

# **The Coming Tribulation: a History of the Apocalypse**

## **Part 2: The Time of the Tribulation and the Signs of its Coming**

### **Subpart A: The Seven Churches**

Revelation 2:1 - 3:22

(also available on-line at [ichthys.com](http://ichthys.com))

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**Introduction:** We concluded the first part of this series with a consideration of the true Christian hope – our ultimate resurrection and eternal future with our dear Lord Jesus Christ. For us, the current generation of the Church, standing on the very brink of the Tribulation, this “hope” is more tangible than ever before, because there is the very real prospect (if not the inevitability) that some who read these words will survive in the flesh to see our Lord return to earth, and will at that moment be “caught up” in resurrection at His glorious return. In all our detailed investigation of the Tribulation’s terrifying events, this perspective of hope rather than of fear should be carefully maintained. For we who have chosen for Him are most certainly *not* the objects of God’s wrath which will be poured out upon the earth during those terrible years, and whatever we may be called upon to suffer in the time between the Tribulation’s commencement and our Lord’s return will be for His glory and our glorification – our labor is not in vain in Him

(1Cor.15:58). The overwhelming reality of His final victory and our blessed unification with Him at that time will transcend to such a great degree whatever horrendous trials it be our lot to endure in the time between that all such relatively “light affliction” will not be worthy of comparison to the glories destined to follow them. May He who is our Light also transcend in our hearts these events even before the fact in the midst of the darkness to come!

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.  
Romans 8:18 KJV

### **The Seven Churches: Revelation 2:1 - 3:22**

In our preliminary discussion of the seven churches in the previous installment of this series it was explained that, in addition to being seven literal and historical local churches existing in John’s day, these seven are also representative of the seven eras of the Church Age that had only just begun at the time Revelation was written. These indications include:

- John’s apostolic authority (especially as the last apostle) extended to the entire Church, not just these seven (1Cor.9:1-5; 12:28; Gal.2:7-9). This is not a message designed by him to address specific issues in particular churches (as 1-3 John), but a message given by God to *the* seven “churches” (Rev.1:11: the definite article is significant here, because there were clearly more than seven local churches at the time of writing).
- Our Lord Jesus Christ is and was concerned for His entire Church, not just for these seven local churches. This revelation of His Person is clearly meant to be for His entire bride, the whole Church universal, and not merely for a very small portion of it.
- The book of Revelation is the heritage of the entire Church. It is meant to bless all who read it (Rev.1:3), and meant to show all who consider it (Rev.22:7) what will happen in the end times.
- Revelation, after beginning with the messages to the seven churches in chapters two and three moves immediately to the history of the end times on the far side of the Church Age’s two millennial days. The book is indisputably focused on the conclusion of the Church Age, so that the preceding messages to the seven churches only make structural sense as an overview of the intervening two millennia.
- The seven lampstands cannot well be understood as only these seven local churches, for they are seen alone in the presence of Christ in chapter one (Rev.1:12-13), and again alone in the presence of the Father’s throne in chapter four (Rev.4:5). The lampstands, light-giving bodies which represent the role of the Church universal in reflecting the truth of Christ in this dark world, and doing so as a totality in both instances, must therefore represent more than seven local churches in the first century.

- The description of Jesus Christ as “in the midst” of the seven lampstands, holding the seven stars, the angels of these churches (Rev.1:12-16), is symbolism which strongly suggests His authority over the Church, and the entire Church at that, and would be very hard to apply exclusively to seven local churches. The number seven, the number of perfection in the Bible, also argues for these seven “churches” to be a symbolic representation of one complete Church (cf. the seven spirits of Is.11:1-2 and Rev.4:5 standing symbolically for the one and only Holy Spirit).
- The text of Revelation 4:1 “what (i.e. the Tribulation) must take place [immediately] *after these things* (i.e., the “events” of the seven churches)” only makes good sense if the seven churches be taken as the aggregate period of time between John’s penning of these words and the commencement of the Tribulation (see section II below).
- Finally, it is appropriate for the last book of the Bible to be addressed to Christ’s entire Church (rather than merely to seven local ones).

This interpretation helps to explain other apparent anomalies in the messages to the seven churches. Why, for example, should the church at Colossae, a mere dozen miles distant from that of Laodicea and the recipient of a canonical epistle from the apostle Paul less than a decade before, be omitted in favor of Laodicea, if not for the fact that the situation at Laodicea was symbolically more applicable to later developments in the Church universal? And there were, of course, many other local churches at time of writing beyond Asia Minor as well as within it. It is, in fact, only because of the symbolic importance these churches bear for the historical eras of the Church which they respectively represent that they have been included in the list. In addition to these considerations, the interpretation of the messages to these seven churches will be seen to reinforce what has been suggested above: the seven churches are, in addition to being seven actual local churches ministered to by the apostle John nearly two thousand years ago, representative of seven distinct periods in the history of the Church Age which is only now in its final phase.

From a structural point of view, these seven also give us – importantly – a historical perspective which pushes our thinking forward from the beginning of the Church, through its history, then down to commencement of the end times, that is, the Tribulation which is the threshold of Christ’s return. Thus, the two-chapter treatment of the seven churches or seven phases of the Church Age is an important link between John’s present (chapter one) and the events of the end (from chapter four forward). Chapters two and three, therefore, “fill in the blank” as to the events of the Church Age that come between the time of writing and the time of the end. The fact that this transitional discussion is so extremely rapid and contains no discernible or fixable dates (before the benefit of historical hindsight) also means that the sense of immediacy and imminency of the approaching apocalypse (along with the corresponding urgency for believers to be alert and to prepare for that eventuality) is actually heightened rather than diminished by the inclusion of this historical survey.

Relating present events and circumstance in this way as models for understanding future realities is a phenomenon which occurs quite frequently in biblical prophecy, as we have taken pains to show in part 1 of this series (cf. the entire second half of Isaiah which, as we have seen, deals with a [then] future Babylonian captivity as an extended analogy to the end times). So this use of seven actual churches to lay out trends which were to take place in the following two millennia of the Church Age is not without biblical parallel. In the experience of these seven churches, we are given to see the unique characteristics of each of the seven historical eras of the Church. Nor is it unprecedented for corporate tendencies to dominate for centuries at a time as is the case in the seven Church eras. Jesus, with the behavior pattern of legalistic unbelief in mind into which the Israel of His day had fallen, prophesied to His contemporaries that the current “generation” would “not pass away” until His return (Lk.21:32 in context), a clear reference to a grouping defined not by longevity but rather by consistent corporate behavior (a point reiterated by the apostle Paul: esp. Rom.11:25-27; cf. Lk.11:50-51). Thus the messages to the seven churches, far from being a lengthy aside, are an essential and comprehensive history of the Church, conveying our focus rapidly forward from the 1<sup>st</sup> century to the very brink of the Tribulation (where, as it happens, we now stand), and doing so in a manner that teaches us a tremendous amount in the process.

**Overview of the Seven Church Periods:** Before proceeding to a detailed exegesis of Revelation chapters two and three, it will be helpful here to provide a brief synopsis of the seven Church periods they describe:

1. Chronological and Historical Overview: Each of the seven churches represents an era of the Church. These eras are presented sequentially, and, with the exception of the first and last eras (Ephesus and Laodicea respectively), are of equal length. It will be remembered from our study of the millennial day structure of God’s plan for human history (covered in part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series) that the Age of the Church comprises two millennial days or two thousand years (the last seven of which are coterminous with the Tribulation). In broad-stroke terms, the seven eras of the Church run from the end of the apostolic age to the beginning of the Tribulation, that is, from 70 A.D. to 2026 A.D., a total of 1,956 years. This total excludes the seven years of the Tribulation as well as the first 37 years of the Church Age, the “age of the apostles” (of whom John was the last). The Tribulation (the subject of Revelation chapters 4-19) is excluded from the tally because it is an era common to the Jewish and Church ages, and one with its own unique trends and developments at that. The “apostolic age” is also excluded because, in addition to being on the point of already being “history” when John penned this book, it was the unique time of the Church’s initial construction and development under the special authority and tutelage of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (rather than operating under its own trends), and essentially predates the seven church prediction which begins with the Ephesian era. As to the remaining 1,956 years of the Church Age’s two millennial days, these are to be divided into five eras of equal duration sandwiched in between the two “book-end” eras of Ephesus and

Laodicea. Ephesus, the first era, is a short, transitional period which runs for a mere twelve years, commencing with the death of John, the last surviving apostle, in the spring of 70 A.D.<sup>1</sup>

As discussed in part 1 of this series, the book of Revelation is best taken to have been written between 64-68 A.D. (with the probability growing proportionally greater towards the end of this four year window).<sup>2</sup> This chronology coupled with the date given above for John's death of 70 A.D. would mean that the last apostle survived his persecutor, Nero (d. 69 A.D.), a precursor and virtual type of the antichrist (an important symbolic combination of events in itself). John then died a scant six months before the destruction of Jerusalem and of the second temple by the Roman legions under Titus, an event which definitively and dramatically marks the temporary end of the exclusively Jewish *oikonomia* of the plan of God (i.e., the dispensation and administration of God's witness through the rituals prescribed in the Mosaic law whose curtailment was signaled by our Lord in the parable of the tenants: Matt.21:33-46; Mk.12:1-11; Lk.20:6-19). For from this point forward, no doubt is left but that it is the Church universal – composed of gentiles as well as Jews – which is to be the “lamp” of God's witness to the world until Christ's return (cf. Is.42:6; Matt.5:15; Mk.4:21; Lk.8:16; 11:33; Rev.11:4). This fact can be clearly seen in and is emphasized by the “lamps” which figure so centrally in the vision of Christ in chapter one, as well as in the messages to the seven churches in chapters two and three (Rev.1:12-13; 1:20; 2:1; 2:5).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The historical testimony for placing the death of John later is somewhat contradictory and entirely unconvincing. The “evidence” that does survive is derivative – both the traditional date of the book of Revelation and that of John's death are suspiciously juxtaposed with Domitian's admittedly fierce persecution of the Church. But Irenaeus' statements from which these dates are largely derived (see especially *Adversus Omnes Haereses* 5.30.3: Irenaeus is good on theological issues but notoriously deficient in chronological matters) are in themselves confusing and open to interpretation. It is easy to see how early historians without any particular evidence would naturally wish link John's death with a martyrdom at the hands of Domitian. For details and commentary see R.H. Mounce, The Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids 1998) 12, n.60, and R.H. Charles, The Revelation of St. John v.1 (Edinburgh 1920) xlv-1. However, as was argued in part 1, Revelation is best taken as having been written toward the end of the emperor Nero's reign. For Nero is the sixth king who “now is” at John's time of writing (Rev.17:10: see discussion in part 3B, section II.1.c.4), the last of the Julio-Claudian emperors to be followed in the far future by the “seventh king” (antichrist). Therefore that John's death should occur shortly after the writing of this final book of the canon and prior to the end of the Old Testament dispensation of temple worship (which ought not extend past the point of the Church's full operational status with the passing of the apostles) is far a more likely construction of events.

<sup>2</sup> See n.1 above.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion of “dispensations” in section II.5 of part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Judgment, Restoration and Replacement”.

Following the death of John, then, the “Ephesian church” represents a transitional period of short duration wherein the canon of the completed Bible is distributed throughout the Church and the Church itself shifts from apostolic supervision to exclusive rule by local churches. This first era lasts for a mere twelve years and constitutes a period of grace. During the time of “Ephesus”, the Church is given a breathing space to adjust from a period characterized by miracles, miraculous events, and oversight by the apostles of the Lamb themselves, to a time when local churches would be the “pillars and supports” (1Tim.3:15) of the Church universal and when the Bible would be the sole touchstone of all faith and practice (cf. 1Tim.4:6; 5:13-16). Such an interval was clearly necessary in order to prepare the incipient Church for the intense persecutions of the next era that would constitute its “baptism of fire” so to speak. The twelve years may be variously explained as being allocated on the basis of one year for each of the apostles, and/or one year for each of the twelve tribes of Israel (into which the entire Church, the body of Christ ultimately including all pre-millennial believers, will eventually be incorporated).<sup>4</sup>

The transitional period of Ephesus is followed by five eras of equal length. The eras of Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia all run for 360 years each. Since 360 days is the standard length in days of a Jewish ceremonial year (that is, twelve lunar months of 30 days each without the intercalation necessary to make the year conform to the solar calendar), it is not a far jump to see this figure of 360 as significant in representing the basic unit for each of these five eras (in the same way that a day often stands for a year [or epoch] in scripture as we have already seen).<sup>5</sup> The 360 day year, moreover, has particular significance within the book of Revelation, for it is precisely by a total of seven such years (split in two by their tally of days) that the length of the Tribulation is specifically defined (this is true both of the first half of the Tribulation and the Great Tribulation: see Rev.11:3 and 12:6 respectively).

After the introductory era of Ephesus and the five 360 year eras which follow, the Age of the Church terminates with a second shortened era, that of Laodicea, which runs for 144 years. This reduction in length vis-à-vis the preceding five eras is to be explained by the fact that, like Ephesus, Laodicea represents a transitional period (leading, in this case, into the final epoch of the Church Age, the Tribulation). As was the case with the Ephesian era, the length of the Laodicean era is likewise significant. First of all, its 144 years unquestionably foreshadow and are meant to suggest the ministry of the 144 thousand Jewish believers who are sealed and begin their evangelistic efforts immediately upon the completion of the Laodicean era (Rev.7:1-8). In this way, just as the twelve years of the Ephesian era (one for each apostle/tribe of Israel) constituted a period of grace in which the Church might prepare for the era of persecution to

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<sup>4</sup> It will be recalled as well that the number “12” (i.e., the “duo-decade”) is also the base unit of days in the Jewish ceremonial calendar, reflecting the proportion of believers in each of the four Ages of Human History. See section II.8.c of part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Judgment, Restoration and Replacement”.

<sup>5</sup> See in particular “The Day of the Lord Paradigm” in part 1 of the present series, section IV.1.b.

follow, so also the 144 years (one for each chiliad of the tribulational evangelists from the twelve tribes of Israel) constitute a period of grace – and of warning – which precede the most intense period of testing and persecution believers will ever experience, that is, the Tribulation. Now 144 is, of course, twelve times twelve, and we would not be wrong to draw from this fact the conclusion that the Tribulation will surpass previous persecutions of the Church by a like order of magnitude. And just as the performance and preparation of the Ephesian era Church left something to be desired in their lukewarm attitude to the Word of God (as we shall see below), so the performance and preparation of the Laodicean era Church (i.e., our own echelon of the Church) is falling short by an analogous order of magnitude, in spite of its preeminent advantages both in terms of time (a twelve-fold longer period of preparation) and resources (beyond anything ever witnessed in eras past and with the entire prior experience of the Church to build upon). The upshot of this sad state of affairs is that (should present trends continue) never will a group of believers be less prepared to face a greater challenge and with less excuse than at any time in Church history as will be the case when we Laodiceans find ourselves confronting the coming Tribulation. Finally, the number 144 is also reminiscent of the twelve-square tally of days in the Jewish ceremonial calendar that represents the unprecedented number of believers called out during the Millennium.<sup>6</sup> While it may thus be possible to see the symbolism of these 144 years in a positive light as foreshadowing this exceptional number of believers predicted to be saved during the final millennial day of human history, it is also very likely that Laodicea's 144 years are a sign of unfulfilled promise, that is, a bitter comment upon the fact that at the end of the Church's two thousand year maturation, our Lord had every right to expect a period of prolific fruit-bearing that might in theory have rivaled what the Millennium will deliver in fact. But just as the Ephesian era Church failed to live up to expectations following a miraculous tutelage at the hands of the apostles, so the Laodicean era Church is failing to measure up to the promise that such abundant resources and opportunities surely give, and is doing so to an astoundingly depressing degree (cf. Matt.21:18-19).

The truncation of the eras of Ephesus and Laodicea may also be explained in another way: the cutting short of potentially damaging failure. For while God often allows groups and individuals to squander their spiritual opportunities to the full, when their actions compromise the spiritual futures of others He is not slow to act (witness the Babylonian destruction of Judah: Jer.29:4-23). While the Ephesian trend to disregard God's Word was not allowed to stultify the Church (for an era of persecution which separated the "good and bad figs" followed quickly: Jer.24:1-10), so "Laodicea" is allowed to spiral spiritually downward at a leisurely pace only so long until an analogous period of intense persecution ensues, namely the Tribulation, a period which likewise separates "the wheat from the chaff" (Matt.3:12). In both periods of persecution, Smyrna historically and the Tribulation prophetically, those who truly love God and His Son (and are not merely going through the motions) are given golden opportunities to demonstrate this love and to "shine like the brightness of the firmament" (Dan.12:3) instead of being gradually undermined and compromised in an increasingly lukewarm sea of indifference.

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<sup>6</sup> See section II.8.c of part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series, "Judgment, Restoration and Replacement".

The seven eras of the Church, wherein the time following the temporary removal of the “lamp” of Israel is replaced by a series of seven “lamps” composed mainly of gentiles who would be God’s witnesses until the restoration of Jewish supremacy in the years preceding Christ’s return (Matt.21:43; Mk.12:9; Lk.20:16), may thus be summarized in overview as follows:

1. <u>Ephesus</u> :	12 years	70 to 82 A.D.	“The Era of Transition”
2. <u>Smyrna</u> :	360 years	82 to 442 A.D.	“The Era of Persecution”
3. <u>Pergamum</u> :	360 years	442 to 802 A.D.	“The Era of Accommodation”
4. <u>Thyatira</u> :	360 years	802 to 1162 A.D.	“The Era of Compromise”
5. <u>Sardis</u> :	360 years	1162 to 1522 A.D.	“The Era of Corruption”
6. <u>Philadelphia</u> :	360 years	1522 to 1882 A.D.	“The Era of Revival”
7. <u>Laodicea</u> :	144 years	1882 to 2026 A.D.	“The Era of Degeneration”

Preceded by the apostolic period (running from the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord in 33 A.D. to the death of John in the fall of 70 A.D.), the sequence above bears some resemblance to the life of an individual Christian who has had his or her share of “ups and downs” in the faith following an initial period of blessed and blissful spiritual success immediately after salvation (analogous here to the apostolic period). Falling into apathy shortly thereafter, this hypothetical believer is shocked into a commendable response when confronted with significant opposition to his or her faith (Ephesus followed by Smyrna). Once the crisis has passed, however, a slow and mundane period of decline then occurs (the succession of Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis), but at the very moment when complete atrophy and apostasy seem inevitable the believer is again shaken from the doldrums and reacts with a renewed and intensified positive response to the Lord and His Word (Philadelphia). The blessings that follow this revival bring in their turn a certain blindness as the believer’s spirituality falls prey to prosperity (Laodicea). This is followed by an ultimate crisis wherein faith is either embraced or abandoned (analogous to the Tribulation). For those alive at the end of the Laodicean period, analogy becomes reality as the final maelstrom of faith will actually *be* the Tribulation: all those of genuine and enduring faith will respond heroically to the unparalleled challenge that meets them in the midst of the Church’s darkest hour, even at the cost of their lives, so that the final chapter of Church history is one of victorious faith, triumphant through the flames of unprecedented persecution:

And this is the victory that has overcome the world: our faith [in Christ]!  
1<sup>st</sup> John 5:4

One final point of overview is needed before we begin our individual consideration of the seven churches and their eras. All seven messages share a certain similarity in structure (which it is customary to note in treatments of Revelation), and the discussion below will follow this somewhat parallel structure. Moreover, a parallelism in the structure of these messages should not be at all surprising, since, as we have made a point of demonstrating above, each church addressed here by our Lord represents a particular era of His Church, an extended “generation” of the faithful to bear light to the world by reflecting Him, *the* Light of the world, as the lampstands which serve to bear the Lamp:



This is what the One who has the mastery over the seven stars in His right hand says, the One who walks in the midst of the seven golden *lampstands*.

Revelation 2:1

And the city has no need of the sun nor the moon to shine for it, for the glory of God has shone upon it and the Lamb is its *lamp*.

Revelation 21:23

Points common to all of the seven messages include:

1) Salutation: All seven messages begin with “to the angel of the church of ... write”. That the recipient of the message is the angel in charge of the particular sub-echelon (or “generation”) of the Church in question demonstrates the importance of the divine chain of command (God working through His angelic servants in a structured and consistent way: cf. e.g., 1Tim.5:21). It also shows that whatever may be true about the quality of the superintendence of the Church on the visible, human level, there is much effective supervision, heavenly liaison, and guardianship taking place in the angelic realm which we cannot see (but know is there nonetheless through these and other passages: see the Satanic Rebellion series as well as part 1 of the present series). Moreover, the command to “write” these things to the angel in charge makes clear that the giving of the particular message is authorized and commanded by Christ Himself.

2) Imprimatur: Our Lord Jesus Christ’s introduction per se is given in a nearly identical fashion in all seven messages. The Greek phrase *tade legei* (“these things [He] says”: ταδε λεγει) is in fact an identical feature common to all the messages, and constitutes an imprimatur, that is, a demonstrative statement on our Lord’s behalf assuring us that what follows are indeed His very own words directly from Him and endowed with His complete authority.

3) Self-description of the Lord: The content of all seven descriptions is different, reflecting the differences in the seven messages, but in all seven, our Lord speaks of Himself in the third person (i.e., “the One who ...”).

4) Particular message from the Lord: All seven individual messages include an assurance from the Lord in the first person that He is in full possession of the necessary information to make the evaluation which the particular messages contain (“I know ...”). This is followed, in varying structure, by a descriptive evaluation of each church, along with a command or commands appropriate to their particular situations.

5) Admonition: All seven messages contain the admonition “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”. This sober advice (given by our Lord) serves to impress upon us all the importance of paying attention to the details given in each description, for even though the remarks are directed to a particular era of the Church, the principles discussed by our Lord concern us all. Hence, each message is described as being – in addition to a specific charge to a given part of the Body of Christ – a message to “the churches”, that is to say, to the Church of all eras. It is further stated in this common admonition that the [Holy] Spirit is the One who is

delivering these messages, the point being that though the messages are from Christ to the seven churches via their angels, even so it is the Holy Spirit who is behind all communication of divine truth in this world at all times.

6) Promise: In addition to warnings, admonitions and corrections, each message also offers up a wonderful set of promises to encourage us in our Christian walk, to remind us that in spite of stumbling and reproof, we are God's children with the future hope of eternal life along with all the indescribable blessings that entails. These blessings are variously and marvelously described, and each presents a different facet of the future glory that awaits all those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ and follow Him faithfully to the end.

#### Revelation 2:1-7:

(1) To the angel of the church in **Ephesus**, write: "This is what the One who has the mastery over the seven stars in His right hand says, the One who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. (2) I know your works and your toil and your perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil people. And you have put to the test those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them out to be false. (3) And you possess perseverance, and you have endured every sort of tribulation because of My Name, and you have not faltered. (4) But I have against you [the fact] that you have abandoned [that] love you had at first. (5) So remember where you have fallen from, and repent, and do the works you did at first. And if you do not, I am going to come to you and move your lampstand out of its place, if you do not repent. (6) But you do have this [in your favor], [the fact] that you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. (7) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who wins the victory, I will give to him [the right] to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God."

#### **1. Ephesus: "The Era of Transition" (September 70 to 82 = 12 years)**

The name "Ephesus", while a geographical name, can be taken by the Greek reader to derive from the word *ephizo*, "to sit upon". This etymology is important, for it conveys (as is the case with the names of all seven local churches selected for their affinity to the historical eras they represent) the fundamental characteristic of the Ephesian era. For the name "Ephesus" while betokening "establishment" (a good thing), also clearly implies a certain impassivity, that is, a "sitting upon" the laurels of past accomplishments, and, specifically (as becomes clear later in the message), the development of a lackadaisical attitude toward the Word of God (the "first love" or "love you had at first" of verse four). Thus the overall character of this and all the eras (as well as the overall lesson for all who read these words) is made clear from the start in our Lord's choice of church names. In the case of Ephesus it is that no Christian can ever afford to cease spiritual growth, to assume that past successes are sufficient. For it is only in continued forward progress through the "narrow gate" and up the "constricted way" that spiritual safety is to be found (Matt.7:13-14).

Ephesus represents the era of transition from direct apostolic rule to the rule of the local church. It begins, appropriately enough, with two pertinent events, namely, the death of John, the last apostle, and the fall of Jerusalem. In the case of the latter event, the destruction of the second temple marked the definite termination of the Mosaic ritual connected with it: from now on the Church was to focus on the reality of Christ to which the ritual of the law had pointed. In the case of the former event, John's death marked the definite termination of apostolic authority: from now on the Church was to serve its One Head, Jesus Christ, as equal members of His body. Both of these developments would mean major transitions for the Church, a difficult role for the Ephesian era believers to fill, but one for which the wonders of the apostolic age had prepared them. The challenging nature of the task faced by this first post-apostolic generation of the Church may be seen in the fact that, from that day to this, believers are still having trouble with both issues when trying to find answers in pseudo-rituals (looking back to the temple rites) and in pseudo-hierarchical authority structures (looking back to apostolic authority) rather than looking where they should look, the only place *to* look, namely, to the Bible, and to the administration of *its* truths through the gifts we the Church collectively possess.

The end of all apostolic rule and of the miracles and miraculous gifts which had attended it meant that the Church would now have to become totally dependent upon the less spectacular (though intrinsically more powerful) procedure of administering the Word of God entirely through the Bible and the concomitant gifts of empowerment given by the Holy Spirit. For from the first days of the Ephesian era right up until our time, the work of the Church, salvation and spiritual growth, has been accomplished exclusively through ordinary Christians who have not possessed such impressive and extraordinary gifts. It has not been through healing, or tongues, or apostolic authority, or any other overtly miraculous means that the Church has spread the message of Jesus Christ and provided for its own growth in the power of the Spirit (Eph.4:3-16; Col.2:19), but through normal evangelism, and teaching, and pastoring, and all of the myriad helps that each individual member of the Body of Christ has provided in support of the fundamental goal of the Church: to grow in Christ and to help others do likewise (Jn.21:15-17).

