanity?

My job isn't to provide you easy answers this morning but to ask the difficult question.

I have a T-shirt that reads, "Live so that if your life were turned into a book, Florida would ban it." I think that's funny but a little unfair. I believe that if any of us read our Bibles and truly lived out the teachings of Jesus, the Bible would be banned, and we would be unwelcome in more than just Florida.

The T-shirt I'd *really* like would read, "Live your life in such a way that you are completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble." This pretty much describes the members of the Church in Smyrna and every genuinely Christian church.

Well, if I can't own the T-shirt, I'll just have to settle for *living the life*. What kind of life do you choose to live in the weeks and years ahead?