The true importance of the historical development of Church ritual and Church administration in the process of our collective salvation and spiritual growth has been highly overrated (at least as far as positive influence is concerned). Certainly, some basic administrative structure was and still is necessary for local churches to serve our Lord "decently and in good order" (1Cor.14:40; cf. 1Cor.14:33). But it can be fairly argued (as will be obvious even from our peripheral treatment of Church history which follows in this section) that over-enthusiastic, one might even say, morbid concentration on the forms of Church government and Church ritual have done far more harm than good in the past two millennia, and for one obvious reason: they have tended to attract attention to themselves rather than to the Word of God.

Jesus Christ Himself gave us the ceremony of communion (Matt.26:26-28; Mk.14:22-24; Lk.22:17-20; 1Cor.11:23-26), a ritual of remembrance of Him and His work and the only true Christian ritual, and even this has been abused – for its true purpose is not to "impart" grace or fellowship or anything else, but to *remind* believers of Him and His work and the choice we have

made to follow Him (cf. “Do this *in remembrance of Me*”, Matt.26:26-29; Lk.22:19; 1Cor.11:24-25).<sup>7</sup> And as to the government of the local church, all the evidence points to the conclusion that flexibility of form in the implementation of the guiding principle of “decently and in good order” is what the scriptures enjoin.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence in the Bible for any administrative superstructure superior to the local church following the (temporary) ministry of the twelve apostles.

Success in the transitional era of Ephesus, therefore, would depend not upon the development of organization, but upon individual Christians redoubling their efforts in the Word of God: hearing it, believing it, learning it, teaching it, living it, and helping others do the same. The “report card” given by our Lord above shows the Ephesian performance as mixed. On the one hand, they are commended for abstaining from false and sinful influences (“good defense”, we might say), but on the other they are roundly criticized for giving short shrift to what really counts for spiritual growth and forward progress in the Christian life by abandoning their “previous love” for the Word of God. Given the fact that the canon of scripture, though complete, was only in the incipient stages of collection and widespread distribution, we can understand why the era of Ephesus was so abruptly cut short after a mere twelve year run: had this lackadaisical attitude toward the Bible been allowed to continue for an extended period of time, the consolidation and distribution of the Holy Scriptures might have been placed in serious jeopardy.

There were signs from even before the start of the Ephesian era that there would be problems with the transition from apostolic to local church rule. Paul’s pointed remonstrances to the Jerusalem congregation (the book of Hebrews), and to the Corinthians (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians), and John’s loss of control over one of the churches as evidenced in his third epistle are just a few of the more pointed examples which, even at the time, might well have led us to see Peter’s

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<sup>7</sup> Time and space will not permit a detailed consideration of the phenomenon of water baptism, a topic to be covered in Bible Basics: Part 6B: Ecclesiology. It must suffice here to point out that in New Testament passages which discuss the issue of baptism the focus is almost universally upon the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the blessed reality of unity with Christ that accompanies the salvation of every believer, with no ritual (and no water) in view (see especially Eph.4:5; and cf. Rom.6:3-4; 1Cor.12:13; Gal.3:27; Col.2:12; Tit.3:5-6; 1Pet.3:21 [no “water” in the Greek]).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Paul goes to some lengths to describe the qualifications of deacons and elders (1Tim.3:1-13; Tit.1:5-9), but gives no suggestions about how these are to organize their church(es). Peter says nothing on the subject at all, and John in particular, although the last of the apostles, is most deferential in the use of his own authority, even in some very taxing circumstances (cf. 3<sup>rd</sup> John). We may compare the situation that confronted Moses in the organization of early Israel (Ex.18:13-26). Although he would be given the most specific guidance on many subjects, administration was something that demanded flexibility as to time and circumstances; it fell to the lot of his gentile father-in-law to suggest better arrangements.

hopes for the post-apostolic Church as overly optimistic (2Pet.1:12-15).<sup>9</sup> For if such problems continued to surface in the “green wood” under the guiding hand of the apostles, what might be expected “in the dry” (Lk.23:31)? Ideally, the Church (as a collection of local churches) would have redoubled their efforts in the Word of God after the apostles’ departure (along with the departure of the miraculous gifts which characterized their age), and would have taken pains to “call to remembrance” their teachings, as Peter so fondly hoped they would (2Pet.1:12-15; 3:1-2; cf. Paul also: 2Tim.1:13). But despite the “good defense” against sinful influences which we have noted in the case of the Ephesians, the evidence suggests that the dynamic and Spirit-filled personal *teachings* of the apostles were largely lost, and, apparently, almost immediately so. This does not mean, it is important to note, that a single iota of divine truth was either lost or even lost to us – all that God has meant for us to know in this life is contained in His holy scriptures. These scriptures were indeed lovingly preserved, collected and distributed, so that today the entire canon of scripture is safe and widely available. But scripture must be *understood* to be learned, believed, and applied. By failing to preserve the *understanding* of the scriptures, bequeathed by the very men that wrote them under the Spirit’s guidance, the Church as a whole lost a tremendous amount of momentum in the realm of spiritual growth, a momentum which would in some respects only begin to be seriously recouped centuries later during the Reformation.

We cannot know the exact whys and wherefores of these events. Church history as we have it is a non-inspired and incomplete picture of what really happened, and, if our present experience be any guide, we can be sure that we shall have to await our Lord’s evaluation of events to find out what were the truly critical developments and who the truly important personages from His point of view.<sup>10</sup> What we can say from the divine assessment afforded us here is that the fire of devotion to the Word of God cooled quickly once the apostles had passed from the scene, and that faithful resistance to false teaching and sensual temptation, while laudatory and necessary, was not a sufficient substitute for an active love of the teachings of scripture. Such “good defense” without sufficient “offense” (i.e., the aggressive and heartfelt pursuit of the truths of the Word of God) not only fails to measure up from the standpoint of service to our Master (who expects us to use our gifts for the salvation and spiritual growth of our fellow members of His Body), but also undermines even this good “defense” in the end. For whatever we do or refrain from doing in the Christian life, everything should be done from an active faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom.14:23; Col.3:17). That is to say, both resistance to sin and evil and the prosecution of truth and good works should flow from a living, dynamic relationship with our Lord and

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<sup>9</sup> Consider also Gal.1:6-9; 4:8-11; 4:19; Heb.5:11-14.

<sup>10</sup> This is an important caveat to keep in mind for all seven Church eras. The things that interest historians, the things that were recorded in the past, do not represent the complete record of events. We can only hope to achieve an approximate parity in matching the divinely inspired assessment of events during these seven time periods as given here with the non-inspired broad strokes of “Church history” as it has been preserved for us.

Savior such as is only possible through consistent, persistent, meaningful immersion in the principles, the examples, the teachings, the doctrines, the truths, the words of God:

But in the teaching (*torah*) of the Lord is his delight, and in His teaching he meditates day and night.

Psalm 1:2

Even the best of behavior patterns are subject to becoming brittle and legalistic, mere rote and tradition, once divorced from the vibrant and powerful source of motivation upon which they were originally based. And once the right sort of things begin to be done for the wrong reasons, collapse and decay are only a matter of time. With the clear hindsight provided here by scripture, we can see that the short history of the Ephesian era was in the best interest of the Church. Despite their honorable behavior, there was and is no substitute for the Word of God.

### **Christ's Self-description to Ephesus:**

1. "the One who has the mastery over the seven stars": Both phrases here, "who has the mastery over the seven stars (i.e., churches)" (Greek *krateo*, κρατεω, to rule over), and "who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" call attention to our Lord's complete authority over His Church. It is not tradition or comfortable ritual that should be our focus in this world (the Ephesian mistake), but rather our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, the very Word of God (Jn.1:1). Christ is our authority (Eph.1:22; 4:15; 5:23), and we cannot afford to allow anything to become more important to us than the Word of God (Ps.138:2 [Hebrew and KJV]).

### **Christ's Particular Message to Ephesus:**

1. "I know your works and your toil and your perseverance": True "good works" are the result of faith and faithfulness, of a true and living faith in our Savior Jesus Christ motivating action on His behalf (Jas.2:14-26). These include but are most definitely not limited to what we today call "charity". The purpose of good works is the glorification of God, and the means of doing genuine divine good involve everything which helps others to come to Christ and to persevere and grow in Him. This explains why in the most controversial passage on the subject of faith and good works, that is, the book of James, the examples given of extraordinary "works of faith" involve, contrary to expectation, not cases of sacrificial charitable giving, but rather exceptional instances of trusting God in difficult circumstances: namely, Abraham's sacrifice of his only son Isaac (Jas.2:21-24), and Rahab's protection of the Israelite spies at great risk to her life (Jas.2:25). Both of these examples provide a model of how believers should act with courageous faith, and so inspire us to do likewise. Neither is an example of mere monetary self-sacrifice or of lending a helping hand in material things.

Such true perseverance and works of faith inevitably go together (as James assures us: Jas.2:26), for they are both a result of spiritual growth which is in turn based upon a thorough foundation of

hearing, believing, learning and applying the words of God.<sup>11</sup> Although such had been the Ephesians' pattern in the past, this "first love" was no longer their number one priority, apparently having been replaced by rote and tradition.

Material charity (as "good works" have [wrongly] come to be almost exclusively understood by many) is, indeed, often the result of proper spiritual motivation with these good purposes of advancing the kingdom of Jesus Christ in mind. Ironically, however, acts of material charity, divorced from the true biblical purpose for them (showing the mercy of God in providing the means by which others too may have the opportunity to learn about Jesus Christ and follow Him as disciples), can become a stumbling block when they are made to substitute for the dynamic purpose and power of God (to which they should respond, not replace). In this respect too, the Ephesians had apparently fossilized a correct procedure from the past (persistence in charitable works) while abandoning its spiritual foundation.

2. "you cannot endure evil people": The word translated here as "evil" is the Greek word *kakos* (i.e., generically bad or wicked), but since this word is picked up by the reference to the false apostles in the next clause as well as by the reference to the "Nicolaitans" in verse six, it is clear that the particular wickedness indicated here is evil in perhaps its most dangerous form as far as the Church is concerned, namely, the organized evil of false teachers and their followers and of the false doctrines and evil practices they promote. Inasmuch as this same issue of the relationship of each Church era to satanic influence is addressed (at least implicitly) in all seven messages, it will be beneficial here to take an overall view of the varying terminology used by our Lord to describe and characterize the pernicious phenomenon of Satan's organized attack upon the truth as it is properly practiced by the true Church.

**False Teachers, False Doctrines, and False Christians:** First of all, it is important to note that the recurrent evil described in these seven messages under a variety of names (i.e., Nicolaitans, Jezebel, synagogue of Satan, false apostles, etc.) is to be distinguished from the devil's worldwide efforts to ensnare unbelieving mankind through a whole host of false religions, cults, and philosophies.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, the variously described false and evil influence in the seven messages noted here is directed specifically and entirely toward the Church of Jesus Christ. More precisely put, these "groups" represent the historical assault by the devil upon and his infiltration of the true Church by means of individuals, groups and false teachings, all of which are contrary to the truth, the Person and the purpose of Jesus Christ. The true Church, after all,

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<sup>11</sup> See the series Peter's Epistles, lessons #10-14.

<sup>12</sup> This system, the devil's "world-system" of control, is the main theme of part 4 of the Satanic Rebellion series, "Satan's World System". For his implementation of that system in human history, see also "Satan's Counter Strategy" in section III of part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series, "Judgment, Restoration and Replacement". Additional information on false teaching and the infiltration of the true Church is also to be found in part 3A of the present series, section II, "the Great Apostasy". See also the special Read your Bible: Protection against Cults.

cannot be seen with our eyes. The true Church is composed of those who are genuinely believers in Jesus Christ, His true disciples who have dedicated their lives to following Him. The true Church is not a building, nor can it be defined in terms of physical structures. It is not an organization, nor can it be defined in terms of specific associations or bureaucracies. The true Church is not for man to define or even to be able to perceive with complete certainty, for only the Lord knows who are truly His, and who are really false (2Tim.2:19; cf. Jn.10:14; 1Cor.8:3; Gal.4:9). Even within the elite circle of the original twelve apostles, one “was a devil” (Jn.6:70-71), and our Lord’s implied admonition to us with this reference constitutes an important lesson for all who genuinely believe in Him: be careful of assuming what only God can know for sure. For within even the most orthodox of organizations, and even in the most zealous of Church eras there have been false teachers, false doctrines, and false Christians. And we can say of a certainty that our adversary has made the infiltration, perversion, and destruction of every true Christian group and organization a very high priority. This has been the case throughout Church history as can be seen from this synopsis of our Lord’s descriptions of “the false” during the seven Church eras:

Ephesus: *False apostles* rejected; *Nicolaitans* hated [the false kept out of the Church]  
Smyrna: Slandered by the *Synagogue of Satan* [the false attacking from outside the Church]  
Pergamum: You *have Balaam and Balak* [the false accommodated within the Church]  
Thyatira: *Jezebel* [the false compromised with and in turn compromising the Church from within]  
Sardis: No group mentioned [the true excluded by the false from the visible, apparent “church”]  
Philadelphia: Acknowledged by the *Synagogue of Satan* [the true has separated from the false]  
Laodicea: No group mentioned [the false has infiltrated and blunted the true Church to such a degree that false and true have melted into one indistinguishable, lukewarm mass]

The chart above should be sufficient to show that in every era of the Church there has been a struggle between the false (satanic infiltration of organized Christianity) and the true (genuine believers in and followers of Jesus Christ, irrespective of organization). Not everyone who has applied the name “Christian” to himself has been so in fact (a principle which still applies today), and, on the other hand, not everyone who has found himself outside of what is seen *by the world* as “legitimate Christianity” has for that reason been excluded from the true Body of Christ, His genuine Church.

Organization is important, as we have allowed, and a certain amount of bureaucracy is necessary to any temporal association, but all too often in churches big and small, such things have come to possess a momentum of their own, and have come to assume an importance exceeding the very purpose for which they were originally put in place: any and all true Church organization must serve the purposes of Jesus Christ, that is, the dissemination of His gospel and the spiritual growth and edification of all those won to Him. But it has frequently been the case in the history of the Church that certain organizations styling themselves as “Christian” have not only failed in this primary task, but have actually gone so far as to prevent others from doing so, even to the point of persecuting and bringing to martyrdom true followers of Jesus Christ.



Physical plant too is important. It is very helpful for any church to have a place to meet, but all too often in churches big and small throughout the eras of the Church, the physical, temporal, concrete concerns of church organizations have come to dominate the agenda, taking away valuable resources (spiritual as well as material) from the work of missions and evangelism and the training and support of the clergy, the mainstays (organizationally speaking) of spreading and teaching the Word of God. This trend toward emphasizing physical superstructure over spiritual foundation is not only a stultifying one, but, whenever left to pursue its natural end, has always led to a complete death of faith in the organizations and individuals so afflicted.

It is worth noting that Jesus had the benefit of neither bureaucracy nor buildings in the accomplishment of the most sublime ministry in world history. A handful of dedicated men who chose to follow Him regardless of the cost, and whatever open field or space might be available sufficed. This is not to say that believers since should have followed this model precisely, or that the development of an established organizational structure and the possession of dedicated buildings are wrong – certainly, they both provide benefits. The example of our Lord cited here is merely to illustrate that the emphasis and priority which many if not most organizations in the history of the Church have placed on such things has in fact been misplaced, and has indeed in many cases and instances been not only counterproductive but often disastrous. We are here for a purpose. We are here to believe in and to follow our Lord, to learn His words and to live them, and to help others do likewise through the ministries and gifts which God has given us. To the extent that bureaucratic organization and physical plant are helpful to this primary purpose, well and good, but as true believers in Jesus Christ we should take pains to ensure that such secondary things do not keep us or even distract us from our true primary duty, the learning and the living of the Word of God.

3. “you have put to the test those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them out to be *false*”: As mentioned in the historical synopsis of “the false” above, the Ephesian era Church was successful on this very important point of identifying false influences and false teachers and had rejected them rather than accommodating, compromising, or commingling with them. The apostle Paul’s words of farewell to the elders of literal Ephesus are apropos of this point and show that the post-apostolic Church did indeed take this and other warnings like it to heart (cf. Rom.16:17-18; 2Cor.11:13-15; Eph.4:14; Col.2:16-23; 1Tim.4:1-5; 2Tim.2:23-3:9; Tit.1:11; 2Pet. 2:1-22; 1Jn.2:22; Jude 4):

For I know that after my departure fierce wolves will enter in among you who will not spare the flock. And even from among your own number [of elders] men will rise up and speak twisted things in order to entice the disciples (i.e., believers) to follow them. So be alert, remembering that for three years I did not stop warning each of you [about these dangers] day and night with my tears.

Acts 20:29-31

Paul’s warning is also echoed by the apostles Peter and John:

And there arose among the people false prophets, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will introduce destructive false doctrines – even denying the Master who bought them – and will bring swift destruction on themselves. And many will follow their lascivious ways so that the way of truth will be subject to blasphemy on their account. And in their greed they will exploit you for profit by means of their fraudulent teachings.

2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 2:1-3a

Beloved, don't believe every spirit [of every so-called prophet], but test the spirits [of these "prophets"] [to see] whether they are from God.

1<sup>st</sup> John 4:1

These warnings recall similar words from our Lord Himself :

Beware of the false prophets who are going to come in among you in sheep's clothing, but underneath they are ravenous wolves.

Matthew 7:15 (cf. John 10:12)

It is very easy for someone to claim to be "an apostle" (or an evangelist, or a prophet, or a teacher, or a pastor, for that matter). In the days of the early Church, once the true apostles had passed from the scene, it would have been a simple matter for strangers to come to any given town and claim the possession of apostolic authority to one degree or another (on the basis of claimed prior association with one of the actual apostles, for instance). From the passages quoted above (and the other references listed) it is clear that there was a responsibility to *make sure* of the genuineness of such men and their teaching *before* extending the right hand of fellowship and accepting their words as true. After all, in the case of the Ephesian era Church which we are considering here, the Christians of this period are being commended by our Lord for *rejecting* such false claims, and without question such rejection must have been based upon careful testing of the individuals and teachings in question. Continuing to quote from our Lord's "wolves in sheep's clothing" remarks regarding false teachers in the Matthew chapter seven passage cited immediately above we read:

You will recognize [these false prophets] from their *fruit* (i.e., their words, teachings, personal behavior and modus operandi). People don't collect grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, do they? Just so every good tree produces good [serviceable] fruit, but the rotten tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good [appealing] fruit. [For] every good tree which doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will recognize [those false prophets] from their *fruit*.

Matthew 7:16-20

The "fruit test" given to us by Jesus Himself remains the standard by which we are to judge and evaluate any and all who purport to convey the Word of God in any fashion, and we are well advised (by our Lord Himself) to do what the Ephesian era Church did and make careful use of

this test *before* accepting the teachings, the authority, or the fellowship of any new element (individual or group) into our midst. For it is precisely this failure to be strict when it comes to the truth of God’s Word that has led to the commingling of truth and falsehood that so characterizes the Church of our own Laodicean day.

It should be well noted that this standard applies to the “good trees”, not the bad. Those who really are servants of the Word labor under a higher standard of judgment administered personally by Jesus Christ (i.e., if they do not produce proper fruit, they are “cut down and thrown into the fire”; cf. Jas.3:1; Rev.22:18-19; cf. Lk.20:46-47). Therefore it is not the individual Christian’s place to judge the effectiveness of true ministers (“good trees”) – Christ will do that, and will not be slow to discipline whenever and wherever His genuine teachers fall short. Rather it is the responsibility of the individual Christian to distinguish between “good trees” and trees which are entirely “bad”. The “fruit test”, therefore, is not some impossible standard to discern, but a relatively easy rule of thumb to apply in investigating the ministries of those who purport to be teaching the Word of God. For anyone of normal intellect and common sense with even a minimal familiarity with basic Bible principles, it is not difficult to discover if a particular tree belongs to the category “generically, intrinsically and irredeemably bad”, for the bad fruit of such ministries will be impossible to hide.

There is, however, a well-known contemporary saying which has some bearing on these things: “You can’t cheat an honest man”. While this saw may not be universally true, the point behind it deserves consideration in our present context, namely, the dishonest person is more susceptible to flimflam precisely because of his nature. In a similar way, it is much more difficult to deceive those who are energetically pursuing spiritual growth and diligently following our Master than it is those whose dedication to Him is minimal and whose Christian walk is lax. Those who are little interested in pursuing the truth of the Word of God are inevitably eager for something “more interesting” and hence are more vulnerable to “spicy” false teaching. And those who are not following the Lord closely in their personal behavior are inevitably receptive to anyone who is willing to tell them that the wrong they are doing (or the right they are failing to do) is really all right. In other words, those who verge on being “bad trees” themselves, are less likely to be able (or even willing) to recognize this trait in false teachers:

[Timothy], I [give] you [this] charge before God and Christ Jesus, the One who is about to judge the living and the dead, [charging you] by His appearance [at His Second Advent] and by His Kingdom: Proclaim the Word! Keep at it, whether circumstances are favorable or not! Reprove, rebuke, [and] encourage with all patience [in your] teaching! For the time will come when they will not put up with sound teaching, but will [instead], desiring to have their ears scratched, heap up by their own [devices] teachers to match their specific lusts. And they will turn their ears from the truth and resort instead to fictions (i.e., made up by these false teachers).

2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4:1-4

In the history of the Church, there has never been a lack of men who, for their own selfish interests (be it for wealth or power or fame or what have you), have been willing to tell weak

Christians of the sort we are discussing here exactly what they have wanted to hear. This willingness to accommodate teaching to the audience's desires is a hallmark of false teachers. Another, seemingly opposite characteristic is the tendency of false teachers to bully, browbeat and braincase all who come within their orbit into accepting outrageous and obviously unbiblical teachings. Far from being opposite in fact, however, both behavior patterns have in common an utter disregard both for the genuine truth to be found in scripture and also for the welfare of those who follow them (i.e., they are of a truth wolves preying upon the sheep: cf. Zech.11:16). Indeed, both sets of behavior are often found within the same individuals, cults, and pseudo-Christian organizations, as new followers are often attracted with whatever their "itching ears" desire to hear, and only later, after the hook has been properly set, gradually enslaved by being brow-beaten into accepting any number of false teachings designed to make them more malleable for the parasites who exploit them.

**The "fruit-test":** So then, for those who are intent on wandering from Christ, all such "testing of spirits" is pointless, for it is only a matter of time before such individuals fall prey to the false. For those who are genuinely trying to follow Jesus Christ and be His disciples, although it is true that they are not as susceptible to false teaching, false teachers, and false-Christian groups, it is, nevertheless, imperative that they continue to apply the "fruit-test" in the way our Lord directed in the interest of spiritual safety.

1) testing the teacher: Evaluating and judging other people is always a dangerous business and one which is best avoided if unnecessary (Matt.7:1-2; Lk.6:37). However, given that serious spiritual growth is extremely difficult without in-depth teaching of the scriptures, and that this process requires the believer's acceptance of the authority of the teacher in question to some degree, at least an initial evaluation is advisable, therefore, when it comes to the issue of choosing whether or not to accept a particular person's teaching authority in the first place. This will mean, it is true, that the lifestyle and personal behavior of the teacher in question should be above reproach (cf. 1Tim.3:1-15; Tit.1:5-9), at least, that is, when a fair and accurate judgment is rendered on more than mere appearances (Jn.7:24).<sup>13</sup> After all, many a false teacher will go to great lengths to try and project an image of sanctity, hiding under a layer of whitewash his true nature, and thus making the issue often less than obvious (Matt.23:27-28). On the one hand, while charlatans are often very careful to conceal their faults, genuine teachers may, out of innocence, be less careful about hiding their own shortcomings (none of us, after all, is perfect). So while sanctimonious behavior trumpeted for mass consumption should put anyone on the alert, and while false teachers often have at least one "tell", or glaring fault that shines through and reveals what is really underneath, judging the source is not entirely without its difficulties.

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<sup>13</sup> It is also the case that unverified rumors (which may be slanderous lies) should be paid no heed: these are inevitably more damaging to those who are innocent, for the truly guilty often take pains to squelch and conceal reports of their offensive behavior. After all, on at least one occasion, our Lord was doubted by the population of Jerusalem on the false grounds that He "was from Nazareth, not Bethlehem", which was, however, the true place of His birth (contrary to the rumor: Jn.7:41-42; cf. Matt.2:1).

This, at least in part, accounts for the acceptance by some (who should know better) of false teachers (based upon their polished deceptions) and the rejection by some (employing an over-legalistic standard) of true teachers (based upon patent peccadillos and minor imperfections). As in all things, the employment of careful, balanced, and sober judgment, accompanied by prayer and the aid of the Spirit, should be able to avoid both of these extremes.

2) testing the teachings: It is surely for just this reason that our Lord directs our attention in these matters not to the tree itself (which may give the *appearance* of being “good”), but rather to its *fruit*, whose goodness and badness it is impossible to conceal. While we may not always be able to discern the nature of the heart from what people choose to “show us” in their personal behavior, judging the quality of their production, their fruit, is an easier matter. The analogy of literal fruit is helpful in this regard. Good fruit is generally obvious upon inspection: it gives a pleasant appearance and smell. With even a small experience of particular types of fruit, it is rare that we are fooled about quality even before tasting (and we often go to great lengths at the market to judge the weight, color, luster, smell, etc.). If we do make a mistake, one bite is usually sufficient to tell us that a piece of fruit is rotten, or unripe, or otherwise deficient in quality (i.e., because of parasites or what have you). And even on those rare occasions when we partake in spite of all these factors, the physical reaction of our bodies will no doubt keep us from making such bad judgment a continuing practice (e.g., an over-indulging in green apples is seldom repeated). As obvious as all this is in the realm of literal fruit (and our Lord has made a point of picking an analogy wherein we have no excuse and no chance to plead ignorance), is it not amazing that so many continue to persevere in indulging in bad “spiritual fruit”, that is, in the lies and dissembling of false or otherwise inadequately or ill-prepared teachers? For while we may not be absolutely sure about the tree (indeed, the false teacher may be charismatic in the extreme, popular, well-spoken, even a model of aestheticism, etc.), if the fruit/teaching is bad, it will stink discernibly, it will taste noticeably bad, and it will produce unmistakable spiritual dyspepsia (to put the issue again in terms of literal fruit). For if the teaching is false, it will arouse our spiritual suspicions immediately (like a banana bruised on the outside), will not square with the Bible upon scrutiny (like an avocado mottled on the inside), and, if we are foolish enough to “take it in” anyway, will cause sudden problems in our spiritual life (like a rotten apple eaten in spite of our better judgment), problems which should immediately warn us of our mistake.

In the realm of real fruit, a person “would have to be mad” to persevere in eating bad fruit and to continue to endure the predictable and dissipating consequences (an unheard of situation). In the realm of spiritual fruit, the believer still possessed of his/her spiritual sanity (that is, still committed to following Christ instead of what the flesh, the eyes, and ego lust for: 1Jn.2:15-17), must react in a similar manner, turning away from the source of the problem (suspicious as it was to begin with). The main difference in this analogy between bad fruit and bad teaching is that, sadly, while few human beings are willing to deliberately skew their perception of physical reality so as to call certifiably bad fruit good, hardening the heart and distorting spiritual reality to the point of calling teaching which is dangerously inadequate or intentionally deceptive good is an all too common occurrence (Eph.4:17-19). This has much to do with the spiritual battle in

which we find ourselves. On the one hand, fruit trees have no hidden agenda, but false teachers (and the devil who motivates and uses them) clearly do: the exploitation of potential victims for their own selfish ends. On the other hand, any motivation we would have to eat rotten literal fruit is easily counterbalanced by the painful price to pay, but when it comes to all the hidden desires of our hearts, we human beings have always been most susceptible to those who are willing to tell us that what we know is wrong (but want or want to do) is really all right. This has been the case since the serpent told Eve that eating that *most famous fruit* would not only fail to produce the dire effects predicted by the Lord, but would even have positive benefits as well (Gen.3:4-5).<sup>14</sup>

For by giving voice to unparalleled folly, [these false teachers] entrap by fleshly lusts and sensuality those who did not flee far enough from such habitual deceivers.

2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 2:18

Choosing the “bad fruit” of false teachers is the result of spiritual myopia in the first place, and, should one persist in such damaging behavior, results in the end in complete spiritual blindness (Matt.6:22-23; 15:14; Mk.4:12; Lk.8:10b; Jn.9:34-41;12:40; Rom.1:21-32; 1Jn.2:11):

And to the degree that our gospel really is covered by a veil, it is obscured in this way only in the case of those who are perishing. For in the case of such persons, the god of this world has *blinded the minds* of these unbelievers, in order to prevent the shining forth unto them of the light of the gospel of Christ’s glory – even Him who is the very image of God.

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:3-4

This is why, dear friends, committed followers of Jesus Christ are seldom ensnared by the lure of “bad fruit” (even if they desire it, they maintain their spiritual “wits” and reject it), while half-hearted and lukewarm individuals are easy targets for false teachers (being all too eager to accept the false version of reality being offered in order to indulge their various lusts, whatever these may be).

3) testing the group: No one is perfect, and so perfect behavior cannot be expected from any group, not even from a legitimate Christian church. Nevertheless, it seems obvious to say that wild or weird behavior on a mass scale should be reason enough to doubt the holiness of any would-be “Christian” church (taking into account, of course, that every organization has an occasional “loose cannon” or two: Tit.1:16). Barring any obvious and dominant trend towards immorality on the one hand or legalistic self-righteousness on the other in the behavior of the membership, there are other factors to consider as well in determining whether or not a particular self-styled group of “believers” is really following our Lord. Certain telltale characteristics of

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<sup>14</sup> For detailed commentary and consideration of the devil’s temptation of Eve, see Peter’s Epistles #27, and part 3 of The Satanic Rebellion: “The Purpose, Creation and Fall of Man” (section IV.1-2).

organizations operating for their own ends apart from God and His Word are inevitably present even in groups which (falsely) profess to be Christian. Positive indications that one is dealing with a “false group” may include (but are certainly not limited to) the fact that they ...

- teach and practice things which are patently and easily refuted by the Bible (cf. 1Cor.15:12-19).
- discourage (or prohibit) individual Bible reading and personal Bible study (cf. Acts 17:11).
- adhere to “secret doctrines” or “oral tradition” available only from and interpreted exclusively by the leadership (cf. Col.2:18-23).
- violate hypocritically (though not openly) whatever good standards they do profess and proclaim (cf. Matt.23:27-32).
- seek to exploit their own membership for money, pleasure, or otherwise take advantage (cf. Acts 20:29-30).
- seek to control the lives and take over the decision-making of their members (cf. 2Pet.2:18-22).
- seek to isolate their members from friends, family, and society at large (cf. Gal.4:17).
- claim a superior righteousness or morality based upon their own deeds instead of Christ’s work (cf. Phil.3:7-9).
- promise eternal life and salvation apart from faith in and faithfulness to Jesus Christ (cf. Gal.1:6-9).
- deny Jesus Christ by their teachings or their actions (cf. 2Jn.1:7).

This last standard of evaluation, the “Christ test”, should really be at the heart of any evaluation of groups which purport to be Christian:

Any spirit (i.e. person, teaching, organization) which professes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, but any spirit which does not profess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God.

1<sup>st</sup> John 4:2b-3a

To fulfill this requirement, there must be acknowledgment of and adherence to the following principles (taught by scripture as natural corollaries to the proposition that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and is God”):

- that Jesus Christ is both undiminished deity and true humanity (Rom.9:5; Col.2:9; 1Jn.5:6-12).
- that He came into the world to die for all mankind (Jn.3:16; 1Pet.2:24).
- that His work was deemed acceptable by the Father (Rom.3:21-26).
- that we are saved on the basis of our faith in Him and in His work alone and not by our own works (Eph.2:8-9).
- that apart from faith in Jesus Christ, there is no way to approach the Father (Jn.14:6).
- that the true believer in Jesus Christ follows Christ and His teachings throughout his life on this earth (Matt.7:20; Jn.8:31; 1Jn.2:4; 2Jn.1:9).

So while “testing” teachers, teachings and groups may (wrongly) seem disrespectful to some, and while many if not most of the so-called “Christian” groups who need such testing inevitably discourage the practice of checking to see what the Bible says, this is one area where the Ephesian believers do come in for praise from our Lord.

Such proper “checking”, moreover, is not easy. Time, thought and effort are required in order to determine that specific points of teaching or behavior or modus operandi are unbiblical (this was especially true in the 1<sup>st</sup> century when the scriptures were not universally available, nor particularly easy to use when they were). Even more difficult than the process and effort of testing to see if would-be teachers and their pronouncements and organizations are truly “of Christ” is the hard decision to separate when such people fail the test. For without the dogged determination to persistently reject from fellowship (personal or collective) any person, persons or teaching which are patently wrong and dangerously contrary to scripture, all the testing in the world is pointless. Given the attractiveness of many false teachers, their doctrines, and their organizations on the one hand, and the extreme pressure from the world to compromise in such cases on the other, we should not be too quick to dismiss this accomplishment on the Ephesians’ part which has come in here for praise from our Lord. For these 1<sup>st</sup> century post-apostolic believers kept “the false” at bay so effectively that for all intents and purposes during the Ephesian era there was little difference between the “Church visible” and the “Church actual”, a claim that certainly cannot be made today in our own Laodicean era where, quite the contrary, false and true have so intermixed that the whole is a lukewarm, indistinguishable mass. Although this success on the Ephesian believers’ part in excluding false teachers, false teachings, and false groups does not excuse the deficiency for which they are criticized of failing to pursue *correct* teaching (their “first love”), rejecting false teachers, teachings, and individuals was and remains a critical safeguard for the faith and practice of the true Church of Jesus Christ.

4. “And you possess perseverance, and you have endured because of My Name, and you have not faltered.”: These three statements express the same essential truth: believers of the Ephesian era



maintained their faith in Christ and their faithfulness to Christ in a steadfast fashion. The threefold repetition of the basic idea (a “tricolon”) serves to reinforce and emphasize the fact. Still, there is a small distinction to be made between these three very similar sentiments:

1) “Perseverance”: The Greek word *hypomone* (υπομονη) is commonly found in scripture with the theologically significant meaning of “perseverance” (as we have it here: cf. Lk.8:15; 21:19; Rom.2:7; 5:3-4; 8:25; 15:4-5; etc.). This of course refers to the believer in Christ’s active continuation of their belief while still in this world following salvation. Of the three qualities for which the Ephesians are being praised here, “perseverance” most clearly relates to the Ephesian era believers’ maintenance of their personal faith in and faithfulness towards Jesus Christ in spite of all the difficulties, distractions, and problems of their time, chief of which was the loss of apostolic leadership in this time of transition.

2) “Endurance”: This is the same word used for “toleration” in verse two: “you cannot endure evil people”. The Greek verb *bastazo* (βασταζω) in its literal sense means to “carry a load” and is used frequently in the Bible with the figurative meaning of bearing a spiritual burden (cf. Matt.20:12; Lk.14:27; Acts 9:15; Rom.15:1; Gal.6:2; 6:5). Thus this second phrase includes along with the maintenance of personal faith (“bearing up” under the trials of life) the idea of continuing ministry to others as well (i.e., “keeping at it” in the “good works” without which faith is dead: Jas.2:17).

3) “Forbearance”: “Hard work” is the core meaning of the Greek verb here *kopiazo* (κοπιαζω). Though generally possessing purely positive connotations (cf. Matt.11:28; Gal.4:11; Phil.2:16; 1Tim.4:10; ), in the perfect tense it sometimes carries as here the idea of having become “worked out” or exhausted. Our Lord’s statement that the Ephesian era believers have not “become exhausted in their hard work” (of Christian ministry) most clearly of the three statements in context relates their continued faith to the ministry which springs from it.

5. “you have abandoned [that] love you had at first”: Given that the Ephesian era believers have such a good track record in maintaining their faith against the challenges of life, of producing fruit for the Lord from that faith, and of keeping a safe distance from those (false friends) who would seek to compromise this life of faith and faithful works, it may perhaps seem curious at first that this next criticism should be leveled at them by our Lord. But in spite of their exemplary modus operandi in general, the Ephesian era believers had apparently lost their focus on the central issue and true focal point of the Christian life: love for God and for His Word (which two things are, in truth, indivisible). There is, let there be no doubt, no difference between loving Him and loving what He has to say (cf. Ps.138:2). Jesus Christ *is* the Living Word of God (Jn.1:1-2; Heb.1:3; 1Jn.1:1; cf. Matt.7:21-23), and apart from the words of God we cannot come to know Him at all (Jer.9:23-24). So when the Bible commands us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your might” (in Mk.12:30, Jesus is quoting *the Bible*: Deut.6:5), it must be understood that this is possible *only* through a lifelong commitment to drinking in the truth of the scriptures without which it is impossible to come to know Him and love Him. This was certainly our Savior’s own

approach as during the days of His first advent He took up the challenge of spiritual advance in the same way that we must do: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds forth from the mouth of God” (Matt.4:4; cf. Deut.8:3). Let it not be lost on anyone that our Lord is here quoting the Word of God to commend that Word to us, even He who Himself is the very Living Word of God!

As so many others before and since, the Ephesian era believers had lost sight of this most important principle of the primacy of the Word of God in every Christian life. They had instead, following the departure of the apostles, adopted a lackadaisical attitude to scripture and the truth it contains. This is both understandable and regrettable. Life was busy. Life was distracting. And they were keeping up a good way of life, after all. Moreover, the teaching of the generation following the apostles would have to have suffered by comparison. None of those who followed Peter, Paul and John could have hoped to have held a candle to these great and gifted apostles. Then too, as the dramatic spiritual gifts which had characterized the apostolic church began to fade (no more tongues or its interpretation, no more prophecy, no more healing etc.), the temptation to see studying the Bible as less exciting than such miraculous events, and to find the Bible teaching of the successors of the apostles somewhat lackluster by comparison was no doubt very real.

There is a good analogy to every believer’s own Christian experience to be found here. Inevitably, the time of excitement that follows conversion to Christ will pass and the glow will fade. The Word of God is in objective fact *always* exciting and interesting (not to mention crucial to our growth and spiritual well-being), but we have to make the decision to *see it in this light* when the initial burst of enthusiasm wears off and the hard work begins. We have to make and stick to the commitment to place the Word of God before anything else in our lives (for only if His Word is first in our hearts is He truly first in our hearts). For if one is not moving forward in the Christian life, then one is not growing, and, in fact, will eventually regress after momentum spills off. In this way, even the good way of life which the Ephesian era believers were maintaining for the time being would eventually come to be at risk. For all the good works they accomplished were, after all, based upon their previous growth, and spiritual atrophy eventually and inevitably undermines even the highest of standards. The Ephesian era believers had enjoyed the “fun” of the apostolic time. In today’s terms, they would love the music and the socializing, the special events and the guest speakers, but they would be less inclined to conscientiously persevere in the practice of personal Bible study and to diligently persevere in the pursuit of substantive Bible teaching. These things must be our “first love” if Jesus, if our Father, is to be our first love, because it is only through His Word that we come to know Him, to know His will, and become prepared to serve Him in this life.

6. “remember where you have fallen from, and repent, and do the works you did at first”: Recovering lost momentum in spiritual growth is described here by our Lord as a three step process:

1) remember: The Ephesian era believers are commanded to recall their former circumstances, consider their present situation, and realize that they have lost ground spiritually (“fallen”). Standing pat is almost impossible in the Christian experience, so that one is inevitably always either moving forward or falling back. These 1<sup>st</sup> century believers are being shaken awake by their Lord and ours and made to recall that in times past they were indeed walking closer to God because they were walking in His Word. Recognition of the reality of one’s situation is always the first step in a spiritual recovery. Just as one must first recognize and admit to oneself the facts when one has fallen into personal sin before any recovery is possible, so it is in respect to the overall course of one’s spiritual life as well: in order to turn the ship around and put it back on course, the course, that is, which leads us ever closer to Him, there must first be an acknowledgment that the present course is wrong (i.e., failure to make the Word of God a priority) and has only resulted in a general drifting away from the Lord:

For this reason, it is all the more necessary for us to pay attention to the [teachings] we have heard, lest we *drift away* [off course].  
Hebrews 2:1

2) repent: Once reality has been faced and the sad state of one’s spiritual status acknowledged, the next step indicated by our Lord is “repentance”. The concept of repentance requires some circumspection in its explanation because of the many misunderstandings the English word has occasioned. The command “Repent!” has the potential for falsely focusing the attention upon emotional reaction and extremes of behavior that are not actually being suggested in the Greek text here. On the other hand, one would also not wish to explain this command as a simple, unemotional “change of mind” (also an understandable interpretation, given the etymology of the Greek verb *metanoëo*-μετανοεω which does contain the two elements of “mind” *nous* and “change” *meta*). An examination of the Greek vocabulary (and corresponding Hebrew expressions, most notably *nicham*-נחם, and *shubh*-שב) indicates that the truth lies somewhere between judging the validity of repentance by the degree of emotional reaction on the one hand and confining repentance to a cold, emotionless calculation on the other: repentance is more of a deep and determined “change of *heart*”, that is, a real “turnaround” in a person’s attitude, which is not necessarily to be judged by the initial outward display of emotion. Genuine, biblical repentance is not merely for show (i.e., visible, temporary emotional distress without long-lasting change), and not just in principle (i.e., acceptance of the facts without the resolution for change), but a deep-seated change of attitude about past behavior that inevitably results in a definitive change in that behavior:

But if a wicked man turns from all the sins he has committed and keeps all My decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done he will live. Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?  
Ezekiel 18:21-23 NIV

3) do: As the quote and discussion of repentance above suggest, a genuine change of heart is to be followed by a definite change in behavior. Once the mistake has been faced up to, and once a new determination of the heart has been adopted, the next and obvious step is to put this newfound resolution into practice, to actually *do* what it is that one has failed to perform in the past, in this case, to renew the pursuit of the words of God, a course of action apparently (and unfortunately) which the Ephesian era believers failed to adopt:

My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words but ***they do not put them into practice***. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but ***do not put them into practice***.

Ezekiel 33:31-32 NIV

7. “if you do not”: The consequence of failing to reinvigorate the process of spiritual growth is clearly spelled out by our Lord. As their penalty, the Ephesian era believers will experience a rapid removal of their “lampstand” (the symbol of their Church era). Continued reluctance to take up the challenge of growing in the Word day by day will have (and did have) the effect of bringing on the “day of visitation” at an accelerated pace. For nothing could be more disastrous for the incipient Church than for its members militant to perpetuate a culture of lukewarm attitudes about what should have been their “prime love”, the written Word and the Living Word, the inseparable Person and teachings of Jesus Christ. Because of the obduracy of its believers in this matter, the Ephesian era did in fact come to an abrupt halt (after a scant 12 years), with God waking the 1<sup>st</sup> century faithful out of their spiritual lethargy by means of a series of persecutions which would test and characterize the next era, that of Smyrna.

I am the true vine and my Father is the vine-dresser. Every branch [that is] in Me which does not bear fruit He removes, and every branch which does bear fruit He prunes so that it might bear more fruit.

John 15:1-2

This passage – the words of our Lord Himself – makes the situation entirely clear. There is only one way for believers in Him to proceed, namely, with continued progress in their spiritual life and the production it engenders. God the Father “works” with this attitude and approach, trimming and pruning us, helping us to do it better day by day. But lack of production, the inevitable result of the spiritual atrophy we see in the Ephesian case, ends in removal (as indeed it did for this first of the Church eras).

8. “you do have this [in your favor], [the fact] that you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate”: As explained above, these “Nicolaitans” were a group of false teachers and their followers who pretended Christianity but in reality were in no wise true followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. The etymology of their name, “the people conquer” (“conquer” from the verb *nikao-νικαω*, plus “people” from the word *laos-λαος*) is significant, for this particular satanic attack hit home where the Ephesians were the most vulnerable. For the central creed of these false apostles and pseudo-believers of putting “majority rule” before the tenants of the Bible

(pithily contained in the Latin gnome “vox populi, vox dei” – i.e., “what the people say has the authority of God”) was well-designed to be difficult to refute by those who had themselves become complacent about the teachings of scripture. During their short tenure, however, the Ephesian era believers did resist and reject this approach. For though their lackadaisical attitude to the Bible made it hard for them to refute the Nicolaitans and their false apostle leaders in principle, yet their correct appreciation and rejection of the *deeds* that flowed from such perverse doctrine kept them from accommodating to their false teaching (“you hate [their] works”).

We should note that our Lord is pleased not with the Ephesian era believers’ hatred of the Nicolaitans themselves, but with their hatred of the Nicolaitans’ deeds. After all, we are commanded not only to love our brothers in Christ, but all mankind without exception (Matt.5:43-47; 22:37-40; 1Cor.13:1-13; 1Jn.2:7-12), that is, to earnestly desire (and to facilitate where possible) the reconciliation of all to God, through their salvation in Jesus Christ (Ezek.18:23; Matt.18:14; Jn.12:47; 1Tim.2:4; 2Tim.2:24-26; 2Pet.3:9). But it must be noted here that the reverse is also true: we are indeed to detest the evil works and evil deeds of evil doers – *after the example of our Lord*. These two attitudes (of love for all those whom God has made, but of hatred for all actions contrary to God’s perfect will) are not at all contradictory and must not be confused. For while it is clearly wrong for Christians to hate evildoers, it is also clearly wrong-headed for us ever to *justify* wrong or evil *behavior* on the pretext that “Christians ought always to love”. After all, we can love our children while at the same time we abhor (not to mention punish) dangerous behavior on their part. How much more then is this not the case when it comes to unbelievers involved in immoral, illegal, illicit or otherwise abominable behavior? Just as we must take care not to allow our disgust at egregiously anti-God actions to sour the universal love we are commanded to deploy toward all mankind, so we must also take pains not to allow this genuine and mandatory attitude of Christian love to mellow and soften our rigid opposition to all evil, detestable, and sinful acts. The Ephesian era believers come in here for praise on the basis of the latter consideration, without being faulted on the basis of the former, and we should all aspire to the same.

### **Christ’s Promised Rewards to Ephesus:**

1. “To the one who wins the victory, I will give to him [the right] to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God”:

The restriction of rewards to those who “win the victory” is a common feature in all seven messages from our Lord to each of the seven eras of His Church. The phrase “the one who wins the victory” is actually an attributive participle in the Greek (from the verb *nikao*-νικαω – the source of our “Nike”), and means, literally, “he who wins/is victorious”. The reference in all seven instances is to every believer who emerges from the crucible of this life with his/her faith intact:

For everything that has been born from God *overcomes* (*nikao-νικαω*) the world. And this is *the victory* (*nike-νικη*) that *has overcome* (*nikao-νικαω*) the world: *our faith* [in Christ]!

1<sup>st</sup> John 5:4

Make no mistake – only those who maintain their faith in Christ, who serve Him faithfully and end their lives in faithfulness, still believing in Him, are the victors referred to here.<sup>15</sup> The world, the flesh and the devil are ever trying with might and main to drown true faith, to quench genuine belief in Christ, to burn up and choke to death the “faith plant” of all those who have turned to follow Jesus (cf. Matt.13:1-9; 13:18-23; Mk.4:1-9; 4:13-20; Lk.8:4-8; 8:11-15), but “all those who endure to the end will be saved” (Matt.10:22) – this is the essential victory of everyone who genuinely belongs to Him. The repetition of this qualification for all seven churches also makes it clear that the various reward-aspects of salvation discussed under each era are equally available and equally applicable to *all* believers of *all* seven eras, provided that they too endure until the end, persevering in their faith.<sup>16</sup>

As to the particular reward mentioned here for those of Ephesus who have endured life with faith intact, it should first be remembered that at the beginning of the message to Ephesus our Lord chose to emphasize His authority with the statement “This is what the One who has the mastery over the seven stars (i.e., churches) in His right hand says, the One who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands”. The issue of response to Christ’s complete and completely legitimate authority also dominates the content of the message to Ephesus (as we have seen), as the believers of that era were called upon by Him to reinvigorate their spiritual walk. Finally, in the promise of reward here to those who persevere in faith, Christ guarantees “[the right] to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God”. Thus in the ultimate Eden, the seventh and final paradise of the New Jerusalem, believing mankind will once again possess the right of partaking of the “tree of life”, with all the blessing that sublime experience entails.<sup>17</sup>

This particular promise was an important reminder to the Ephesian era believers (as it is to us as well) that following Jesus Christ in this life, that is, persevering in faith and faithfulness (including the spiritual growth to which these 1<sup>st</sup> century believers were being re-called) does not

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<sup>15</sup> See especially the discussion on so-called “eternal security” in Peter’s Epistles #27: Three False Doctrines that Threaten Faith.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Dr. James Rosscup’s, “The Overcomer of the Apocalypse,” Grace Theological Journal, 3:2 (Fall, 1982) 261-86.

<sup>17</sup> The “tree of life” as it will exist in the New Jerusalem is covered in part 6 of the present series. For a discussion of the original “tree of life” in the garden of Eden, see section IV *passim* of part 3 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “The Purpose, Creation and Fall of Man”. For the “seven Edens”, see section II.6 of part 1 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Satan’s Rebellion and Fall”.

mean losing out on the joys and pleasures of life. For in eternity, the delight which we shall experience with Him “in the paradise of God”, eating from “the tree of life” itself, will put all the transitory pleasures of this temporary life decidedly “in the shade”. For our eternal life in the perfect eternal bodies we have been promised after the pattern of our resurrected Lord will most definitely *not* be one deprived of happiness. Rather, it will be one of blessed, legitimate and sanctified enjoyment of wonders we can scarcely now imagine. This promise of the right to eat of that wondrous tree is one we are meant to take to heart and anticipate, remembering and believing that though we may have to deny ourselves in this life in order to take up the cross which Christ has assigned each one of us individually, yet in that marvelous time to come the glories of the New Jerusalem will render the heights of what may be experienced on this ephemeral earth insignificant by comparison, the most sublime of which will be the face to face experience of the One we love, our Lord Jesus Christ.

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.  
Romans 8:18 KJV

There is one last conclusion to draw from our examination here of the Ephesian era of the Church: Those who would go back to the early Church for authority on faith and practice (instead of relying exclusively upon what the Bible has to say) should consider instead that here we have it directly from our Lord that even in John’s day and immediately thereafter this generation of the so-called “apostolic fathers” was not paying the attention to the Bible and its teachings that it should have done. Following the departure of the likes of Paul, Peter and John, their forward progress was arrested, and they failed to continue to grow in the Word (their “first love”), with the result that their “lampstand” was prematurely removed (after a mere twelve years). Emulation of such post-apostolic patterns through a hyper-traditionalism that clings to good forms but abandons as a primary focus what had energized the Church in the first place and always has since (namely, attention to the Living Word through His written Word) is also typical of what is happening in our own Laodicean day. Scripture must be our only source of faith and practice, not the traditions of the post-apostolic generation (or of any other generation, for that matter) who were found wanting in this respect by our Lord Himself. For it is only by doggedly sticking with His Word that we continue to grow and to serve Him effectively, whereby the way to the tree of life will be abundantly supplied.

Happy is the man who does not walk in the path of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers. His delight, instead, is in the law of the Lord, and he meditates on His law day and night. He will be like a tree planted where the waters divide, which will yield its fruit in its season, and whose leaf will not wither.  
Psalm 1:1-3

Revelation 2:8-11:

(8) And to the angel of the church in **Smyrna** write: "This is what the One who is the first and last says, He who died and came to life. (9) I know your works and your

tribulation and your poverty – but you are rich! – and the slander [falling upon you] from those who say that they are Jews but are Satan’s congregation. (10) Have no fear of what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Demonstrate faithfulness unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. (11) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who wins the victory shall not be hurt by the second death."

## 2. Smyrna: “The Era of Persecution” (82 to 442 = 360 years)

Smyrna means “myrrh” in Greek, that is, the resinous, aromatic substance (derived from the gum of certain south Arabian trees) used in making incense and in the process of embalming.<sup>18</sup> Myrrh was a costly substance (one of the gifts of the Magi at Jesus’ birth: Matt.2:11), and speaks here of the persecution and martyrdom which befell many of the believers of this second era of the Church. Though called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice for our Lord, those who died for Him died a death which was characterized by the fragrant aroma of myrrh (the incense analogy). That their martyrdom was acceptable to God (no matter what their persecutors may have thought), and so was characterized by proper burial (symbolically sweet-smelling in heavenly terms no matter what the actual earthly disposition of their remains), is also indicated by the name Smyrna, “myrrh”. For believers of all eras, we can be assured that if we are ever called upon by our Master to endure persecution or loss of our lives for Him, such sacrifices are equally precious in His sight, carrying the sweet scent of the most costly perfume before the throne of God as a token of the rewards that will fall to the lot of all called to share the sufferings of Christ (1Pet.4:12-19; cf. Ps.116:15; Matt.16:24-25; Rom.8:17; 2Cor.1:5; Phil.3:10; Col.1:24).

Beyond the name, the theme of eternal life victorious over death is evident in every part of the message to Smyrna. Christ describes Himself as the One “who *died and came to life*”, the believers of Smyrna are told to be *faithful unto death*, and the reward for their continued endurance is the promised *crown of life*. Finally, the victorious one *will not be hurt by the second death*. This focus upon eternal life triumphing over mere physical death for true followers of Jesus Christ was a critical one for those of the second era of the Church, for the era of Smyrna represents the era of intense persecution of the Church by the Roman state. Called upon to demonstrate their faith in the ultimate manner, martyrdom, the believers of Smyrna responded magnificently, and this period of the Church was in many ways one of her finest hours. It is easy (or rather “easier”) to be a Christian when “the sun is shining”. However, these believers of the Church’s second era endured slander, ostracism, intense personal tribulation and poverty, imprisonment and even martyrdom. Yet they held onto their faith – and not only held on, but continued their spiritual advance, generating significant production for our Lord (the significance of the “crown of life” discussed below). Without question, it is no simple matter to persevere in faith in this life, much less to continue an aggressive spiritual advance, still less to come into the full function of ministry to which we have been severally called. But to

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<sup>18</sup> See A.C. Gaebelein, The Revelation, p.35f; et vid. lexica.



accomplish *all* of these things under the adverse circumstances faced by the believers of the Smyrna generation – lack of resources, intense opposition, hostility, imprisonment and even the very real threat of death for practicing what they believed – this is a test that few of us (if we are honest with ourselves) would probably be able to pass.

In the event, the faithful of Smyrna did meet the challenge and pass the test, an entire series of them, as a matter of fact. For the “ten days” mentioned by our Lord are ten distinct periods of persecution which occurred during the 360 year era of Smyrna (see below). And distributed chronologically as these persecutions were within Smyrna’s allotted time, there was never a point when these believers could afford to fall into complacency (the failing of the Ephesian era). No, the believers of Smyrna had only two options: either stay alert, or risk the shipwreck of their faith when the next wave of persecution hit. The fact that, along with Philadelphia, Smyrna is the only Church era which does not come in for any rebuke or threat of judgment from our Lord in His message to them is clear proof that this noble group of believers made the right choices – and continued to do so throughout the period entrusted to them.

One principle to be gleaned from the Smyrna experience is that all good progress in the gospel of Jesus Christ produces opposition from the evil one and his earthly minions. This is true even today, though for many of us (though not for all of us) the possibility of state-sponsored persecution seems a distant possibility – the devil has many other ways to oppose any and all who are truly striving to draw closer to Jesus Christ and to serve Him properly with the gifts entrusted to them. For it is ever the case that the most dedicated believers (like those tried and true Christians of the era of Smyrna who went to their deaths rather than renounce our Lord) are often the ones who come in for the most intense experiences of personal tribulation (note Christ’s use of the word “tribulation” twice in this message and see below). This observation is easily reinforced by even a peripheral overview of outstanding Old and New Testament personalities and thus gives the lie to the so-called “prosperity gospel”, for even in those cases where exceptional believers such as Abraham and David did receive notable material wealth from God, we should be quick to note that their lives were also characterized by an intensity of testing which few of us would wish to emulate.

Finally, before moving on to a consideration of these verses themselves, it should be pointed out that the initial population of the Smyrna generation would be, roughly speaking, the children and grandchildren of the Ephesus or apostolic generation. There is a comparison to be drawn here between the believers of the Exodus generation, who failed the wilderness test (ironically out of an alleged concern for their children), and the generation which followed them who did have the faith to enter the land of promise under Joshua’s leadership (cf. Num14:27-35). Ephesus failed to meet the challenge of the Word, but Smyrna took up the challenge of putting scripture and spiritual growth before all else – *and held on in spite of the severe persecution which their exceptional faithfulness occasioned.*

### **Christ’s Self-description to Smyrna:**

1. “the One who is the first and last, He who died and came to life”: As mentioned above, our Lord’s victory over death, the resurrection of His humanity following His triumph on the cross, provides the model destiny of all who follow Him (Ps.16:10). For even though He was persecuted and executed for our sakes, God the Father through the Holy Spirit raised His human body from the dead in incorruptible form, and so shall He reign forever. This self-description reminds the believers of the era of Smyrna who were chosen to glorify Him through martyrdom (along with all who have been given that particular destiny since) that even if the world puts us to death, it cannot hold us there. For just as “it was impossible for Him to be held by [death]” (Acts 2:24), so also we are confident of our coming resurrection and the concomitant victory over death forevermore. Indeed, dying a true martyr’s death, as was the case for many believers of the Church’s second era, is the strongest confirmation possible in this life that one has successfully run the course God has assigned and is truly passing to a heavenly reward (cf. the case of Stephen and his vision of Christ just before being martyred: Acts 7:55-60). Rejection to the point of martyrdom is the highest compliment (albeit an unintended one) which the devil’s world can pay a follower of Jesus Christ. And far from compromising our true life which shall last forever, martyrdom only confirms it. For all those who have been baptized into Him by the Spirit (Rom.6:3-4) share His destiny, death to the world in this life, life everlasting through the resurrection of this mortal body in the next. How much more is this not true for those who, like many of the era of Smyrna, have been called upon to follow Him even unto martyrdom (cf. Peter: Jn.21:18-19)?

"And do not fear those who can kill your body, but are not able to kill your self. But fear rather the One who is able to destroy both your self and your body in hell."  
Matthew 10:28

### **Christ’s Particular Message:**

1. “I know your deeds and your tribulation and your poverty – but you are rich!”: The believers of Smyrna had a difficult time from almost every worldly point of view. Christianity, originally poorly understood by Roman bureaucracy, soon came to be distinguished from Judaism (which had the favored status of a *religio licita*, that is, a form of worship countenanced by the state) – and came instead to be viewed as little more than a cult, and a potentially dangerous one at that. As ironic as this may appear, that the one and only true way to God should be considered dangerous, erroneous, and superfluous by a pagan state, provides a telling perspective on how the devil’s world really functions. To the world, it is utter madness to devote oneself to a faith which brings trouble and privation. But from the eternal perspective, the trouble of this life lasts but a moment, and the poverty of this life is destined to give way to untold eternal riches for all believers in Jesus Christ. In contrast, those who have had a short season of peace in this life with the means of the world abundantly at their disposal *apart from obedience to God* will perish when this life concludes and suffer the loss of all they prized (contrast Heb.11:26-27). The believers of the Smyrna era were poor (as societal outcasts, this stands to reason). And they knew trouble, difficulty and hardship, even to the point of full-blown persecutions and pogroms against them on many occasions. Our Lord states these things as fact. But He is also quick to point out what we all should take pains to keep fixed prominently in our hearts: the riches we

possess in the Word of God, in our fellowship and union with Jesus Christ, in the rewards for our Christian labor which will exceed anything the world can yet imagine and do so for all eternity, so far eclipse the mortal and ephemeral rewards of this life as to make comparison unworthy:

For I do not consider these present hardships in any way comparable to the glory destined to be revealed for us.

Romans 8:18

2. “and the slander from those who say that they are Jews but are Satan’s congregation”: The word translated “slander” here is actually the Greek word *blasphemia*, the origin of our English word “blasphemy”. Inasmuch as the “defamatory speech” is directed at the believers of Smyrna rather than at God Himself, “slander” is the preferable translation (for our English word “blasphemy” is in general exclusively reserved for outlandish railings directed against God Himself). Nevertheless, *blasphemia* is not the most common word for slander, and we should be aware that there is indeed a meaning being imparted here by our Lord which suggests more than mere slander on the part of the opponents of the Smyrna era believers. For to slander those holy to God is, indirectly, to slander Him as well, and any attack upon us who follow Jesus Christ is taken personally by Him (cf. Is.54:15-17; Zech.2:8).

Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His holy ones.

Psalms 116:15

The source of these vituperative verbal attacks upon the believers of the Smyrna era is said to be “the congregation (or “synagogue”, from Greek *synagoge*: συναγωγή) of Satan”. Along with the “false apostles” and “Nicolaitans” of Ephesus, “Balaam and Balak” and those who hold to the teachings of the “Nicolaitans” at Pergamum, “Jezebel” at Thyatira, and the identically named “synagogue of Satan” at Philadelphia, this designation (along with all the other designations mentioned as we noted above in our treatment of Ephesus) indicates the false or anti-Church element of the era in question in its relationship to the true Church. The “synagogue of Satan who falsely claim to be Jews”, therefore, are organized unbelievers who claim to be “of God”, but are in truth the devil’s congregation carrying out the devil’s will. It is very important to note here that for John, for the book of Revelation, for Jesus Christ, for the Father, for all true Christians who understand the Bible, truly being a Jew in fact is a decidedly *good and blessed* thing. These individuals only claim that spiritually privileged status *and do so falsely*.

While it is true that if we were to interpret this “synagogue of Satan who falsely claim to be Jews” from the time of the writing of the book of Revelation, then a tempting identification for these individuals would be the Judaizers (many of whom were gentile converts) who so fiercely opposed the apostle Paul with their legalistic teachings (cf. especially the book of Galatians). In terms of the second historical era of the Church, however, the antagonism here is clearly between true believers on the one hand and those who are in reality opponents of the Church of Jesus Christ on the other. As we have mentioned above (and will have occasion to see again several times during the course of this seven part study), John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, uses Israel (true Israel, that is) to represent those who are of the family of God in distinction to those who

are not really in any way “of God” but are really His opponents even though they may claim to act in His Name. Given the fact that Israel is the foundation of the Church and the ultimate organization into which the entire Church, the assembly of all believers throughout human history, is eventually to be subsumed, this representation on John’s part is not an unexpected one (cf. the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem: Rev.21:12).<sup>19</sup>

Therefore the proper identification of these “false Jews” and “congregation of Satan” as they existed during the period of the Church’s persecution by the Roman empire, the era of Smyrna, is the state-sponsored system of religion generally known as paganism. The mind-set of those who were under paganism’s sway at this time (the majority of the population of the empire) was exactly as described by John: they were, so they thought, “the true religion” (i.e., the equivalent of claiming to be Jews), but in reality they served a system of false religion designed by the devil to ensnare mankind to his will and keep them from the true God. It is interesting if chilling to read, for example, the correspondence between the emperor Trajan and the younger Pliny in which Christians are characterized as “insane” and means are explored of coercing their “repentance” and return to the “true religion”. In this respect, the paganism of the Roman empire is much like the revived system of state religion which Satan and his minion, antichrist, will foster during the dark days of the Tribulation. It too will be characterized by the zealous contention that it is the only true religion, will be intolerant of all others, and will persecute Christians for their failure to “convert”. And just as the pagan religion of antiquity eventually infiltrated and took over the organization of the true Church by the time of the middle ages (i.e., the era of Sardis, on which see below), so also the rump of that corrupted organization will form much of the basis for the worldwide satanic religion in the time of the Tribulation.

Though variously named and identified, the false groups mentioned in these seven messages share certain common features. In addition to a claim of superior authority (they are “apostles”, or “true Jews”, or have “deep things”, etc.), they also all share in the common objective of attacking and undermining the true Church by suborning true believers to spiritual infidelity. The pressure to compromise with the beliefs and practices of the world contrary to the Word of God has always been a severe one here in the devil’s *kosmos*, and will continue to be so until the return of our Lord. Historically speaking, these purveyors of maculate and substitute forms of the truth were identified and rejected by the Ephesians, then assaulted and persecuted Smyrna for refusing to accommodate to them, established a foothold in Pergamum, were tolerated in and infiltrated into Thyatira, completely gained the upper-hand in Sardis, lost control of the true believers in Philadelphia who separated from them, and have reentered the body of Laodicea like a virulent disease, whose degenerating effects we are sadly being forced to watch as they intensify day by day. Since the various names and relationships given to the evil forces in opposition to the Church within the texts of the seven messages give us important information about the nature and status of their attacks on the militant body of Christ, it will be helpful here to summarize in chart form what our Lord tells us about the deadly antagonism of the devil’s

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<sup>19</sup> These principles are discussed under “The Uniqueness of Israel” in section II.8.b.i of part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Judgment, Restoration and Replacement”.

“anti-church” in its efforts to resist, oppose, destroy and corrupt the true Church throughout all its eras:

**Ephesus**: status of the anti-church in “The Era of Transition” (September 70 to 82 = 12 years)

identification: early attempts by unbelievers to infiltrate the true Church [unsuccessful].

contemporary position: excluded from the true Church.

claim of authority: “say they are apostles”; “Nicolaitans” [the majority is the authority, they say, and not the Bible].

weakness of target: careless Ephesian attitude toward the study of the Word of God.

specific attack: libertinism justified; attack on the truth of the Bible [where the Ephesians were vulnerable].

**Smyrna**: status of the anti-church in “The Era of Persecution” (82 to 442 = 360 years)

identification: paganism attempting [unsuccessfully] to coerce and destroy the true Church.

contemporary position: separate from the true Church, but established as the state religion.

claim of authority: they claim to be the true and legitimate religion [“[falsely] say they are Jews”]

weakness of target: none – by enduring even to the point of martyrdom, the believers of Smyrna demonstrate their faith beyond question.

specific attack: lack of worldly means (no money, no influence, no power) – but these “weaknesses” are such only in the eyes of the world; if God is for us, who can defeat us?

**Pergamum**: status of the anti-church in “The Era of Accommodation” (442 to 802 = 360 years)

identification: evil in the form of secularism and paganism beginning to influence the Church through temptation and accommodation in the manner of the conspiracy of Balaam and Balak.

contemporary position: infiltrating into the true Church.

claim of authority: the presence within the body of those who stoutly hold to these “teachings of the Nicolaitans”.

weakness of target: growing powerful in the secular realm, the church visible becomes vulnerable to the fallacy of “inclusiveness” on the one hand and of the need for centralization on the other, thus opening the way to infiltration by evil.

specific attack: upon the desire for secular security, leading to the false assumption that accommodation with evil to garner secular power can be indulged in with impunity.

**Thyatira**: status of the anti-church in “The Era of Compromise” (802 to 1162 = 360 years)

identification: evil now entrenched in the body gains control of the leadership of the church visible [“Jezebel”, the whore, representing the increasingly secular and unbelieving leadership].

contemporary position: the secular, pagan element begins to assume a dominant position within the leadership of the church visible [“Jezebel” supported by her “adulterers” and their “children”]

claim of authority: these elements falsely claim superior authority based upon superior knowledge “teaching” the “deep things” which are in reality deceptive lies (i.e., “of Satan”).

weakness of target: “Jezebel” and her followers prey upon those within the church visible who are vulnerable to the false appeal of secret dogma, elaborate ritual, and false authority.

specific attack: spreading of influence through these cult-like activities to those still holding to true faith and practice [“to eat food sacrificed to idols and indulge in sexual immorality” = spiritual unfaithfulness].

**Sardis**: status of the anti-church in “The Era of Corruption” (1162 to 1522 = 360 years)

identification: no group mentioned = the body is now, as a whole, moribund, with only a spark of life left in some of its individual members.

contemporary position: the cancer of evil has now thoroughly infiltrated and dominated the originally healthy body.

claim of authority: the evil and the false have usurped the offices and authority of the visible organization of the “Church”.

weakness of target: for true believers to continue within the dead body will mean the eventual extinction of the true faith.

specific attack: directed toward the last vestiges of true faith and practice.

**Philadelphia**: status of the anti-church in “The Era of Revival” (1522 to 1882 = 360 years)

identification: the entirely corrupt and completely ungodly “synagogue of Satan” in opposition to true believers who have separated themselves from this dead body which once represented the Church.

contemporary position: having usurped the original organizational body of the earthly Church, the false “synagogue” now finds itself opposing from the outside the true Church reformed.

claim of authority: the opponents claim to be the true and legitimate religion [“say they are Jews”], the “one true Church”, but are in reality “Satan’s synagogue” [an evil organization].

weakness of target: none – the true believers have put the truth of the Word of God first and God has honored these “works” granting them a bountiful harvest [of evangelism, knowledge, and spiritual growth], an “open door”.

specific attack: despite active persecution, the false put off balance; even some of its own recognize that God is with the Philadelphians and repent, “worshiping” at their feet.

**Laodicea**: status of the anti-church in “The Era of Degeneration” (1882 to 2026 = 144 years)

identification: no group mentioned = the false has now infiltrated the reformed Church organization and is indistinguishably intermixed with it.

contemporary position: the “sleeping sickness” of evil has managed to thoroughly permeate the true “Church” to the point of having fatally compromised it.

claim of authority: established within the “Church”, unbelievers have spread the apathy of relativism: everything is “good”, so nothing can be wrong (and nothing right).

weakness of target: not a cancer as in Pergamum/Thyatira/Sardis (which would be identifiable), but a degenerative illness that has attacked the body from within subtly and incrementally to avoid sharp reaction, and has brought about spiritual paralysis in the “host”.

specific attack: instead of posing a clear challenge, the anti-church of our own day has gradually introduced relativism, false or loose standards, apathy about the Word of God, etc., rendering the Church of our era largely insipid (lukewarm), and ineffective.

3. “Have no fear of what you are about to suffer”: Returning to our examination of the message to Smyrna, in stark contrast to the dismal state of affairs in our own day, the believers of the second era of the Church were entirely ready for the trial our Lord put before them. Given a similar mandate, it is doubtful that the Church of our own era would as a whole (making allowance for faithful individuals) be up to the challenge. Indeed, in eschatological terms we are on the threshold of the greatest failure of the Church, when, in the first half of the approaching Tribulation, there will occur an unprecedented falling away from the faith (the “Great Apostasy”). It is with a sense of awe and humility, then, that we should read these words of our Lord, given to a group of believers who for the most part lacked the great advantages we enjoy today. They were on the whole very poor, looked down upon by the pagan society, excluded from many important and critical activities because of their unwillingness to adopt idolatrous pagan practices. They were largely uneducated and suffered a dire lack of the resources for studying and teaching the Bible now at our fingertips. But they made the most of what they had. They put Jesus Christ first in their lives, even though there was a very real price to pay for doing so. They learned what they could, believed what they learned, and put it into practice faithfully and powerfully. For they did not lack either the Spirit or the Lord’s gracious oversight. Mixed with a powerful faith, this was a recipe for the greatest spiritual success, transcending exponentially the advantages we have today (but largely fail to take advantage of). So when our Lord tells the believers of Smyrna not to be afraid of the terrible suffering, trials and persecution which are coming their way, it is an acknowledgment on His part of their *ability* to bear up under these things in faith and perseverance (cf. 1Cor.10:13). It is also a reminder to us that without God, without a close and vibrant relationship with Him, no material advantage, no matter how impressive, will count for much when the hour of testing arrives, but that with God, we truly have nothing to fear from it:

So what shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but handed Him over for our sake, how will He not also graciously give us everything [we need] along with [that gift of] Him? Who will [dare to] bring charges against God’s elect? God is the One who is pronouncing [us] justified. Who is he that condemns [us]? Christ Jesus is the One who died [condemned in our place], and the One, moreover, who was raised from the dead [for us], who is [seated] at the right hand of God, who is also making petitions on our behalf. What will separate us from Christ’s love? Tribulation? Or privation? Or persecution? Or hunger? Or destitution? Or danger? Or violence? As it is written, “For your sake we are being put to death all day long. We were accounted as sheep for slaughter”. But in all such things we are decisively victorious *through Him* who loved us [enough to do what He did for us]. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angelic nor human authorities, neither things present nor things to come, neither heavenly powers, be they the highest [of the elect] or the lowest [of the fallen], nor any other created thing [on this earth] will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:31-39

4. “the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you”: The persecutions which await the believers of Smyrna run the full gamut of trouble. They would know isolation,

ostracism, and danger throughout most of their era. And at times (ten distinct “times”, as a matter of fact), this already high level of opposition was destined to overflow into an even more intense persecution that would bring on the imprisonment of many and the martyrdom of no small number. Given that our own generation is on the threshold of the most intense persecution of believers in world history (in spite of the fact that a great many of us now find ourselves in the deceptively calm “eye of the storm”, so to speak), a few points should be noted about persecution of an intensity so great that it actually leads to physical imprisonment (and even death). In particular, we ought to keep in mind that

1) there is a difference between deserved and undeserved punishment. Our Lord was terribly abused by the legal system of His day prior to His crucifixion, and He had lived a perfect life. His suffering in this regard redounds to His eternal glory, as it is the case with His apostles (Peter, Paul, and John, for example: Acts 12:1-19; Acts 21-26; Rev.1:9), and all His disciples who have ever been or will ever be imprisoned for the simple fact of believing in and following Him. So while we should indeed be ashamed to suffer imprisonment for wrongful conduct, we must be careful, should it ever be our lot to endure this particular trial for His sake, to distinguish in our hearts true suffering for Christ from punishment for crime, and not to be ashamed of shame endured for Him (1Pet.2:20):

If you are indeed *being reproached* on account of Christ’s name, you are truly blessed, for the Spirit of glory, even the Spirit of God, rests upon you. Now let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or a meddler, but if [anyone should suffer] as a Christian (i.e., a “person-belonging-to-Christ”), *let him not be ashamed of it*. Let him rather glorify God under that name.

1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4:14-16

By faith, Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, and chose instead to suffer maltreatment with the people of God rather than to enjoy the transitory pleasures of sin, because *he considered the reproach* [suffered on behalf] of Christ greater riches than the treasure vaults of Egypt. For he was looking to his reward. Hebrews 11:24-26

Since then we too [like the believers of chapter 11] have such a large audience of witnesses surrounding us [both men and angels], let us put off every hindrance – especially whatever sins habitually affect us – and run with endurance the race set before us, turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him, *endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despite*, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Keep in mind all the terrible opposition He endured against Himself at the hands of sinful men, so as not to grow sick at heart and give up.

Hebrews 12:1-3

2) there is no suffering or trial that comes into our life apart from the will and foreknowledge of God: Whatever our God allows to happen to us is for a reason, a reason that



always involves His glory and our greatest good (Rom.8:28). If we do experience suffering not on account of our own failings but because of our faithfulness, being persecuted by the world, we cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that our loving heavenly Father knows all about it (and knew all about it in eternity past: cf. Acts 9:16), so that nothing will ever befall us that is not part of His perfect plan:

Then Pilate said to Him, “Do you not speak to me? Don’t you know that I have the authority to release you and [that] I have the authority to crucify you?” Jesus replied to him, “You would not have authority over Me unless it had been given to you from above.”

John 19:10-11a

Should such an occasion arise, therefore, we ought to be even more careful than ever before to walk with Him in faith and trust, knowing, like Daniel’s friends, that He is able to deliver us, even from the hottest fiery furnace.

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Daniel 3:17-18 NIV

The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the [lions’] den. And when Daniel was lifted out of the den, no wound was found on him, because *he had trusted* in his God.

Daniel 6:23 NIV

3) “sharing in the sufferings of Christ” is a part of the normal Christian experience (Acts 5:41; 2Cor.1:5; Phil.3:10; Col.1:24; 1Pet.4:12-13): It is impossible for anyone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ to avoid opposition from the devil’s world. For every act of faith, every good decision, will be challenged by the current ruler of this *kosmos* (Jn.15:18-21).

Beloved, don’t be amazed at the fiery ordeal of testing you are now undergoing, as if something out of the ordinary were happening to you. But to the degree that you are [truly] participating in Christ’s sufferings, be joyful about it, so that at His glorious revelation, you may also rejoice with great gladness.

1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4:12-13

Furthermore, such testing is a necessary element in the building of faith, like the tempering of steel to make it stronger and to prove it genuine (1Pet.1:7). In fact, our glorification with our Lord is conditional upon our “suffering through” this life with faith intact:

And if we are God's children, then we are also His heirs, even fellow heirs of Christ – that is *if we have indeed suffered with Him* so that we might also be glorified together with Him.

Romans 8:17

Not everyone, it is true, is called upon to endure persecution, imprisonment, or martyrdom. Indeed, not every Christian would be able to bear up under such extreme stress and strain, giving a good witness and persevering in faith in the process. Our God knows all this, and many have no doubt for this very reason been spared trials of this sort, trials which may well have quenched their faith. At first blush, there may seem to be a negative incentive for developing the faith necessary to bear up under the sort of trials the believers of Smyrna had to endure. But, really, there is no higher compliment that our Lord can pay a believer than to demonstrate to the world and its current demonic ruler that one of His own truly does put Him before all else (cf. Job 1-2; Dan.9:23).

4) and, ultimately, all that we may suffer for Him only results in blessing and reward:

Without exceptional suffering, there can be no exceptional reward (see below under the “crown of life”). Besides that, it is important for us as Christians to keep in mind that we belong to the Lord, and that we are here for His use, at His disposal. We all try to maintain our health and the security of our lives for ourselves and our loved ones, and rightly so. But there may come a time when we are called upon to make sacrifices for our Lord which compromise these things. We need to be ready for that day, whether it comes for us or not. Professional soldiers do everything they can to minimize the potential for disaster on the day of battle, but, if they are worth their salt, do not shirk from danger even at the risk of and the actual loss of their lives when the situation demands it. As soldiers of Jesus Christ, we have to recognize that there may come a day when we too are called upon to likewise “cash in our chips”, so to speak, to offer up our fortunes, our freedom, even our lives, if so be that the will of God requires it. And we have this great comfort, an encouragement that does not pertain to those whose reward is in this life alone, to know that in losing our lives and all that we have in this world, we gain Christ and more blessing than we can now imagine in the coming world which will not pass away.

And whoever does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever has found his life will lose it, and the one who has lost his life for My sake will find it.

Matthew 10:38-39

5. “you will have tribulation for ten days”: The use of distinct units of time (especially the “day”) to represent longer periods of time in the Bible is a very common phenomenon, one which we have covered exhaustively elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the “ten days” mentioned here are ten distinct periods of persecution (or “tribulation”) predicted by our Lord for the era of Smyrna. Because the historical record for events relating to the Church during the first four centuries of

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<sup>20</sup> See especially part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Judgment, Restoration and Replacement”, section II.8, “Evidence for the “Seven Days” Interpretation”.

the Christian era is far from complete, these times of tribulation have been variously identified. However, sufficient evidence exists to pinpoint ten significant periods of persecution as having occurred, roughly speaking, during the reigns of the following Roman emperors.<sup>21</sup>

Domitian	81-96
Trajan	98-117
Marcus Aurelius	161-180
Septimus Severus	193-211
Maximinus	235-238
Decius	249-251
Valerian	253-260
Diocletian	284-305
Licinius	311-323
Julian	360-363

As this chart makes clear, with the exception of the final generation (i.e., from the death of Julian “the apostate” to end of the era in 442), these ten periods of testing were well spread out within the era of Smyrna, requiring the believers of these difficult centuries to remain constantly alert and sharp in their faith. Of the precise extent of these persecutions we know less than we should like to (some being better documented than others). For example, we would scarcely know about the troubles of believers in the east during Trajan’s time, but for the surviving correspondence of Pliny. The later persecutions of the believers in Gaul under Marcus Aurelius, on the other hand, are fairly well attested (cf. book V of Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History). A list of general characteristics, however, some or all of which may be inferred for each of the ten periods of persecution, would include:

- General prohibition on Christian faith, study, worship, and proselyting.
- Penalization of Christians for failure to foreswear Christ and/or sacrifice to pagan gods.
- Treating Christians as scapegoats in plagues and natural disasters.
- Accusing Christians before the legal system on the crime of being Christian.
- Imprisonment of those refusing to “repent” their faith in Christ.
- Execution of the most stalwart in their faith (martyrdom).

### **Christ’s Promised Rewards:**

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<sup>21</sup> In addition to our incomplete sources, some of these persecutions overlapped imperial reigns, with that of Septimius Severus continuing in North Africa under his successor Caracalla’s reign, and that of Marcus Aurelius extending into the reign of Commodus (wherein it eventually died down).

1. “Demonstrate faithfulness unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”: Both this promise of the “crown of life” and that of protection from “the second death” (see immediately below) are direct reflections on the part of our Lord of the difficulties and tribulation faced by the believers of the era of Smyrna. The “crown of life” is one of the three major echelons of reward given to Christians who persevere as such *in this life* (i.e., showing that the next life was more important to them than the present one, a key characteristic of spiritual maturity).<sup>22</sup> Along with the crowns of “righteousness” and “glory”, this is a distinct award given to recognize accomplishment by the believer in this life. The crown of “righteousness” (corresponding to the virtue of faith) goes to all believers who achieve spiritual maturity in this life (2Tim.4:8). The crown of “glory” is the highest award, bequeathed to all those who fulfill in time the ministries that God has assigned to them (corresponding to the virtue of love: 1Pet.5:4). The crown of “life”, corresponding to the virtue of hope, is bestowed upon believers who achieve and maintain spiritual growth even when seriously tested and opposed by the evil one, sometimes (as in the case of the believers of the era of Smyrna) in the fire of intense persecution (Jas.1:12). Our Lord’s promise of the “crown of life” associated with the virtue of “hope” should therefore come as no surprise, for it is only in the hope of the glories to come that the believer is able to put his or her walk with God above the things of this world, especially when the level of resistance intensifies (as it certainly did during the Smyrna era). Furthermore, although it is by no means a prerequisite for winning this award, true martyrdom is a guarantee of this crown, for valiantly facing death on Christ’s behalf is impossible without a mature and edified faith, which is in turn the result of *consistent spiritual growth*.

2. “The one who wins the victory shall not be hurt by the second death”: This promise is in many ways the “converse” to the “obverse” side of the coin above. For just as a courageous physical *death* in true martyrdom guarantees the crown of *life*, so also everyone who endures to the end with faith intact by keeping focused on eternal *life*, is assured of never coming into contact with *death* again. For us who remain faithful to Jesus Christ in this life, physical death really is only the beginning of eternal life, an unimaginably blessed and unending reality that nothing will ever be able to touch again once we make our exit from this world. For those, on the other hand, who persist in unbelief throughout the period of grace given them for decision (i.e., this short life on earth), their ultimate destiny is not life but death, another death, the “second death”, for nothing short of the word “death” can convey the terrible prospect of an eternity separated from God and all the blessings of the New Jerusalem, committed forever instead to the torment of the lake of fire (Is.66:22-24; Matt.3:11-12; 25:31-46; Mk.9:42-49; Rev.20:11-15). By “losing our lives” on this earth, that is, by putting Jesus first with all the difficult choices that entails, choices of faith and sacrifice for Him which seem nonsensical to the world, we gain our life, abundant eternal life with Him forever (Matt.16:24-28). By cravenly putting this life and its considerations first, however, and turning away from the Lord who died for all and calls us to the only true way of life, unbelievers make the poorest bargain imaginable, trading short-lived dust and rubbish for the incomprehensible wealth of an eternity with Jesus

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<sup>22</sup> The doctrine of crowns is covered in detail in lesson #18 of the Peter’s Epistles series and in part 6 of Coming Tribulation, section I.7, “The Judgment and Reward of the Church”.

Christ, selecting instead permanent residence in the lake of fire. As a popular phrase rightly has it, “born twice, die once; born once, die twice”. This is in fact the true situation for all believers vis-à-vis unbelievers, regardless of their level of spiritual growth. How will it not then be even more true for believers who, like many of those of the era of Smyrna, have made the ultimate sacrifice for Jesus Christ?

### Revelation 2:12-17:

(12) And to the angel of the church in **Pergamum** write: "This is what the One who has the sharp two-edged sword says. (13) I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you are holding fast to My Name. And you did not abandon your faith in Me in the days of Antipas my faithful witness who was killed among you where Satan dwells. (14) But I have a few things against you, namely that you have there those who practice the teachings of Balaam, who instructed Balak how to throw a stumbling block in front of the Israelites, to eat food sacrificed to idols and commit sexually immoral acts. (15) So you also have those who practice the teachings of the Nicolaitans in a similar way. (16) So repent. And if you do not, I am going to come to you quickly and make war on them with the sword from My mouth. (17) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who wins the victory, I will give to him the hidden manna, and I will give to him a white stone, and on it will be written a new name which no one knows except the one who receives it."

### **3. Pergamum: “The Era of Accommodation” (442 to 802 = 360 years)**

The name Pergamum was an extremely famous one in antiquity. In addition to designating this town situated on a mountain side on the border between the Asian territories of Mysia and Lydia, Pergamum was also the name of the citadel (or acropolis) of the fabled city of Troy. The choice of cities for this third era of the Church, the “era of accommodation”, is thus no accident. Pergamum represents the first era in a three era progression whereby the Church would see its organizational structure and leadership spiritually compromised and sapped of anything resembling true Christianity, to such a degree, moreover, that in the sixth era of the Church, the era of Philadelphia, the true Church would have to separate completely from the “church visible” in order to survive (i.e., the Reformation). To return to the image of Troy evoked by the name Pergamum, that famous city fell “from within” after being deceptively penetrated (by the legendary “Trojan horse”). This image of “the enemy within the gates” is indeed the one which arises from a careful inspection of the treatment of Pergamum given here by our Lord. For while the Ephesian era had seen the devil’s anti-church entirely excluded from the true Church, and while the era of Smyrna had seen the devil’s anti-church powerfully battering away at the true Church from without (in the form of the state-sponsored pagan persecutions), in the era of Pergamum we see for the first time the enemy actually “within the gates” of the true Church, if only incipiently so: “you *have there* those who practice the teachings of Balaam”; “you *also have* those who practice the teachings of the Nicolaitans”. The description of these non-Christian elements as being wrongfully included in and tolerated by the Pergamene era believers

makes it clear that some accommodation with the forces of evil has in the form of the devil's anti-church taken place *within* the visible church.

Of course, this description is giving us an overall picture of the way in which the era of Pergamum would develop. And we are right to assume (based upon the worsening situation in the next era, that of Thyatira) that what is being described here is the beginning of a trend toward a growing accommodation of false elements within the Church which was to gather momentum during these 360 years.

But how did this dangerous state of affairs come to pass? In the previous era, that of Smyrna, our Lord had not a single negative remark or reproof for these gallant believers who withstood the fire of persecution. Writing in the midst of their troubles, during the persecution under emperor Septimus Severus at the end of the second century, Tertullian upbraided the pagan persecutors with the following words: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed*", and, ever since, "the blood of the martyrs as the seed of the Church" has been the common historical judgment upon this era's contribution to the Church's growth.<sup>23</sup>

But while oppression brought tempering, validation and true growth, the ultimate "success" of the Church visible at the end of the era of Smyrna began, sadly, a process of corruption that would eventually result in the complete spiritual death of the organization which had once been synonymous with the true Church (by the time of the era of Sardis). The three eras of Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis, therefore, form a regrettable progression of the growing influence of the devil's anti-church *from within* the true Church until, at the end of the day, there is nothing left but a remnant which must escape for the true Church to be preserved (i.e., the Reformation represented by Philadelphia). As in the famous Talmudic story of the *golem*, a tale that correctly describes the process of infiltrating evil in general, the devil's pseudo-Christian elements address the believers of the Church of Pergamum as "my masters" (begging tolerance and inclusion), the believers of the Church of Thyatira as "my brothers" (demanding equality once included), and the believers of the Church of Sardis as "my slaves" (dictating obedience having gained control after admittance), in proportion to the growing power and influence they amass.

During the previous era of Smyrna, the hostility of the Roman government and of the pagan society at large had enforced a certain amount of unity upon believers in spite of their geographic and cultural differences (most especially to be seen in the differences between the Greek and the Roman halves of the empire, in terms of geography, cultural outlook, and linguistic differences). This solidarity can be seen, for example, in the united front the Church presented to the heresies of that day as manifest particularly in the first three "ecumenical councils" of the Church. These were held respectively at Nicea in 325 (against Arianism), at Constantinople in 381 (against

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<sup>23</sup> From paragraph 50 of his *Apologeticum*: *Plures effcimus quotiens metimur a vobis; semen est sanguis Christianorum.*

Apollinarianism), and at Ephesus in 431 (against Nestorianism). The very fact of these councils, wherein representatives from all of Christendom attended (and no individual, group or specific church had priority) tells us that the unity of the Church during that previous era of Smyrna flowed *from below* (i.e., from individual believers and their chosen leaders in individual churches). For though, it is true, these represent the time when the Church had “won out” and was in the process of becoming a state church, there was nonetheless as yet no imperial papacy, no worldwide, monolithic super-organization, steeped in erroneous tradition (and having “institutionalized” gross error). Not that the believers of the era of Smyrna were perfect, but we can say that, by and large, Christians of that era pulled together *in the right direction*, and that this wonderful phenomenon was due at least in part to the fact that they still essentially saw themselves to be a faithful few navigating a dangerous sea of opposition from all quarters (rather than the dominant, state sponsored majority into which they were in the process of developing).<sup>24</sup>

By the time we come to the era of Pergamum, however, the situation has changed radically, and the discernible effects upon the Church universal are equally earth-shaking. For Pergamum marks the end of the transition of Christianity from an unknown quantity (as far as the civil authority of that time, the Roman empire, was concerned) to the established state religion (by way, as we have said, of nearly three centuries of persecution), and from persecution of the faithful to a situation where many would wish to join the Christian ranks for political and social reasons rather than from a deep and abiding faith in Christ (making the presence in the Church of an element of pseudo-believers inevitable). Thus the Church’s “victory” during the fourth century was at least a mixed blessing, for the political alliance between Church and state begun under Constantine was indeed a “fateful union” as Walker has so eloquently described it, a bargain with the devil in many respects, because it guaranteed that politics and state concerns would at least influence (and sometimes even come to dominate) the administration, organization, and even the faith and practice of the Church (witness the state interference in the first ecumenical council at Nicea, for example).<sup>25</sup>

The diminution of imperial power under the pressure of the barbarian invasions of the fifth century reduced this threat considerably and presented the Church universal of the era Pergamum with the opportunity to flourish spiritually without being fatally compromised by secular involvement. That opportunity, however, was not fully grasped, for the growing centralization, politicization, and bureaucratization of church administration springing out of Constantine’s adoption of Christianity was an element not easily expelled and a trend not easily reversed. Political pseudo-Christianity proved to be both a virulent, resistant strain on the one

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<sup>24</sup> The troubles which both the eastern and western halves of the empire suffered during the fourth and fifth centuries, especially the barbarian invasions, undoubtedly contributed to this perspective.

<sup>25</sup> Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church (3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed.: New York 1970) 102.

hand, and a seductive and seemingly necessary development on the other, as the power-vacuum left by the fall of the western empire was gradually filled up by the church at Rome.

It is indeed in the church at Rome where we see this trend towards secularism most clearly manifested, though it was by no means confined to Rome (to one extent or another, all of the important sees succumbed). But it was at Rome where, over the course of this and the two following eras of the Church, a large local church gradually metastasized into a worldwide organization of unprecedented political power. It is important to note on this score that in historical terms as the *political* power of Rome increased, its spiritual purity decreased proportionally (a reminder to true disciples of Jesus Christ everywhere that we are here to serve Him, not to dabble in the devil's world-system).

Volumes could be (and have been) written charting the political rise and spiritual decline of the Roman church. More important for our purposes here is to consider briefly the effects of the historical developments alluded to above on the era of Pergamum, the period which marks the inception of this dangerous trend toward the bureaucratic centralization of power and the eventual imposition upon true believers of a pseudo-faith (leading to their separation from this dead edifice during the era of Philadelphia). In general terms, the combination of factors discussed above (i.e., the overall unity of the community of faith, the radical turn of events under state-sponsorship, the power-vacuum of the fifth century and following, and the inclusion of lukewarm and even pseudo-elements within the visible Church) all contributed to the secularization of the visible church. This secularization, seen by many historians as the key element in its political success, was also the major factor in its eventual spiritual decline.

Centralization of power and homogeneity of bureaucracy certainly have their advantages in the abstract: this “one-two punch” of united effort and the means to direct it are the hallmarks of every effective organization – in worldly, political terms, that is. The creation in particular of the Roman “super-church” in the west was, again from a secular point of view, a giant leap forward in the provision of worldly security for the Christian faith, an understandable if spiritually lamentable objective, especially given the growing threat and conquests of Islam in the final two centuries of the Pergamene era. With the rise of the papacy (in the likes of Leo the Great, 440-461, and Gregory the Great, 590-640), the regimentation of the priesthood, the concentration of doctrinal and administrative authority in the Roman see, Rome (and, though less successful in secular terms, the eastern sees as well) did become a true “Pergamum”, a citadel which no individual or group with politico-military aspirations could afford to ignore. And in light of the experiences of the previous era of wide-spread persecution, the desire to provide such a “fortress” against future attacks is understandable. The problem with such thinking, however, is that, on the contrary, *it is God* who is our mighty fortress (Ps.46:1), and *it is the Lord Jesus Christ* who is our Rock (1Cor.10:4; cf. Ps.127:1). This world “lies in the lap” of the evil one at present (1Jn.5:19), so that whenever and wherever Christians have tried to play the devil's game of power politics, they have inevitably been subverted. True security in this world rests not in



what our own hands can provide, but in remembering that beneath us are His everlasting arms (Deut.33:27), and in trusting Him to provide for our protection (1Jn.5:18).<sup>26</sup>

The development of the centralized church provided, as we have said, some true advantages, as well as some which were only apparent (in particular this false sense of “security”): It afforded a united front against heresy, an apparatus for training clergy, a mechanism for producing and disseminating the scriptures, and a platform for evangelism. But even within these categories of “advantage” lay the seeds of trouble. Once false doctrine has infected a “protecting organization”, strengths can easily become weaknesses. Those teaching truth contrary to the accepted false principles find themselves attacked as “heretics” (witness the intense opposition to the Reformation). Once political considerations become paramount, those selected for elite positions in the clergy are most likely not those whom God has chosen to instruct His flock (but rather a political verses a spiritual priesthood). Once the game of power-politics dominates all other considerations, even the scriptures themselves can be tampered with or discounted (witness the false emphasis sometimes placed on “oral tradition” versus the scripture, and the “canonization” of the Apocrypha). And once what is being evangelized is not the gospel of Jesus Christ, but a pseudo-religion of salvation by works (e.g., works of supererogation, indulgences, penance, etc.), then the words of our Lord have come to fulfillment in the case of this super-church as well:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you scour land and sea to make a single convert, and when he converts, you make him twice the reprobate you are.”  
Matthew 23:15

Then Jesus called [the disciples] over and said to them, “You know that the men of repute who rule over the gentiles lord it over them mightily, and that their prominent men exercise forceful authority over them. But it is not this way with you. Rather, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be everyone’s slave. For the Son of Man also did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom on behalf of many.”  
Mark 10:42-45

All of these abuses, of course, did not come to fruition during the era of Pergamum (this would take two more eras to fully transpire), but the root of the problem is clearly to be found here. So while this centralizing, bureaucratizing trend may be understandable in the context of persecutions past and in the dangerous world of that earlier time, it nevertheless turned out to be a poor bargain (given what later occurred as a result). On the one hand, such a concentration of political power was never meant to be for the Church as we can plainly see from the latitude the apostles gave to their charges (obvious from the Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine epistles), exercising much more of a circumspect control, and one founded more upon moral authority than

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<sup>26</sup> See part 4 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Satan’s World System”.

the arbitrary power which the individual sees and the papacy would soon come to wield.<sup>27</sup> And these men were the Lamb's very own apostles! On the other hand, the policy of concentrating authority in the hands of only a few central churches, and, eventually, largely in only one church was also destined to backfire badly. Just as the original Pergamum, the citadel of Troy, was finally captured in spite of its seeming impregnability – because it fell from within – so the development of this monolithic church structure, while it might be effective in protecting itself from external threats, would soon be infiltrated (Pergamum), compromised (Thyatira), and dominated (Sardis) by the non-Christian elements which, ironically, it had let in – like a Trojan horse – in order to keep the overtly hostile forces out. Jesus had warned us all about the dangers of such “leaven”:

And [Jesus] gave orders to [the disciples], saying, “Beware! Be on guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod (i.e., the Sadducees: cf. Matt.16:6)”.  
Mark 8:15

The “leaven”, of course, is not literal (as the disciples originally construe it: Matt.16:7-12; Mk.8:16-21), but refers rather to false doctrines (Matt.16:12) and, in the case of the Pharisees at any rate, also to their hypocrisy (Lk.12:1). Now simplistically put, during our Lord's day the Pharisees were the party of legalistic, traditional religion, “teaching as [if they were God's] doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt.15:9). The Sadducees, on the other hand, were essentially secularists whose relationship to God was one entirely consisting of “lip-service” (cf. Is.29:13). They were much more concerned with political power than religion (which explains the reference to Herod; cf. Matt.22:23-34). In the case of the inchoate “fortress church” of Pergamum, *both* of these characteristics can be seen in a developmental stage: on the one hand, the adoption of pagan trappings and the creation of a system of impressive (though unbiblical) ritual and paraphernalia is one and the same with the Pharisees' erroneous and onerous interpretations of the Law of Moses; on the other hand, the construction of a one-world church with a highly centralized and domineering leadership would fulfill the Sadducees' fondest hopes. The main difference between the Pharisee-Sadducee antagonism and the formation of the Roman super-church, however, is plain to see. For while the Pharisees and Sadducees were bitter enemies (cf. Acts 23:6-10), *both* trends worked in tandem in the development (or corruption) of the church visible beginning in the era of Pergamum. In fact, these two trends served to reinforce each other. For the creation of a “palatable” and “attractive” Pharisaic system of worship for the

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<sup>27</sup> In terms of organization, Paul's instructions to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:13-35), and to Titus concerning the situation on Crete (cf. Tit.1:5-9), John's instructions to Gaius (3Jn.1:3-10), and Peter's instructions to elders in general (1Pet.5:1-4) all indicate a large degree of local autonomy in individual churches, even while the supremely authoritative administrative gift of apostleship was still functioning. These and other passages strongly suggest that while there is no biblically ordained system of local church organizational structure (beyond the presence of gifted men to administer and teach), the existence of extra-local super-organizations is not a biblical development. This subject will be covered in detail in part 6 of Bible Basics: "Ecclesiology".

sake of accommodation and protection required a powerful, centralized Sadducean authority to bulldoze opposition and enforce uniformity.

Inevitably then, the quest for Sadducean political power and influence on the part of false and negative elements within the church visible (called in Pergamum's case practitioners of the teachings of Balam and Balak, and of the "Nicolaitans"; see the chart above under Smyrna) had much to do with generating this overall policy of Pharisaic "accommodation", which is the signal characteristic of the era of Pergamum as we have mentioned above (cf. Hos.4:7). And the terrible results of this policy are extremely relevant for us to consider today. For in order to expand to the utmost, the church had to be as inclusive as possible. Numbers now became the name of the game, and quantity (i.e., gathering within its ranks as many as possible who would at least give nominal obedience to the church) became a much more pressing concern than quality (i.e., instead of dedicating itself to serving the spiritual growth of genuine, committed Christians). No longer was "what the Bible says" the number one concern, but rather, "what will contribute to growth".

As a result, we may trace to this era the initial development of most if not all of the pagan and superstitious practices which increasingly came to characterize the medieval church. The practice of infant baptism, the carefully defined hierarchy of rank, the evolution of an elite priesthood with all its fantastic trappings, the ritual of confession, the use of statues, the construction of massive and elaborate churches, the worship of other human beings in the guise of saints, the use of votaries, the creation of the complex of festivals, the system of penance and works, the use of ecumenical councils to squelch legitimate diversity (beginning with Chalcedon in 451), etc., etc., were all egregious developments from the point of view of biblical Christianity, precisely because they helped to institute what amounts to a system of pagan religious cultic activity (invested with a Pharisee-like patina of dogma) having absolutely nothing to do with the One true God or with salvation through His Son Jesus Christ.

For quondam pagans, on the other hand, this stress upon such practices and paraphernalia was incredibly comforting. When Christian priests looked and behaved like pagan priests, when Christian saints resembled pagan gods and goddesses, when Christian statuary became like unto those in pagan temples, and when Christian rituals, practices and festivals came to be almost indistinguishable from their pagan counterparts, surface conversion and allegiance became an easy matter – but at the cost of much genuine belief and true spiritual growth. What the "church" gained in being "accommodating" in order to include large numbers of those for whom Christianity was at best an after-thought, she lost by diluting her original essence, and eventually found herself subverted by the very forces against which she had thought to protect herself with these policies. In the era of Pergamum, these problems were only incipient, but her overly generous toleration of these evil, non-Christian influences began a trend which would eventually shatter and transform the Church visible.

The problem with a fully integrated and unified Church/church is that such an organization, being run by imperfect human beings, may well have the effect of spreading good usage and

prohibiting heresy, but it can also have, and inevitably *must* have (again, because those who run it are imperfect, and imperfection tends to breed more imperfection over time) have the opposite effect eventually, that is, of spreading heresy and prohibiting good usage. This dual trend towards centralization and accommodation would thus have, by the time of the late middle ages, the same effect that the tower of Babel was intended to have in ancient times: the squelching of all *true* faith and practice in the name of a unity that was becoming increasingly anti-God in fact. That it took so many centuries for the rot to progress to the point of making the splitting off of (most if not all) true believers (necessary for the perpetuation of the faith) is a testimony to the faith and dedication of so many Christians who continued to labor in the only vineyard they knew in spite of ever increasing problems.

### **Christ's Self-description:**

1. "This is what the One who has the sharp two-edged sword says": The image of the sword here stresses the need to make sharp distinctions between right and wrong, between true believers and phony ones:

Do not think that I have come to hurl peace upon the earth. I have not come to hurl peace upon the earth but a sword [of divisiveness]. For I have come to divide, [so that] 'a man [will be set] against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; [with the result that] a man's enemies will be the members of his own household' (cf. Micah 7:6). Whoever loves his father or mother above Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves his son or daughter above Me is not worthy of Me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever has found his life will lose it, and the one who has lost his life for My sake will find it.  
Matthew 10:34-39

The "sharp two-edged sword" of Revelation 2:12 is to be understood in similar terms. Toleration of and accommodation with those minions of the evil one who had infiltrated the church was, as we have made the case, a recipe for disaster. The Ruler of the Church thus describes Himself here in terms that remind us of His own policy of non-toleration of evil and non-accommodation with those who compromise the truth. We are to choose for Him without reservation or we are not worthy of Him (as the Matthew passage above makes clear). Later in the message to Pergamum, this impression is strengthened as the offending believers are told by our Lord to repent (of their attitude and practice of toleration of evil and compromising the truth), and also told that, if they do not take the admittedly hard decision to force out the cancerous elements in their midst, He Himself will take matters into His own hands. In the same way, Paul had to deal harshly with the Corinthian church when they in a very similar way out of fear and a misplaced sense of tolerance failed to take action when confronted with gross sinfulness (1Cor.5:1-13): "Those outside [the Church] God will judge. [You] expel the wicked one from among you! (quote from Deut.17:7)". The necessity for believers to separate themselves from evil and evil-doers is at the heart of experiential sanctification, the walk of righteousness to which we have all been called (1Cor.5:8; 5:11; 2Cor.7:1; Heb.12:14). By failing to separate ourselves from those who do wrong, we risk being drawn into their error as well:

Do not be deceived: bad associations corrupt good behavior.  
1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:33

### Christ's Particular Message:

1. “you dwell, where Satan’s throne is”: The devil’s “throne”, as we have seen in significant detail in the Satanic Rebellion series, is the earth, the kingdom which he wrested from Adam in the temptation and fall of Genesis chapter three. Yes, the believers of Pergamum, and all believers since the fall and up until the establishment of Christ’s millennial kingdom, do indeed dwell in the enemy territory of the kingdom of darkness, at least physically. *Spiritually*, however, we have been transferred into the “kingdom of God’s beloved Son” (Col.1:13). Therefore the adoption of a “fortress mentality” is entirely the wrong point of view for us who have chosen to follow the victorious King. This is even more the case given that the days of intense, organized, state persecution are by the era of Pergamum temporarily past (they would resurface in part from time to time, such as in the days of the Philadelphian era, but the next universal persecution of the Church will not occur until the Tribulation’s second half).<sup>28</sup> The enemy has already been defeated in principle (Lk.10:18; Jn.16:33; Heb.2:14-15), and the day of consummate victory is imminent (Rev.19:11-21). The Church is therefore not here to build “bunkers”, as the name Pergamum suggests the believers of that era had, but rather to adopt an offensive mind-set, marching with the Lamb wherever He advances (Rev.14:4), and picking up our cross to follow Him (Matt.10:38; 16:24). From a purely secular point of view, the pursuit of political power and strength is somewhat understandable in the context of Pergamum. In her days, after all, the western Roman empire came crashing to the ground and what had been Roman territory was subjected to successive waves of barbarian invasions and regimes. From the spiritual point of view, however, the Church’s survival and success never had a thing to do with the Roman empire, originally hostile, then later “sponsoring” the church visible. Our warfare is not an earthly one – we do not struggle against flesh and blood (Eph.6:12). But in the service and in the power of our Lord, as long as God is our refuge, we need no earthly citadel (Ps.46:1), and no fortification of the evil one which can stand against His Church:

And I tell you that you are Peter [the little rock] (*petros*), and upon this [mighty] Rock (*petra*, i.e., upon Christ Himself; cf. 1Cor.3:11) I shall build My Church (cf. Dan.2:44-45), **and the gates** (i.e., the fortified defenses) **of Hades** (i.e., the devil’s kingdom) **will not** [be able to] **resist it**.  
Matthew 16:18

2. “And you are holding fast to My Name and you did not abandon your faith in Me in the days of Antipas my faithful witness who was killed among you where Satan dwells”:

Despite the fact that the Pergamene believers have taken the unwise course of tolerating evil in their midst, they themselves are still holding onto their faith. It will take two further eras until

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<sup>28</sup> See part 4 of this series, “The Great Tribulation”.

faith within the church visible is largely quenched, leaving it “dead” (in Sardis: Rev.3:1). The believers of Pergamum are praised not only for faith present, but also for preserving their faith in past persecutions (the reference to Antipas). Beyond this passage, nothing is known historically of this Antipas, but that does not preclude the existence of such a martyr in John’s day, nor does it preclude this “Antipas” from also being a symbolic reference to past martyrdom, either sporadic persecution at the beginning of the Pergamene era, or even further back in the previous era of Smyrna (the name Antipas meaning either “in place of all” or “against all”, referring to the select and substitutionary nature of martyrdom in the first instance, or to its steadfast resistance to all compromise and satanic opposition in the second). The key word here is “past” – the persecution which resulted in the martyrdom of Antipas is over, and the Church in the era of Pergamum has now passed into a much less precarious position from a secular, worldly point of view. Yet in spite of the change of circumstances, now that the times were more conducive to spiritual advance and a spiritually offensive mind-set, the best that can be said for Pergamum is that 1) they defended effectively in the past, and 2) they are still “holding on” in the midst of the devil’s world (“where Satan dwells”). This positive accomplishment is not to be underappreciated, and there is no equivocation or sarcasm in our Lord’s praise here. But the lack of any mention of offensive activity (i.e., “deeds”; contrast Ephesus: Rev.2:2; Thyatira: Rev.2:19; Philadelphia: 3:8) suggests that the interpretation of Pergamum as an era characterized by a “bunker-mentality” is correct.<sup>29</sup> Antipas is by now “old business”. What this verse says, is, in essence, “true, you have a good heritage, and you are to be commended for it, but that does not excuse what you are doing (and not doing) now”.

3. “But I have a few things against you, namely that you have there those who practice the teachings of Balaam, who instructed Balak how to throw a stumbling block in front of the Israelites, to eat food sacrificed to idols and commit sexually immoral acts. So you also have those who practice the teachings of the Nicolaitans in a similar way”:

The first thing to notice about our Lord’s indictment of the Pergamene era Church is that “those who practice the teachings of Balaam” and “those who practice the teachings of the Nicolaitans” are one and the same. This Church “has” them both, and the reference to the Nicolaitans is added by way of explanation (i.e., “*so* [in an analogous way] you also have ... the Nicolaitans”). Despite the fact that the identity of the historical Nicolaitans is shrouded in speculation, as we saw in our discussion of false teachers in Ephesus and in our overall assessment of satanic attacks throughout the seven eras (given under Smyrna), all of these terms refer essentially to the devil’s “anti-Church” (and its relationship to the true Church). As mentioned above, the fact that the Pergamene Church “has” these two groups (synonymous in terms of personnel), signals us

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<sup>29</sup> It is true that no mention of “deeds” (Greek: *erga*) is to be found in the case of Smyrna either (the only other church with a largely positive report), but then Smyrna is the one era wherein persecution and martyrdom were the rule – these were her works, so that our Lord says not “I know your deeds”, but “I know your *tribulation*” (Greek: *thlipsis*, the root word of *the* Tribulation) and your poverty, *but you are rich*. (Rev.2:9).

that, unlike the previous two eras, the forces of the evil one have gained a foothold within Pergamum.

That having been said, we can also garner from this dual description something about the operations of this growing element of unbelievers in the earthly assembly of Christ. These “Nicolaitans” are doing what “Balak did on advice from Balaam”. The word “Nicolaitan”, is composed, as we saw above, from Greek words meaning “people” (*laos*) and “conquer” (*nikao*), representing (as it did in the case of Ephesus) the pronouncement by false teachers of the priority of popular opinion over biblical truth.<sup>30</sup> That is to say, the use of this name by our Lord highlights once more the fact of accommodation which we have identified as the leading characteristic of the era of Pergamum (i.e., the acceptance of false practices, false persons, and false beliefs in an effort to be inclusive for the sake of security on the one hand and political power on the other). The main *difference* between the Nicolaitans here and those of Ephesus is that in the era of Pergamum they are *inside* the visible church, promoting their anti-Church agenda from positions of leadership and authority within the framework of organized Christianity.

The means by which these false teachers and their supporters pursued their ends (eventually gaining complete dominance of church organization in the era of Sardis) is explained by the reference here to Balaam and Balak. Balak, it will be remembered, was the Moabite king who desired to destroy the Israelites as they were about to enter the land (Numbers chapters 22-26). To this end, he hired Balaam, a famous enchanter, to curse them. Balaam, unable to bring about Israel’s destruction from without because of the Lord’s overruling will, instead provided Balak with a strategy for destroying Israel from within. This strategy was, in its essence, to persuade individual Israelites to become involved in Moabite idolatry, with Moabite women providing the attraction for this destructive course. In this way, carnal seduction would lead to spiritual infidelity as well, and Israel, separated from her God by her own godless actions, would be easy prey for Moab (or any enemy).

The analogy with the Church of Pergamum is not difficult to see. The Nicolaitans, having infiltrated into the fellowship of the true Church, are adopting a similar strategy to the one conceived of by Balaam. Through deceptive and enticing false teaching they are bringing into a church, now prone to accommodation, pagan practices of the heathen religion (discussed above). The resulting adoption of the paraphernalia of the ancient world’s heathen cults (which religion Christianity was still in the process of replacing), had the worldly advantages of encouraging and welcoming former pagans into the church visible by making it a much more friendly and “accommodating” place (especially for those who might be poor pagans but who were no Christians). And on the other hand, this toleration and eventual embracing of pagan festivals, forms, and beliefs also provided an element of security by coopting and neutralizing the

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Balaam’s name admits of a similar etymology, for it is possible to see in the two elements of which it is built, the Hebrew words for “lord” (*Baal*) and “people” (*‘am*), yielding a potential meaning of “the people are lord [or even God]”.

objections of potential and actual pro forma converts. From a spiritual point of view, however, this trend towards celebrating pagan festivals, worshiping statues and demigods, and replacing the truth of scripture with man-made principles, was, in effect, a new sort of “legalism” (cf. Matt.15:9; 1Cor.10:19-21; 12:2; Gal.3:3; 4:9-10; Col.2:17; Heb.8:5; 10:1). For it was made more palatable to the true Christians within the Church by endowing these pagan elements with a patina of Jewish temple ritual (e.g., “temples”, “priests”, “feasts” and more exist in both Jewish and pagan liturgy). That such a “marketing” strategy was wrong in principle (no matter how successful it might prove) is clear:

But at that time [when you were unbelievers], not knowing God, you were slaves to those things which are by nature not [truly] gods. But now, having recognized God, or, as it really is, having been recognized *by God*, how is it that you are turning back to these weak and impoverished **false [pagan] principles** which you wish to serve as slaves all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that I may perhaps have spent my labor on you in vain.

Galatians 4:8-11

So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ. Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and the adoration of angels, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] produces the growth that God has given. If you have died with Christ to these **false [pagan] principles** [belonging to] this world, why are you letting yourselves be [wrongly] indoctrinated as if your life were of this world? In accordance with the commandments and teaching of [mere] men [these false teachers tell you] “Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!”, even though [we know] that all these [are only] things [which] decay with use.

Colossians 2:16-22

Don't let yourselves be mismatched together in the yoke with unbelievers. For what partnership does righteousness have with immorality, or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement is there between Christ and Belial (i.e., the devil)? What agreement is there between God's temple and idols? For we are the temple of the Living God, just as God has said.

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:14-16a

This disastrous path of compromising truth in order to expand and secure the “organization” would eventually be the spiritual death of much of the original organization of the church-visible. For to compromise God's truth for temporal advantage is the essence of “spiritual idolatry” and “spiritual unfaithfulness”, a persistent failing of Israel throughout her long history, and one which always had dire consequences (Hos.4:12 & 5:4).



So where intense, external pressure had been ineffective in our adversary's attempts to corrupt the Church in the time of Smyrna, internal temptation (specifically, the desire for security apart from God) proved to be highly effective in the time of Pergamum. The notion that one can dabble in things diametrically opposed to God's truth and "still be a good Christian" was a fallacy every bit as false then as it is today (and every bit as dangerous). It was no more acceptable or salutary for the Church of Pergamum's day to tolerate unbelievers and adopt unbelieving ways than it was for Israel to intermarry with the Moabites and adopt their pagan idolatry. For the progression is the same in both instances. Spiritual unfaithfulness follows wrongful association (1Cor.15:33; cf. Prov.13:20; 22:24-25; 2Cor.6:14): "[Balaam] ... instructed Balak how to throw a stumbling block in front of the Israelites, **1**) to eat food sacrificed to idols and **2**) (i.e., "then") to commit sexually immoral acts". Thus the intermarriage with pagans which precedes the involvement in idolatry in the historical example of the Moabites and Baal-Peor used here by our Lord is exactly parallel to the situation in which the believers of the era of Pergamum find themselves: tempted and pressured to make common cause with pagans in adopting terrible practices, they thereby begin the process of spiritual unfaithfulness which would prove so devastating over the next two Church eras.

4. "So repent. And if you do not, I am going to come to you quickly and make war on them with the sword from My mouth": This statement is addressed to the entire Pergamene Church ("I am going to come *to you*"). Therefore, the compromising of truth and the accommodating and associating with pagan practitioners mentioned here is a problem for everyone in the Church, one requiring a true change of heart and mind and the deeds that flow therefrom (i.e., genuine repentance), even though it is true that the sword (of punishment) will descend only upon those evildoers in the Church's midst (i.e., "[I am going to] make war *on them*"). The sword mentioned here, it will be recalled, is visible to John, flashing forth from our Lord's mouth as He delivers this message (Rev.1:16), and this is also the sword with which He will destroy His enemies at His return (Rev.19:15; 19:21; cf. Is.49:2; 2Thes.2:8). But in addition to the clear threat of divine punishment for failure to comply, there is another important significance of the sword, mentioned now for the second time in the message to Pergamum (cf. v.12). For in addition to being an instrument of destruction, the sword is also an instrument of division and separation (as we saw above: Matt.10:32-39), the very division and separation (between good and evil) which the Pergamene era Church has failed to practice, and which is being demanded here by our Lord (cf. Heb.4:12).

God is holy, and all who would follow Him in truth must sanctify themselves unto Him, separating from what is impure, cleaving instead to what is good and righteous and honorable (Phil.4:8; 1Pet.1:15-16; cf. Deut.32:51). That does not mean that believers are to turn their backs on the world, for it is clearly impossible for us to live anywhere else (1Cor.5:9-11). But it does mean that we are to be careful and prudent in our choice of close fellowship and association, especially when it comes to the gathering of ourselves together for the worship of God. We must be true to His principles of truth, trust in Him that such is the correct course of action, and not allow ourselves to be tempted or bullied into compromising what we know to be right for the sake of those who do not really love Him in truth.

## Christ's Promised Rewards:

1. "To the one who wins the victory, I will give to him the hidden manna, and I will give to him a white stone, and on it will be written a new name which no one knows except the one who receives it": The theme of the rightness of choosing for and following God wholeheartedly and without reservation in spite of the worldly pressures to compromise and accommodate is continued in Christ's promise of these specific rewards to the Pergamene Church.

**The Hidden Manna:** The "hidden manna" represents our complete and open fellowship with Jesus Christ face to face on that blessed coming day. Manna, as every Bible reading Christian knows, was the divinely provided "bread" that sustained the Israelites for forty years in the midst of a barren desert (Ex.16). And we know that God's provision of the manna-bread was specifically designed to teach the Israelites that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds forth from the mouth of God" (Deut.8:3; cf. Matt.4:4; 6:11; Lk.11:3). The "manna" in the context here is described by our Lord as "hidden" because we are not presently experiencing this promised personal and visible fellowship with the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ (Jn.6:25-58; cf. Matt.26:26). For though we love Him here in time, we cannot yet see Him in the flesh (1Pet.1:8; 1Cor.13:12; Heb.11:27; cf. Jn.20:29), but on that blessed day to come, we who overcome through faith in Him will experience forever the incalculable joy of sweet fellowship with the Lord who bought us:

In complete truth I tell you, he who believes has eternal life. *"I am"* the Bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. *This* is the bread which comes down from heaven (i.e., Christ Himself; cf. Matt.16:18 *"this Rock"*; Jn.2:19; *"this temple"*), that anyone who eats of it may also not die. *"I am"* the Living Bread who has come down from heaven. Whoever eats of *this* Bread will live forever, and, moreover, the bread which I will give is My flesh, [which is about to be offered] on behalf of the life of the world.

John 6:47-51

In the context here, this true manna which we shall "eat" and with which we shall be satisfied forever, is also set in contrast with the "eating" of "sacrifices to idols" leading to the "sexually immoral acts" encouraged by the "Nicolaitans". For the wholesome fellowship with Jesus Christ represented by the true "eating" of the Bread of Life here in time, the taking in of the words of God about the Word of God, is completely antithetical to the false fellowship and false indulgence of which the Pergamene era Church is accused by our Lord. Rather than seeking safety, sustenance and refreshment in secular compromise and accommodation with unbelievers (as they did), we should turn instead to the One who is truly able to satisfy us here and now with the truth (because He *is* the Truth), and who will satisfy us with the promised hidden manna in eternity, everlasting personal fellowship with the One who died on our behalf.

The cup of blessing which we bless – is it not fellowship in the blood of Christ? And the bread which we break – is it not fellowship in the body of Christ? For one bread, one body we many are, since we all partake of that One Bread. Consider [even] physical

Israel [on this point]. Do not those who eat the sacrifices share fellowship in the altar? So what am I saying? That food sacrificed to demons [really] is anything? Or that an idol [really] is anything? [Of course not.] However, [it is true] that what the [se pagans] sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to share fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons [at the same time]. You cannot participate in the Lord's table and the table of demons [at the same time].

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:16-21

If we truly do accept that He is our portion forever, both now and in the life to come (Ps.73:26), and if we truly do look forward to this promise of hidden manna, eschewing the allures of false fellowship and the enticements of this present world, then we should ever remember and apply the truth of the lesson that “man does not live only on bread”, and determine never to neglect our “true eating” of the manna of the Word, which has proceeded forth from the mouth of our God in the Person of His Son, so as to secure our portion of that future manna, now hidden from the world, but destined to be revealed at the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

**The White Stone:** There are several important aspects to consider in the symbolism of the “white stone” which our Lord will give to every one of us who overcomes, successfully completing a life of faith and faithfulness in the midst of the devil's world.<sup>31</sup> First, in keeping with the other promises of Christ which we have seen so far in these messages to the seven eras of the Church, this promise too reflects the description of the Pergamene Church era previously given. For just as the hidden manna contrasted the future provision of true fellowship with false fellowship with pagan elements (of which the Pergamene era Church was guilty), so one function of the white stone is to contrast the true, eternal security of each believer in Jesus Christ to the drive for false security in time (the failing of Pergamum reflected in the name of this third era of the Church, “citadel”). In contrast to a man-made earthly citadel built by accommodating pernicious secular influences, a citadel which, ironically, is pictured here as already infiltrated and being attacked from within (compare the success of the “Trojan horse” against the original Pergamum), believers ought to focus on the fact that we are being built up into an eternal edifice which shall never fall, the true, spiritual Church, founded upon the one and only true Rock, our cornerstone Jesus Christ (1Pet.2:4-8; cf. 1Cor.3:9-15; Eph.2:20-22). The white stone thus represents our true union with Him and our true security in Him in contrast to the harmful union with secular forces taking place in Pergamum for the sake of a worldly security that could never be truly secure, compromising as it did the very principles of truth which should have been protected.

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<sup>31</sup> Compare the stone set before Joshua the high priest in Zechariah 3:9 as a symbol of sin removed, the basis for our redemption in Jesus Christ. The color white as an indication in this context of sins cleansed is well known (cf. Is.1:18), and it is interesting to note that also in the secular world of this time, white was the color of acquittal: compare Ovid *Metamorphoses* 15.41, where a white “pebble” was used by jurymen to acquit (with a dark one used to record a guilty verdict).

Such special stones, memorials from God for those who are His, are known collectively in the case of the angels (i.e., the “stones of fire” of Ezek.28:13-14), and in the case of the twelve tribes of Israel (i.e., the precious stones on the breast plate of the high priest: Ex.28:17-21; 39:10-14; Hos.3:4).<sup>32</sup> But it is most encouraging for us, we who find ourselves in the middle of this spiritual battlefield called life, to be told that we are not only known to God individually and will be individually recognized with special “stones” as “stones” in the edifice of His grand design, the Church of Jesus Christ, but will also receive from our Lord Himself “a new name” to be inscribed upon this memorial stone (cf. Is.56:5; 62:2; 65:15). Given what we know about divine renaming elsewhere in scripture (e.g., Abram to Abraham, and Jacob to Israel, to name but two), it seems clear that this “new name” will be a divine reflection of the role we have played in God’s plan here on earth in service to the Church of Christ – a revelation which is both an encouragement and a spur to persevere (as indeed all future reward and evaluation from God should be).

[On that day] you [who have forsaken Me] will leave your name to my chosen ones as a curse, for the Lord God will put you to death. But to His servants there will be given a different (i.e., “new”) name.

Isaiah 65:15

#### Revelation 2:18-29:

(18) And to the angel of the church in **Thyatira** write: "This is what the Son of God says, the One whose eyes are like a flame of fire and whose feet are like white-hot bronze. (19) I know your works and your love and your faith and your ministry and your endurance, and your most recent works are more numerous than your first ones. (20) But I have against you that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, she who claims she is a prophetess and teaches and deceives My servants to commit sexually immoral acts and eat food sacrificed to idols. (21) And I gave her time to repent, but she was not willing to repent from her prostitution. (22) Behold, I am going to throw her and her adulterers with her onto a couch, [yes], into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, (23) and I will kill her children with death. And all the churches will know that I am the One who tests the desires and the hearts, and I will give to each one of you according to your works. (24) And to the rest of you in Thyatira, as many as do not hold to this doctrine, you who have not acknowledged Satan’s “deep teachings”, as they call them. I am placing upon you no further burden. (25) Only hold fast to what you possess until I come. (26) And to the one who wins the victory and gives heed to My works until the end, I will give to him authority over the nations. (27) And he will shepherd them with an iron rod and crush

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<sup>32</sup> See section III.f of part 1 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Satan’s Rebellion and Fall”. For the fact that part of the “name” here includes our new tribal affiliation within Israel, see section II.9.b, “Israel the ultimate organization”, in part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Judgment, Restoration and Replacement”, and see especially part 6 of this present series, section VII.7, “The Gemstone Foundations and the Tribal Gates of New Jerusalem”.

them like vessels of clay, (28) just as I have received [the authority] from My Father. And I will give him the Morning Star. (29) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

#### **4. Thyatira: "The Era of Compromise" (802 to 1162 = 360 years)**

The era of Thyatira may best be described as ambivalent or bifurcated. For on the one hand, within its 360 years, genuine followers of our Lord Jesus Christ accomplished many spectacular things for Him and His Church, but on the other hand, it is also an era wherein the unbelieving, satanic "anti-church" element expanded to the point of being able to challenge for the leadership of the visible organization. This dichotomy can be seen in the name "Thyatira", inasmuch as its etymology, "unwearied in sacrifice", can also cut both ways.<sup>33</sup> For the name both represents the tremendous sacrifices made (especially by missionaries) in bringing the gospel of Christ to many barbarian nations (a hallmark of this era), while at the same time it calls to mind participation in the false sacrifices of idolatry mentioned here by our Lord (as was also the case in Pergamum). In terms of spiritual sacrifice, Thyatira possessed many whose love for the Lord was impressive indeed, made manifest by the works they accomplished. However, Thyatira also possessed a growing element devoted not to Christ but to their own secular and carnal agendas, that is, a malignant, cancerous "anti-church" guilty of what amounts to idolatry and pagan revelry, those who were spiritually unfaithful to Christ (in contrast to the faithful whose work is praised), and who, by definition, were devoted to the devil instead. In Pergamum, the enemy had merely entered within the gate, but in Thyatira, we see them challenging true believers for dominance within the structure of the temporal church organization.

#### **Christ's Self-description:**

1. "This is what the Son of God says, the One whose eyes are like a flame of fire and whose feet are like white-hot bronze": This description, which speaks entirely of judgment, is a clear indication that, in spite of the positive points our Lord will address in Thyatira's behalf, the pressing nature of the problem which afflicts her is uppermost in His mind. That bronze (compare the bronze altar of burnt offerings: Ex.27:1-6; cf. Num.21:9; Deut.28:23; Zech.6:1) and even more especially fire (e.g., Is.66:15; Matt.3:10-12; Rev.20:10-15) speak of coming judgment is a fact well-known to readers of scripture. The double mention of flaming eyes and white-hot bronze feet serves to intensify the picture of impending judgment (upon those who refuse to repent: see below), with the eyes calling attention to our Lord's complete and perfect knowledge of all things, including, in this case, of all transgression in need of fiery divine correction (2Chron.16:9; Zech.3:9 with 4:10; Rev.5:6), while the feet of white-hot bronze, on the other hand, speak to the readiness of our Lord to execute this judgment forthwith in the absence of

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<sup>33</sup> The name is a combination of two Greek elements, the first from the verb *thuo* (θυω), meaning "to offer sacrifices", and the second from the adjective *ateires* (ατειρης), meaning "unwearied/untiring".

repentance (Eph.6:15; cf. Is.52:7). Our God is a “jealous” God (Deut.4:23-24; Heb.12:29), that is, a God intolerant of infidelity on the part of those who have pledged themselves to Him, and the self-description given here bespeaks His indignation over the spiritual prostitution in which a goodly portion of Thyatira is engaged.

### **Christ’s Particular Message:**

1. “I know your works and your love and your faith and your ministry and your endurance, and your most recent works are more numerous than your first ones”: This is indeed a glowingly positive report for the true believers in Thyatira, one which both reflects the significance of the ministries in which they have been engaged, and also impressively acknowledges that the trend of their activities is a positive one. The most noteworthy and spiritually significant positive trend in the history of the era of Thyatira is, as mentioned above, the broad expansion of missionary activity beyond the frontiers of the original Roman empire. Within the time frame covered by the era of Thyatira (802 to 1162), northern Europe, eastern Europe, Russia and the British isles were evangelized (to note the most dramatic and best documented areas of growth), resulting in a massive influx of genuine believers into the Church of Jesus Christ. For this wave of conversion was unlike the process of “social Christianization” which had taken place in the era of Pergamum. At that time, it will be remembered, many compromises were made to soften the pagan population’s entrance into the church’s lists, and even so the new converts were motivated in many cases by practical considerations rather than spiritual ones. But for the new Christians of the era of Thyatira, things were different. On the one hand, they were presented with a largely “solid-state” Christianity, which, whatever its flaws (acquired during the previous era), was nonetheless at its core the worship of God through Jesus Christ based upon the Bible. And on the other hand, those of the previously “heathen” lands became Christians, by and large, out of genuine and personal motives (rather than as a result of shifting political realities). It is clear from the outcome that God honored the efforts of true evangelists and their eager listeners in blessing the Church era of Thyatira with one of the most dramatic and rapid expansions of the Christian faith which the Church Age was to experience. It is primarily this activity (along with the spiritual and material support provided by Thyatira at large) which comes in for the impressive praise recorded here by our Lord.

However, given what our Lord has to say by way of criticism in the verses which follow, we should all soberly reflect that even an excessive amount of good is not sufficient to counteract an excessive amount of evil (cf. Ezek.33:12-16). None of us is perfect, and none of the Church eras were populated by perfect Christians. But there is a limit to the Lord’s patience, longsuffering and gracious though He irrefutably is (Ex.34:5-7; Is.48:9; 1Tim.2:4; 2Pet.3:9; 3:15). There may come a time in the life of any civilization, any organization, any Church era, any group whatsoever, when even the presence of exceptional good or exceptionally godly believers is insufficient to ward off divine judgment upon widespread rebellion and apostasy (Ex.32:11-14; 32:32-33; Ezek.22:30):

Son of man, if a land sins against Me by being unfaithful, and I raise My hand against it and shatter its staff bread and send famine against it and cut off from it man and beast, even if these three men were in its midst, Noah, Daniel and Job, they would only deliver their own lives by their righteousness.

Ezekiel 14:13-14

In this respect, Thyatira demonstrates the exact opposite of the earlier era of Pergamum, where good defense was prized (to the point of developing a dangerously centralized bureaucracy), while the learning and spreading of the Word of God was neglected. Applying the lessons of Thyatira and Pergamum to our own individual lives, we can see then that in addition to a “good offense” of spiritual growth, preparation for service in accordance with the gifts we have been given, and the implementation of the ministries and good works God has ordained for us since before time began (Eph.2:10), we also have need of a “good defense”, that is, a firm commitment to “putting to death” the sin nature within us ( Col.3:5; cf. Rom.8:12-13; Eph.4:22; Col.3:9), and dying to this world even as we live for Christ (Rom.6:2-14; Gal.2:20; 5:24; 6:14; Phil.1:21; Col.2:12; 2:20; 3:1-4). Life in the midst of the devil’s world is indeed a difficult proposition, and it is certainly true that it is a challenging task to be perfect in our self-discipline, picking up our cross daily to both “reject wrong and choose the right” (cf. Is.7:16), as our consciences informed by the Holy Spirit tell us to do. For, in spite of the fact that if we would but put ourselves in His hands, His Spirit is ever present within us both “to will *and* to do” (Phil.2:13; cf. Matt.26:41; Rom.8:5-13; Gal.5:16-18), it is nevertheless true that as human beings we are likely to run into rough patches in our lives (some of which may well be testing and attack: Job 1-2; 2Tim.3:12; 1Pet.4:13; 5:9) wherein forward progress on these two fronts may be arduous and excruciatingly slow. At such times, it is of paramount importance that we demonstrate unrelenting persistence and perseverance (cf. Rom.5:3-5). In this way, even if our forward progress in personal sanctification (our “defense”: Heb.12:14) and in spiritual growth and ministry (our “offense”: Gal.6:9-10) is running into significant resistance (whether from personal fatigue or from external pressure), we shall nevertheless *not lose* ground if only we keep on pushing forward:

(15) So as many as are [spiritually] mature, let us have this attitude (i.e., of focusing on our spiritual advance and reward and not getting hung up on what lies behind: vv.13-14), and if in any matter your attitude is off-center, God will reveal that to you (i.e., assuming you are mature and are advancing as you should). (16) But with respect to the progress you have made, keep on advancing in the same way!

Philippians 3:15-16

For if we can but persevere when under attack (again, whether we share any culpability for the spiritual assaults under which we suffer or whether they are essentially compliments to the progress we are making, having attracted the attention of our adversary), then when the pressure lifts, and lift it eventually shall, we will find ourselves not only stronger in faith, but also none the worse for wear in any spiritual sense.

2. “But I have against you that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, she who claims she is a prophetess and teaches and deceives My servants to commit sexually immoral acts and eat food

sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent, but she was not willing to repent from her prostitution”: It is clear to see from our Lord’s words here that within Thyatira there is a pseudo-Christian element (represented by Jezebel) which is leading genuine Christians astray (“teaches and deceives My servants to commit sexually immoral acts and eat food sacrificed to idols”). That is to say, the anti-church element which had as yet only entered the gates of Pergamum (benefitting from that earlier era’s likewise misplaced tolerance) is now described as being actively engaged in suborning and seducing believers away from the true worship of Jesus Christ, and doing so *from a position of authority within the church visible*. What had merely been an incipient problem in Pergamum, therefore, is now a full blown challenge for the control of the church visible by an element (represented by Jezebel) which, while it may profess itself to be serving Christ, is in reality serving Satan (a point made clear by the fact of her unwillingness to change her ways in spite of the remonstrances and grace period given by our Lord).

The phrase “sexually immoral acts” here refers not to literal fornication but rather to spiritual infidelity to which some of the believers of Thyatira are being suborned and seduced through the efforts of Jezebel, abandoning thereby their loyalty to Jesus Christ in favor of substitutes offered by this false authority.<sup>34</sup> The fact that this seductive call to sacrilegious activity in the name of Christianity issues forth from *within* the visible organizational structure of the church makes it a doubly dangerous and sinister development. For it can be challenging enough for us – given the devil’s prodigious deceptive abilities – to ward off lies that originate from outside of church organizations, but when such threats issue forth from *within* the very groups to which we have joined ourselves, it may take all of our discernment and knowledge of biblical truth to defend against them.

The “Jezebel” problem is still present in our own time. For without any doubt there are today many “church” organizations which falsely claim to represent God (i.e., “who say they are prophets, but are not”). We at least have the option of separating ourselves from any such group which in whole or in part turns away from God to pursue instead a course of worldly power and abominable practice in the manner of Jezebel. In the ninth through twelfth centuries, however, there were few alternatives. The times, the technology, the educational system, the largely feudal society, the particular economies, and the political circumstances simply did not favor a separatist reformation of the kind that became necessary (and possible) several hundred years later. It is important to recognize that the criticism being leveled here by our Lord (i.e., “I have against you that you tolerate”) is directed towards the entire Church era of Thyatira and should not be construed as a fault of true believers who are not part of the problem. Changing an organization from within is always the most difficult type of struggle, and one which is usually unsuccessful. Separation “from” or extreme external pressure “from without” are, in general, the only effective ways to bring about correction under such circumstances. Our Lord therefore takes

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<sup>34</sup> We should note, moreover, that the listing of spiritual infidelity first in the sequence, that is, *before* the participation in idolatry, is a clear indication that the situation has worsened since the days of Pergamum (since now the more severe offense comes first).



upon Himself the responsibility for punishing “Jezebel” and all those who choose to commit spiritual adultery with her “if they do not repent”.

Our Lord’s choice of “Jezebel” to represent the increasingly non-Christian character of the leadership of the church visible is a telling one. For Jezebel, it will be recalled, was a pagan foreigner who became queen of Israel by marriage (1Kng.16:31). Until her death, she remained a vigorous and violent proponent of the worship of Baal, a false and highly obscene religion whose practice the words “prostitution”, “harlotry” and “adultery” aptly describe, both in terms of literal practice and also in terms of the spiritual infidelity to our Lord that participation in this cult entailed. After becoming queen, Jezebel soon convinced her husband king Ahab to adopt and promote this cult in place of the worship of the One True God (1Kng.16:32-33). Jezebel’s influence and power soon became such that, although she was in no way a legitimate ruler, she nevertheless functioned for all practical purposes as co-regent of the Northern Kingdom, fostering her chosen form of idolatry in every possible way, while energetically attempting to supplant the worship of the Lord by eliminating His prophets (1Kng.18:4; 18:13).

This picture has much in common with what we know of the growing degeneration and secularization in the leadership of what was an increasingly centralized and bureaucratic church during the ninth through the twelfth centuries. During this period, instead of making use of growing resources, numbers, and opportunities to promote the independence of local churches and to foster the purity of biblical Christianity, the trends in both of these crucial areas were exactly the opposite. Thyatira is the era wherein increasingly secular central authorities consolidated and expanded their power by a variety of worldly means, diminishing thereby the independence and authority of local congregations on the one hand, while on the other hand reinforcing their own power through an increasingly superstitious system of ritual and dogma of human design. Exactly at the time when it was becoming more feasible to educate the impressive wave of new converts in the scriptures, erroneous traditions, previous false opinions, and essentially pagan superstitions were actually invested with increasing authority for all the wrong reasons. That such things were endemic throughout Christendom at this time should not distract us from observing that these trends can be seen most perspicuously in the case of the “imperial” Roman church and papacy.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> During this time period the “imperial Roman church” and the “imperial papacy” truly came into their own. True enough, one finds the roots of such behavior in the previous Church era. Consider for example Leo I (dubbed by contemporaries “the secret western emperor”), or Gregory the Great (ca. 590-640). But, beginning with the reign of Charlemagne and the establishment of the “Holy Roman Empire”, it was in the era of Thyatira that the Roman see and the papacy began to effectively assert their power throughout Christendom in an ever tightening marriage of church and state. The pseudo-Isidorian decretals, the particularly venal papacy of Benedict the 9<sup>th</sup> (who became Pope at the age of only twelve years old and later sold the office for several thousand pounds of silver), and Pope Hildebrand’s use of excommunication to humiliate and control the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV (1076), are just a few outstanding symptoms of this “Jezebel-trend”.

In light of the return in chapter seventeen of Revelation to the image of the prostitute, we would do well to consider the implications of our Lord's choice of Jezebel here to describe a church leadership and organization now largely metastasized into an instrument of evil. Prostitutes, in order to effectively ply their trade, need to cover up what they really are under a thick veneer of alluring lies. The whore of Revelation chapter seventeen, for example, is dressed in purple and scarlet with glittering gold, jewels and pearls. She holds a golden goblet in her hand – but inside are abominable adulteries and filth (contrary to the beguiling picture she tries to present). And it is ever so. The devil's lies are always “dressed up” in the most attractive packages possible. We should not be surprised to see in the high ritual of various cults (whose end is death) the most superficially beautiful rites, elaborate paraphernalia and places of worship, and anthropologically interesting practices (behind which lie only the bones of the dead as in the case of the whitewashed sepulchers to which our Lord refers: Matt.23:27). One has to look inside the cup they offer their unsuspecting victims to see the horrible and profane reality of what they truly are beneath their deceptive patina.

During the era of Thyatira, Rome in particular had dressed herself in all the trappings of the true believers who had gone before, adorned herself with the wealth that so many had lavished on her over the centuries, portrayed herself as the special, chosen “prophetess” – and violently treated any and all who opposed her, just as the original Jezebel did. Furthermore, the marked elevation during this period of superstition over the Bible, of the veneration and worship of creatures (angels and “saints”), of idols (“relics”, “statue”, “shrines”, “icons”, etc.), and the elaborate rituals and gaudy trappings which characterize all the pre-reform churches (and now, sadly, many of the post-reform ones as well) are clear signs of the substitution of worldly, and, in truth, pagan forms for a pure and genuine devotion to Jesus Christ (developments which in the event helped to solidify the power and influence of those in control of this meaningless ritual and paraphernalia). Jezebel, therefore, represents false authority, falsely won, opposing itself to true followers of Christ, and through the pressure of coercion and the seduction of superstition luring away any and all whose faith may contain a weak link. Jezebel represents the secularization of church organization and church aims by a non-Christian leadership intent on worldly power, that is, a complete shift of focus from evangelism and spiritual growth to the drive for secular power and position, a forceful prosecution of the “marriage” of pseudo-church and state which had also occurred in ancient Israel (under Ahab and Jezebel). This is a change of heart from the previous era so fundamental and so detrimental that it would condition the entire future course of Church history (for the worse).

Moreover, this is also the sort of thing which is extremely difficult to garner purely from historical treatments, for while the difference in orientation in a spiritual sense is analogous to the difference between day and night, secular history's weakness has always been its inability to see into the hearts of men. History can show us that “two men on a bridge” are in approximately the same place – it takes scripture to show us that they are moving in exactly opposite directions. This weakness certainly applies in the case of church history. The Hildebrandian faction, for example, is often portrayed as a “reform movement” within the church. However, the enforcement of celibacy and the fight against political appointments to the clergy and against the

purchasing of positions (“simony”), had, in the event, the (intended) overall effect of strengthening the centralized ecclesiastical authority. Power may eradicate certain abuses, then be used to perpetuate far worse ones (cf. the Nazis, who ran on a platform of social reform). Although it may be true that many of the evangelism efforts discussed at the outset of this section did have the support of the central authority, that does not mean the motives of the supporters were as pure as the motives of the missionaries: obviously, increasing numbers and the expansion of areas of influences are both developments which tend to increase political power. But it is clear from scripture that blocking our vision of Christ with the false substitutes which this world provides based upon a falsely claimed authority is the essence of idolatry, worshiping in effect the creature rather than the Creator (Eph.5:5; Col.3:5). The vigorous pursuit of this process is the worst form of spiritual infidelity, the very trademark of Jezebel:

My people inquire of their wood[en idols], and their [diviner’s] staff speaks to them. For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray, and they have prostituted themselves away from following their God.

Hosea 4:12

Whatever the good that centralized and organized collective churches may have done over the centuries, the expansion of authority beyond the level of the local congregation (and the inevitable propagation of false teaching) has done disproportionately more harm. This is the case because the amassing of power (and the motivation behind it) requires, in general, behaviors and policies which have nothing to do with Jesus Christ, but which have everything to do with the playing the devil’s game on the devil’s worldly playing field. Inevitably, therefore, so-called “Christian” individuals, factions, and organizations which engage in such worldly pursuits (instead of concentrating on the Word of God and the life of the Spirit), come to rely upon the tactics and the methodologies of Satan’s world-system. In other words, while such practitioners may project themselves as “servants of light”, they are, in reality, serving a satanic purpose through satanic means (2Cor.11:13-15).

3. “Behold, I am going to throw her and her adulterers with her onto a couch, [yes], into **great tribulation**, unless they repent of her works, and I will kill her children with death. And all the churches will know that I am the One who tests the desires and the hearts, and I will give to each one of you according to your works”: The anticipation of tribulational events within the messages to the seven Church eras which is found here is not unparalleled. For example, we also find in the message to the Philadelphians a promise from our Lord of deliverance from that terrible time (Rev.3:10). In direct contrast to the Philadelphians’ reward for faithful service, our Lord here threatens to throw Jezebel and her followers in Thyatira into “great tribulation”, a clear reference to and anticipation of “the Great Tribulation”, the very event whose explication forms the subject of the book of Revelation. Indeed, apart from the absence of the definite article, the Greek phrasing used here is identical to that used for “[the] Great Tribulation” (*megale thlipsis*: μεγάλη θλιψις, versus *he megale thlipsis*: η μεγάλη θλιψις).

Jezebel represents the spirit of harlotry within the church visible on the part of the leadership and their supporters. As is made clear from these verses, such spiritual infidelity to Jesus Christ

(whether by the leaders or the followers) is not only unacceptable to our Lord, but also incurs severe judgment from Him. The source of this behavior is the internal seduction of the visible church from within by unbelievers who are ostensibly though not actually Christians.<sup>36</sup>

In verses 21-23, we find three parties who incur our Lord's displeasure: 1) "Jezebel": those servants of Satan in powerful positions within the leadership of the church visible during the era of Thyatira; 2) "her adulterers": supporters, enablers and abettors of this false authority; 3) "her children": the doomed offspring of this diabolical union of false authority and false teaching, that is, "converts" who are in no way genuine followers of Christ. The phrase, "you who tolerate", is, as pointed out above, a collective reference to the entire Church era. Toleration of evil is always dangerous, on any level (Deut.13:12-16). However, active *participation* in evil is always disastrous, for such a course destroys one's own faith even as it takes part in the sins of others: Jezebel's "adulterers" here find themselves cast upon the same "[dining and reclining] couch" with her, an image of participation in festal and obscene communion with this agent of Satan, for which allegiance they will pay a heavy price (Is.59:2).

We may take great comfort in the fact that our Lord was well aware of "the desires and the hearts" of all groups during the era of Thyatira (v.23). And thus is it ever so. He always gives "to each one of you according to your works" (v.23), so that while the corrupt leadership is frustrated and ultimately eliminated along with all who facilitated its evil plans, and its "children", that is, those who are brought into this false family, are "stricken with death" (v.23),<sup>37</sup> we who truly believe in and remain faithful to Him can anticipate not only deliverance, but also an ultimate reward "not worthy to be compared" to the pressures under which we may now find ourselves as a consequence of such satanic opposition (Rom.8:18; 2Cor.4:17).

4. "And to the rest of you in Thyatira, as many as do not hold to this doctrine you who have not acknowledged Satan's "deep teachings", as they call them. I am placing upon you no further burden. Only hold fast to what you possess until I come": The first thing to notice here is that the "doctrine" and the "deep things" are one and the same, namely, the "teachings" of Jezebel discussed above. In respect to the latter element, "deep things" is the name which these false prophets give to their doctrine. They do not call their teachings the "deep things of Satan". Rather, the qualifier "of Satan" has been added by our Lord to make clear the true nature of the

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of similar events in the beast's worldwide religion, see parts 4 and 5 of this series.

<sup>37</sup> It is tempting to see in the widespread elimination of so many nominal "Christians" during the next era's "black death" (mid-fourteenth century) a partial fulfillment of this prophecy, clearing away much dead wood and allowing the opportunity for spiritual rebirth (a development which would, in the event, wait upon the era of Philadelphia).

false “mysteries” they are promoting.<sup>38</sup> The doctrines of the increasingly secular (and hence satanic) “Jezebel” leadership of the church visible were described earlier by our Lord as “teaching” believers in Thyatira “to commit sexually immoral acts and eat food sacrificed to idols”. That is, as we have seen, to choose the course of spiritual unfaithfulness, following after the false idols of this world (substitutes offered up by these false prophets and their true master, the devil) rather than following after Christ. These “teachings”, “doctrines” and “deep things” all represent the intricate fabric of lies, false rituals, and concocted human dogma designed to provide the power-hungry leadership of the church visible during the era of Thyatira with a basis for their false authority.

This is a very important concept to comprehend, and one which no Christian should fail to understand. For if an organization, group or individual claims to base their authority and teaching upon the Bible, that is an easy enough claim to verify or refute. Clearly, the presence of teachings, practices, rituals and behaviors which are not authorized by the Bible and/or condemned by the Bible would then undeniably demolish that claim. Even in cases where this acid test may only arouse well-founded suspicions, that is reason enough for an individual believer to separate and find a place where he/she is more certain that what is being taught and done is in line with the Word of God (for we are all responsible for the decisions we make on this score: see Read Your Bible: Protection against Cults). However, when organizations, groups or individuals claim a *secret* or *mysterious* authority, when they rely for their authority upon unverifiable tradition, personal interpretation which trumps the Bible, or “inspiration” and feelings as the basis for their authority, believers should immediately take care, because, even if somehow what is being taught and done is not completely anti-God, there is still absolutely no way for the believer to ascertain the rightness or wrongness of the individual doctrines being proffered when playing by these false rules. That is precisely *because* the things being taught and used to establish the authority of such false prophets are “mysteries”, “deep things” (to put their deceptive spin on it) which only the thoroughly initiated may know. This reliance upon secret information, ungrounded tradition, and personal infallibility or inspiration of leadership has been a hallmark practice of cults from time immemorial. It had been true of the gnostic cults which plagued the historical local church at Thyatira during the first century; it was true of the increasing ostentatious and centralized organization of the church visible during the historical era of Thyatira; and it is true of many “religious” organizations and cults today. For if the accountability of the Bible is removed, then no other authority on this earth is capable of keeping such individuals and groups accountable. Thanks be to God that He will call all who deceive in His Name to account, both in this life and in the next! It is for this very reason that our Lord had

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<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that God’s “mysteries” are either known only to Him, or are brought to light by Him for *all* those who truly want to know Him and His truth (Matt.13:11; cf. 1Cor.2:7; 15:51). The “mystery” of Christ, and of the uniting of the gentile believers to His people Israel is essentially synonymous with the gospel (see The Satanic Rebellion: Part 5, under “The Church and the Mystery of Christ”), a mystery which has truly been “shouted from the rooftops” (Lk.12:3), and which will be proclaimed worldwide in many spectacular ways before the end comes (Matt.24:14; Rev.14:6).

said in verses 21-23 above that He Himself would take responsibility for judging Jezebel, her adulterers, and her children.

In spite of the fact that “tolerating” Jezebel was, collectively speaking, a point against the Church era of Thyatira, our Lord here (addressing the true believers in her midst) stresses that serving Him is the charge that has been given to individual Christians – our primary responsibility is to pick up our cross and follow Him every day (Lk.9:23). Without personal godliness and personal growth, there can be no question of trying to reform organizations or other individuals who may not be operating within the will of God (Matt.7:3-5). If we truly are following Him, growing in knowledge, sanctification and production, then He places upon us “no further burden” (v.24) than to persevere in this good conduct while continuing to resist the seductive calls of false prophets to come to know their “deep things”, meaningless lies covered by an attractive but superficial veneer. This is the essence of “holding fast”, the perseverance of continued growth and service on the one hand, and of separation from all evil on the other (cf. 2Jn.1:8; 2Pet.1:10).

For Christians who really are trying to please their Lord and Savior in every way, false religion of the sort which “Jezebel” is selling is one of the most dangerous types of evil. That is because much cleverness and effort always goes into making the false system appear (from the outside) to be attractive, and interesting, and good, and “deep”. But its intricacies are those of the spider’s web, its external comeliness that of the whitewashed tomb, and its alluring features the charms of a prostitute. No matter how beautiful buildings, rituals, paraphernalia, statues, vestments and the like may be, we are here to worship Christ, who taught us simply, while dressed in humble attire, out of doors, and with words alone. No matter how attractive as potential objects of reverence saints, or apostles, or pastors, or popes, or Mary, or angels may be, we are here to worship God and His Son only. No matter how entertaining miraculous gifts, or mystical teachings, or supernatural events and manifestations may be, we are here to believe the truth of the Word of God and through the Word to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. For those who make use of this rule to follow Jesus Christ, that is, the rule or “canon” of His holy scriptures, there is truly “no other burden”.

### **Christ’s Promised Rewards:**

1. “And to the one who wins the victory and gives heed to My works until the end, I will give to him authority over the nations. And he will shepherd them with an iron rod and crush them like vessels of clay, just as I have received [the authority] from My Father”: In quoting Psalm 2 here, our Lord is deliberately contrasting the false authority of Jezebel with the true authority which belongs to Him, having been won through His victory at the cross (Lk.10:18; Jn.16:33; 19:30; Col.2:15; Rev.5:5). For those who resist the siren song of pseudo-mysteries emanating from pseudo-authorities and adhere instead to the true authority of Jesus Christ and the true authority of God’s Word, our Lord Jesus Christ promises a share in that genuine authority and a chance to participate in His millennial rule wherein all who oppose the truth will be summarily crushed. In the midst of the devil’s world, it may be grating to have to endure the copious and ubiquitous lies that bombard our ears and eyes, but if we remain faithful to Him who is the truth, we can

joyously anticipate not only the future triumph of what is right and true over all that is deceptive and false, but can even be a part of the implementation of that triumph.

2. “And I will give him the Morning Star”: The “Morning Star” is a reference to the Person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2Pet.1:19; Rev.22:16; cf. Num.24:17; Is.9:1-2; 42:6; 49:6; Matt.2:2; 2:9; 4:16; Lk.2:30-32; Jn.1:4-5; 8:12; 9:5). The symbolism of this title is twofold. On the one hand, at His return, in the midst of a supernatural day which is “neither light nor darkness” (Zech.14:6-7; cf. Is.13:9-13; 34:4; 60:1-2; Ezek.32:7-10; Joel 2:2, 2:10, 2:31; 3:15; Zeph.1:15-18; Matt.24:29; Mk.13:24-25; Acts 2:17-21; Rev.6:12-13), He will blaze forth at His return like the light of the brightest star (Is.60:1-3; Matt.24:29-30; 2Pet.1:19; Rev.1:7), a true harbinger of the blessed morning to come after the long dark night of the Tribulation (cf. Heb.1:3).<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Jesus in His humanity also replaces the previous chief of the created world, “Lucifer” (meaning “light bearer”: Is.14:12), who was designed to reflect the light of God, but chose darkness instead, that is, to go his own way in rebelling against God (Eph.6:12; Col.1:13; Jude 1:6; 1:13).<sup>40</sup>

Everyone one who wins the battle of faith and enters the next life with that faith intact will live with Jesus forever, as part of His Bride, the Church, and will thus “have Him”, the Morning Star, enjoying forever an eternal and intimate relationship with the One we love, the One who died for us. Just as the promise of shared authority spoke to our coming temporal rewards (fulfilled during the Millennium), so this promise of the “Morning Star” speaks to our eternal rewards, specifically, the inestimable pleasure of an eternity of intimate fellowship with the One who bought us, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. “Jezebel”, the figure chosen by our Lord for false authority appealing to vulnerable Christians on the basis of alluring but deceptive promises, represents compromise with worldly power, selling out in this life for celebrity and secular acceptance. But for all those who reject such false substitutes and cleave instead to our true partner Jesus Christ, the eternal participation we shall have in His power and His celebrity, and His eternal acceptance of us as His very Bride, will in no way be comparable to the “mess of potage” offered by the pseudo-prophets of the devil’s world system (no matter how attractive they may presently seem).

#### Revelation 3:1-6:

(1) And to the angel of the church in **Sardis** write: "This is what the One who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars says. I know your works, that your name says you are alive, but you are dead. (2) Wake up, and strengthen what remains and was about

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<sup>39</sup> This theme of light versus darkness and day versus night to represent good versus evil is found often in scripture (cf. 1Thes.5:2-8). For a detailed treatment of the theme see part 2 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “The Genesis Gap”, section II.2.

<sup>40</sup> See part 1 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Satan’s Rebellion and Fall”, section III.a, “The Morning Star”.

to die. For I have not found your works complete in the presence of My God. (3) So remember how you have received and did hear, and give heed and repent. If, then, you do not wake up, I will come like a thief and you shall not recognize at what sort of time I will come to you. (4) But you do have a few persons in Sardis who have not befouled their clothing. And they will walk with Me in white, because they are worthy. (5) The one who wins the victory will be dressed in white clothing in this way, and I will assuredly not erase his name from the Book of Life. And I will acknowledge his name in the presence of My Father and in the presence of the holy angels. (6) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

### **5. Sardis: "The Era of Corruption" (1162 to 1522 = 360 years)**

In contrast to the four preceding eras, with the commencement of the era of Sardis the *entire* organization of the church visible now finds itself in a state of severe corruption, so severe, in fact, that it can only be described as being "dead". This state of affairs is reflected in its etymology. The name "Sardis" comes from the famous reddish gemstone to which the historical city gave her name, that is, the Sardius (or Sard). The reddish color invoked here calls to mind the idea of sinfulness (Is.1:18; Rev.12:3; 17:3-4). And it is more than interesting to note that the Hebrew equivalent for this gem is *'odhem* (dva). This is a virtual equivalent to "Edom", the alternative name of Jacob's elder brother, a fact which becomes all the more pertinent when one considers that Esau/Edom is a typical prophetic symbol for the pagan nations in contrast to the people of God (as we saw in part 1 of this series). So on the one hand, Sardis may be an attractive and shiny gemstone in the eyes of the world, but to the Lord, rather than being built on the Rock and comprised of "living stones" (1Pet.2:4-5), she is instead a dead stone whose red color betrays her true spiritual state. On the other hand, like Esau, though born with a glorious birth-right, Sardis too chose instead a "mess of [red] pottage" as her heritage, leaving the true spiritual blessings for others to claim (cf. Gen.25:30; Mal.1:2-3; Rom.9:10-13), and forcing the true people of God to separate from her and her pagan practices (as Jacob was forced to separate himself from the unbelieving Esau).

Even among secular historians, the "Late" or "High" Middle Ages (spanned by the era of Sardis) are generally recognized as a time of severe recession in the spirituality of the church visible. The mid-twelfth through early sixteenth centuries saw, among other things, the triumph of the imperial papacy in the west, the "great schism" between east and west, the dominance in academia of "scholasticism" (essentially a triumph of philosophy over legitimate biblical study), the inquisition (culminating in the Spanish inquisition of the fifteenth century), the violent suppression of various "sects" which were challenging the homogenous rule of Rome, the crusades (a shameless projection of political power on behalf of the church visible), and the institutionalization of all previous doctrinal error and pagan practice into the codified "canon law", an event which marked the victory of universal papal rule, and which was a recipe for effective persecution and extermination of any and all who might choose to look to scripture for the truth instead of to the dead, anti-biblical traditions and church dogmas accreted over the previous centuries as instruments of church power.



Sardis therefore represents the third phase in the degeneration of the visible church which had begun the better part of a millennium before. What had started as an infiltration of the church organization in Pergamum, and progressed to a domination of its hierarchy in Thyatira, had by the time of Sardis permeated virtually the entire church visible, to the extent that, apart from a remnant of genuine followers of Christ, there was at this point almost nothing “Christian” about the so-called Christian church. For, at this historical juncture, Jesus, the living Word, was not the primary object of worship (statues, saints, rituals and the like had effectively obscured the fact that salvation comes through faithfully following Him alone), and His teachings, the written Word, were not the primary standard of faith and practice (the Bible had become a distant third to the authority of the hierarchy and the now codified traditions). It is not too much to say that by the end of the era of Sardis, the secular “church” visible and the spiritual Church actual had become, for all intents and purposes, two separate entities, to the point that a complete separation of the latter from the former, and the wholesale reconstitution and “reformation” of a new “church visible” became necessary to preserve the genuine community of faith on earth, one consisting of those who truly believed in and followed our Lord Jesus Christ and His teachings, the holy scriptures (cf. Jn.14:23-24).

Given the fundamental weaknesses inherent in all humanly designed organizations (and the history of the church as we have briefly sketched it in this study), these developments should come as no surprise. For human organizations are only as strong as their weakest link, and while errors (of faith, doctrine or practice) have a tendency to become memorialized by “tradition”, the vibrant spiritual realities which originally underlie all genuine Christian groups are as difficult to institutionalize as they are to quantify and express, let alone to bequeath to future generations. Regardless of past successes, therefore, by the time of Sardis, the increasingly monolithic and centralized organizational church was, particularly in the west, far from God, and drifting farther and farther away with every passing year. No longer was the problem merely the existence of newly “converted” pagans whose practices and beliefs should be accommodated. No longer was the problem merely the domination of the central leadership by a power-hungry faction with an entirely secular viewpoint, agenda, and methodology. By the time of the era of Sardis, the rot, which had begun with new entrants into the organization (without likewise entering into the true Body of Christ through faith), and which had then spread to the “head” through a desire on the part of an ambitious few for worldly power achieved and exercised through cosmic means, had now metastasized throughout the entire body so that the form and practice of what secular historians would no doubt term “Christianity” was now by and large anything but. In short, the visible organization of what had been the Christian church on earth was now essentially dead, having become merely a dried-up, hollow shell of its former self, with all the true life and spirituality drained completely away. In order for this organization to endure as a functional part of the true Body of Christ, radical surgery would be necessary

### **Christ’s Self-description:**

1. “This is what the One who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars says”: It will be remembered from our Lord’s own interpretation (in chapter one, verse twenty), that the seven

stars are the seven angels of the seven churches, the supernatural administrative agents of Jesus Christ who carry out His commands for the direction of His Church.<sup>41</sup> The seven spirits, first mentioned in Revelation 1:4, are, as we saw in our treatment of that passage, a reference to God the Holy Spirit, the One who provides the power for the functioning of Christ's Church.<sup>42</sup> Both of these references speak to the same issue, namely our Lord's complete control of history and total authority in all things pertaining to His Body, the Church. No human failure, no satanic opposition, no historical event of any kind can frustrate the completion of His Body and the accomplishment of all which has been ordained for it. The fact that the majority of those who are part of the visible church organization in the era of Sardis are either not following Christ as they should or are not true followers of Him at all can in no way and will in no way deter the Plan of God. This self-description is a reminder to all – especially to all those in leadership positions who may suppose they possess some measure of sovereignty in the Church and to any and all who believe that their particular organization is the repository of true authority – *that it is Jesus Christ* who is the Head of the Church. His is the only true and the ultimate authority, transcendentally and completely so. Furthermore, as the Creator of the world and the Director of the Father's plan for human history, there is not the slightest chance that anything will transpire to keep His Body the Church from attaining its destined fullness and completion at exactly the right time in exactly the right way.

### **Christ's Particular Message:**

1. "I know your works, that your name says you are alive, but you are dead": This statement should be taken at face value to mean what it unquestionably says, namely that by the time of the era of Sardis, the visible church organization was stone-cold dead. In spite of the fact that the church visible of this era continued to lay claim to the *name* "Christian", and to profess to be a *living* agent of the One true God, it had by this time become in no way a true witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, like the Pharisees of our Lord's day, it had, through the superstitions and false teachings it had come to embody, actually "closed the door" of salvation to many who wished to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Matt.23:13-14). It is thus important to note that merely using the name "Christian", a glorious title which means, literally, "[a person] belonging to Christ", does not in fact make one a Christian. The hierarchy and majority of the membership of the visible church of Sardis describe themselves as "Christians", but we have it from our Lord that in the true, spiritual sense, they "are dead". That is to say, the bulk of the Sardian congregation has not put their faith in Christ for eternal life and are not following Him with their lives. They have substituted for faith and discipleship the rote, the ritual, the human dogma, and the superstitions of the visible church organization, superficialities which have aggregated into high pageantry by this time, but which have almost nothing to do with Jesus Christ. They have accepted the reputation of "Christian" from those who have gone before, while elaborating, augmenting, and enshrining the false traditions of these previous eras to the point of blocking out

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<sup>41</sup> See section 5 of part 1 of this series under "The seven churches' angels".

<sup>42</sup> See section 5 of part 1 of this series under "The seven spirits".

entirely the light of the truth of the gospel of Christ (cf. 2Cor.4:4). The self-identification of so many unbelievers as “Christians”, even to the point of outnumbering true followers of Christ, is a trend and a problem that has continued from the era of Sardis right up to the present day, and will continue up to and through the “Great Apostasy” and the “Great Persecution” predicted to occur during the Tribulation’s first and second halves respectively.

2. “Wake up, and strengthen what remains and was about to die. For I have not found your works complete in the presence of My God. So remember how you have received and did hear, and give heed and repent”: The call to repentance issued here to the Sardian era of the Church by our Lord Jesus Christ is unequivocal, and is based, as this statement makes clear, upon the inferior quality of their work (with the lack of production being an unmistakable indication of the failure of their faith: cf. Jas.2:14-26).<sup>43</sup> Jesus therefore tells them to “wake up”, to come back to life in a spiritual sense, that is, to abandon their faith in their own works, rituals, and human teachings, and instead return with all their hearts to Him who is the only way, the only truth, and the only life (Jn.14:6), to be grafted back into the true Vine, that they may once again produce a genuine crop through Him and for Him (Jn.15:1-8).

Based upon what had been handed down to them, the Sardians could have (and should have) known well the words of God and the Word of God. They could have (and should have) devoted themselves to true faith in Him and to truly following Him. According to these verses, they had “*received*” a form of authentic Christianity from the previous era of Thyatira, even though this was “*about to die*” and required strengthening. The reader will notice that the past tense (Greek imperfect) is generally overlooked by the versions, but Jesus’ words here are extremely precise and the tense is important to note. When Sardis “heard” the truth, so that she was still in possession of what she “received” (i.e., the Bible and the biblical message of faith in and discipleship to Jesus), these “things”, that is, the visible organization of the Church at that time, were on the point of death. The once pristine and truly catholic organized Church was “about to die” because of its agglomeration of false teachings and traditions, because of its increasingly bureaucratic, centralized, and secular hierarchy, and because of its accelerating trend towards valuing ritual, ceremony, paraphernalia, and pageantry above the holy scriptures and the true worship of Jesus Christ. This status of “about to die” therefore represents the situation *at the outset* of the Sardian era.

Unfortunately, instead of reversing course and “strengthening” what was good (the evangelistic efforts of the former era of Thyatira), and instead of weeding out what was bad (the power-hungry secular leadership and growing paganism of the church visible), Sardis has gone in the opposite direction, compounding the degenerative focus upon non- and anti-biblical practices, while at the same time failing to live up to our Lord’s expectations in the realm of faithful production (“*For I have not found your works complete in the presence of My God*”). And small wonder. For where there is no true spiritual life, and where the so-called “church” is in actuality

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<sup>43</sup> For more on the issue of faith and production, see in particular Peter’s Epistles, Lesson #14: “Believing and Spiritual Growth”, and Lesson #24, “Faith Dynamics”.

spiritually dead, there *can* be no genuine working for God. All true “works” done for our Lord Jesus Christ must of necessity be done through Him and in Him and for Him, and there can be no true production apart from Him:

Stay *part of* Me, and I will [stay] part of you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it remains part of the vine, so you too cannot [bear true fruit] unless you stay part of Me.

John 15:4

Even what might be thought to pass for good cannot be counted as such when done in the energy of the flesh, apart from the Spirit of God, out of false motives, and on the basis of false pretenses. God may choose to use such efforts in the accomplishment of His overall plan (cf. Lk.9:50; Phil.1:15-18), but that does not mean that those who produce them are believers or will receive a believer’s share in the Kingdom of Heaven anymore than has been the case for other unbelieving agents of the past (e.g., Cyrus the Great in Is.45:1-4: “I will strengthen you, although you have not acknowledged Me”).

3. “If, then, you do not wake up, I will come like a thief and you shall not recognize at what sort of time I will come to you”: Sleep is often found in scripture used as a metaphor for death (as when Jesus describes Lazarus as “asleep”: Jn.11:11-14). In our context here, the sleep from which “nodding Sardis” is commanded to awake is not a physical but a spiritual death (cf. Rev.3:1: “*your name says you are alive, but you are dead*”). This statement applies to the church visible as a whole, and, as in the case of similar corporate evaluations of Israel by our Lord found throughout the Old Testament prophets, indicates that the great majority of individuals presently “members” of this group are either backsliding or entirely apostate.

The “sort of time” at which thieves come upon unsuspecting households is invariably nighttime (at least in the ancient world). Night is also the time of sleep and rest, but in the application of the analogy here, the values of good and bad have, of course, been reversed, with the peaceful “sleeper” being at fault, and night being, in a scriptural sense, a time of danger rather than repose. Light represents truth (Jn.3:20; 14:6; Eph.5:8-14), and the absence of it makes the believer spiritually vulnerable. Just as the darkness of night lends itself to sleep, so the absence of the light of truth induces spiritual drowsiness, that is, a lack of alertness which, if it progresses far enough, can result in complete spiritual “sleep” (i.e., spiritual death). The use of this analogy stressing the importance of staying awake and spiritually “quick” in the face of the darkness of this world is a common one in scripture, and is an issue which will reach its most critical stage during the dark days of the coming Tribulation (cf. Matt.24:42-44; 25:1-13; Mk.13:33-37; Lk.12:35-40; Eph.5:14; 1Thes.5:1-10; Rev.16:15).

The “visitation” our Lord warns of here is a general divine inspection and subsequent judgment upon the Sardian era of the Church (which will end with the remaking of the church visible). But the principle of unexpected divine judgment or “visitation” upon unsuspecting spiritual degeneracy is one which holds good at all times, in all eras, and for all institutions and individuals. On a personal level, no man knows the day or hour of his death, and the teachings of

our Lord are filled with examples of those who were extremely foolish from the divine perspective in wasting the opportunities God had given them, recognizing their folly only too late when once the final “visitation” of God had come upon them (cf. in particular the examples of “the rich man and Lazarus”: Lk.16:19-31; “the parable of the rich fool”: Lk.12:13-21; “the abusive steward”: Lk.12:42-48; and see also Jerusalem’s tragic failure to recognize “the time of your visitation”, comparing Lk.19:41-44 with Lk.22:23).

4. “But you do have a few persons in Sardis who have not befouled their clothing. And they will walk with Me in white, because they are worthy”: The contrast between the situation in previous eras of the Church and the situation here in Sardis is stark. For things have come to such a pass that far from being in danger from outsiders or from some pernicious influence within, the church visible is now *itself* almost entirely composed of unbelievers and backsliders (that is, with the exception of “the few” mentioned here). The Lord’s solution to the problem will therefore not be a restructuring of the visible organization of the church, but rather the deliverance from the midst of this once proud body the remnant of the truly faithful, and the reconstitution of the “church” in the following era of Philadelphia. The statement that this remnant of those who are truly following Jesus Christ have “not befouled their clothing” is a reference to the sanctified life of the faithful few, an inevitable characteristic of true spirituality and a genuine pursuit of the truth (1Thes.4:3). This quality of earnestly seeking to walk the way the Lord would have us walk is placed here in sharp contrast to the majority’s befouling of their reputations through unsanctified behavior (cf. Zech.3:3-4; and compare the command to “guard our garments” in Rev.16:15). As believers, we are all, without exception or condition, *positionally* sanctified by the blood of Jesus Christ (Rev.7:14; cf.1Cor.1:30). But we are also called upon to live our lives as if that meant something to us, and to develop an *experientially* sanctified and holy walk while on this earth (Heb.12:14). The result of following of our Lord in this proper and necessary way is the future realization of the eternal life we now possess in principle and for which we wait so expectantly, that is, the *ultimate* sanctification which we shall fully experience on that day when our bodies are redeemed in resurrection (Rom.6:22).<sup>44</sup> Our eternal, ultimately sanctified state is thus described here as “walking in white” with our Lord Jesus (Rev.19:14; cf. Rev.6:11), with the color and the quality of our future clothing representing our righteousness in time, righteousness which is achieved through faith in Jesus Christ, confirmed in worthy following of our Lord, and finally brought full circle in the eternal righteousness that will be ours forever with Him (Rev.19:7-8).

### **Christ’s Promised Rewards:**

1. “The one who wins the victory will be dressed in white clothing in this way”: The white clothing of sanctification contrasts sharply with the Sardian “red” of sinful allegiance to this world. As indicated above, this reference to our future white clothing is descriptive of our eternal life brought to fruition at our resurrection (with which eternal life is essentially synonymous, living forever in a perfect and spectacular new body “in the age to come”:

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<sup>44</sup> See Peter’s Epistles, lesson #13, “Sanctification”.

Mk.10:30; Lk.18:30; cf. Dan.12:1-2; Jn.3:16; Rom.2:7; 2Cor.5:1).<sup>45</sup> The reality of our eternal life, life unending and forever in paradisaical circumstances with our Lord, is a fundamental part of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1Cor.15:1-19). As Christians, people who proclaim their faith in Jesus, we should take every opportunity to remind ourselves and others of this sublime fact. For us, death is not something to be feared. Rather, it is a transition to far better circumstances, chief of which will be our reunion and experiential union with our blessed Lord forever (Phil.1:21-26; cf. 2Cor.5:1-10). And not only shall we live forever, but we shall do so in perfect bodies, uncorrupted by sin and no longer subject to any of the complaints of this world (Is.25:8; 49:10; Rev.7:16; cf. 1Cor.15:12-58). Further, the white clothing mentioned here is yet another sign of the wonder of that time to come, for we shall be dressed like our Lord “in this way” walking “with Me” in perfect, eternal clothing of brilliant white (cf. Dan.7:9; Matt.17:2; Mk.9:3; Lk.9:29; Rev.6:11; 7:9-14; 19:14; like the angels of God: Matt.28:3; Mk.16:5; Rev.4:4). All too often we believers have a tendency to undervalue the eternal life which is ours (contrast Paul’s command to Timothy to “*take hold* of the eternal life to which you have been called”: 1Tim.6:12). Even if we had only been vouchsafed to live forever in this imperfect world under these present difficult circumstances and in merely functional health, that would be a boon for which the unbelieving world would offer untold riches. But we have been promised so much more, a perfect body, in a perfect world, and a perfect eternal life walking together forever with our Lord Jesus Christ “in white”.

2. “I will assuredly not erase his name from the Book of Life”: The book mentioned here is variously titled in scripture as “your [God’s] book” (Ex.32:32-33), “the book” (Dan.12:1), “the Book of Life” (Ps.69:28; Rev.3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 20:15), “the Lamb’s Book of Life” (Rev.21:27), and, at least once, mention is merely made by our Lord to our names being “written in heaven” (Lk.10:20). As all these verses indicate, God keeps a record book in heaven containing the names of all who, through faith in Jesus Christ, are to be spared from the last judgment of unbelievers (which is the second death: Rev.20:6; 20:11-15; cf. Acts 24:25; Rom.2:5-6).<sup>46</sup> Believers are, of course, also evaluated by Jesus Christ on the basis of “the things done through the body” (2Cor.5:10; cf. 1Cor.3:12-15; Rom.14:10), but this is a far different matter from the last judgment of unbelievers (even should much of what has been “done” by us be deemed unacceptable). For we who complete this life with our faith in Christ intact, “will not enter judgment” because we have passed “from death to life” (Jn.5:24-30; cf. Jn.3:18; 1Jn.3:14). That fact is reflected by the inclusion of our names in the Book of Life, a solid and enduring record of our salvation (Dan.12:1; Lk.10:20; Phil.4:3). Absence from the book, however, means certain condemnation (Rev.20:12 with 20:15; 21:27). Therefore this promise to the genuine believers in Sardis that their names will not be “blotted out” is both comforting personal reassurance in the midst of so much unbelief and corruption, and at the same time strong

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<sup>45</sup> The subject of the resurrection is covered in detail in part 5 of this series. See also Peter’s Epistles: Lesson #20: “The Resurrection”.

<sup>46</sup> Now that all judgment has been committed to Him, our Lord Jesus Christ is the Judge of the living and the dead (Jn.5:22-27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom.14:9-12; 2Tim.4:1; 1Pet.4:5).

encouragement for them to maintain their correct approach to the Christian life, a validation, in fact, of their good behavior in contrast to that of their fellow Sardians. For one clear implication to be drawn from our Lord's words here is that there are certainly *some* in Sardis who have turned away from Christ, and whose names, without the repentance here demanded, are indeed at risk of being blotted out of this crucially important book.

May the[ godless] be blotted out of the Book of Life, and may they not be recorded with the righteous.

Psalm 69:28

“And now, if You will forgive their sin, [fine]. But if not, [then] please blot my name out of Your book which You have written.” But the Lord said to Moses, “The one who sins against Me, him will I blot out of My book.”

Exodus 32:32-33

The Book of Life is itself never a means of condemnation. God has other “books” chronicling the course of our lives which will form the basis of indictment for those who do not accept, or who reject, or turn away from Jesus Christ in this life (Dan.12:1; Rev.20:12). Rather, the Book of Life is a means of vindication for all of us whose names are included when we stand before Christ on that day (Rev.20:15). The inclusion of our names will be evidence, in effect, that we remained faithful to Jesus Christ in this life. Christians, faithful followers of Jesus Christ, the true “victors” in this life, are thus promised here that our Lord will most definitely not erase our names from the Book of Life, for by “winning the victory” through faithfully following Him in this life, we are assured that our names will remain indelibly written in God's Book of Life forever.

3. “I will acknowledge his name in the presence of My Father and in the presence of the holy angels”: This promise is a positive corollary to what is essentially a “double negative” above: Jesus will not erase our names; He will (instead) formally acknowledge them. At that blessed point in the future, all potential for the removal of our names for the Book of Life will have passed away. For when we stand before Him on that great day in resurrection, we shall be like Him and with Him from that point forward and forevermore (1Jn.3:2). This announcing of our “name” in the court of heaven, the verification that we are enrolled for eternal life, is the reward that falls to the lot of all those who sought His glory on this earth rather than their own (Jn.7:18), who sought a true eternal “fame” rather than the vain and pointless celebrity of this present world. This is true of our relationship with the temporal church visible as well, and thus has an important application to the largely dead church-visible of the era of Sardis which we are studying here. For those who were celebrated as great and important within the visible organization of that time were in God's eyes of no account. But those who rejected the corrupt and secular trends of that era, seeking instead true salvation through pure and unadulterated faith in Jesus Christ, they are the ones whose names our Lord shall proclaim “before the Father and the holy angels”. The name or reputation, the tangible counterpart of the ego, is something for which the world strives mightily and values highly. But we believers in Jesus Christ live in hope of an

eternal name and an everlasting reputation (Rev.2:17), for we are here not advancing our own name, but the Name, the reputation, the Person and the work of the only Name under heaven which offers salvation, that of our blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

Revelation 3:7-13:

(7) And to the angel of the church in **Philadelphia** write: "This is what the One who is holy and true says, the One who has the key of David, the One who opens and no one will lock, who locks and no one opens. (8) I know your works. Behold, I have provided an open door before you which no one can shut. Because you have a little power and have given heed to My Word and have not denied My Name, (9) behold, I am going to give you some of those from Satan's synagogue who claim they are Jews and are not but are lying. Behold, I will make them come and worship at your feet and they will know that I have loved you. (10) Because you have kept My command to persevere in Me, I will also keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the entire inhabited world to put the inhabitants of the world to the test. (11) I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have that no one takes your crown [away]. (12) The one who wins the victory I will make a pillar in the temple of My God and he shall never go out again. And I will write upon him the Name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem (which is going to come down from heaven from My God), and My new Name. (13) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

**6. Philadelphia: "The Era of Revival" (1522 to 1882 = 360 years)**

Philadelphia represents the era of revival which began with the Reformation in the sixteenth century, was followed by the spread, defense, and solidification of true Christianity during the seventeenth century, the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, and the blossoming of this genuine Christianity into the intensified dedication to biblical study and to worldwide evangelism of the nineteenth century. It would be difficult to overestimate the spiritual power and significance of this exciting time in the history of the Church (wherein the positive developments discussed here were almost exclusively the province of what has generally been called "Protestantism"). In contrast to Sardis, the third phase in a series of progressively degenerate eras of the visible church organization and a time when almost the entire church-visible was dead in the spiritual sense, Philadelphia represents a complete turn around. Philadelphia thus personifies a veritable "rising from the dead" of organized Christianity in the revitalized protestant church(es).

Along with Smyrna, Philadelphia is the only other Church era to receive a report from our Lord lacking in overt criticism. Indeed, historically speaking, the era of Philadelphia was an impressively commendable one in terms of the quantity and quality of its evangelism, in terms of the orthodoxy and intensity with which it sought God's truth through the holy scriptures, and in terms of its widespread charity directed towards believers and unbelievers alike, all this in spite of the often violent opposition it encountered, especially in the early years. It is also to



Philadelphia's credit that the believers of this era essentially made "something from nothing", jump-starting, as it were, the forward progress of the church-visible through defection from the moribund organization already in place, and creating new organizations, while re-inventing the procedures, policies and approaches necessary for the sanctification and spiritual progress of the Christians of its day. All this had to be accomplished in an environment of intense hostility from the former church, occasionally severe persecution, and significant political interference. The history of the West during these four centuries is well established and testifies to these facts, as we see a growing opposition from the old church-visible to the new path being forged by true believers (such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli), a political reaction leading to wars and pogroms, and a continual diaspora of these genuine Christians from antagonistic countries (such as the Huguenots from France). But rather than allowing these difficulties to cast a damper upon their search for the truth, we also see from the famous reformers themselves, their followers, and the serious theology and biblical scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Word of God and the tools for its proper study (textual, theological, linguistic, historical, etc.) developed, distributed, and exploited as never before in history. The courageous separation of Philadelphia from the dead church (16<sup>th</sup> century), her survival and triumph over the forces which sought to destroy her (17<sup>th</sup> century), the revivification and intensification of true spirituality among the faithful (18<sup>th</sup> century), and the bubbling over of these positive trends into widespread evangelism, dedicated biblical scholarship, and charitable activities (19<sup>th</sup> century), mark Philadelphia as one of the truly extraordinary eras of the Church, all in spite of the great psychological pressure of being placed in the position of having to go against the established former church.

This last point, the trauma of separation from all that one has once known and from all that was once the only center and focus of supposed "legitimacy", was not undertaken lightly by the reformers, and remained an issue throughout the era of Philadelphia. A large part of this "separation anxiety" was no doubt due to the strident claim by the now dead church-visible (from which Philadelphia had to part) to be "the one true Church", a claim it sought to support and emphasize on the basis of centuries of practiced ritual, ornate regalia, and imposing rigamarole, though not on the basis of the truth. The need to belong, to come in from the cold and be a part of a tangible "universal fellowship", was a longing and a desire that vexed the spirit of Philadelphia throughout her history (a normal human emotion which all cults exploit). It is also a concern to which our Lord responds throughout His message (see below), promising to the true believers of Philadelphia at the end of that message demonstrable and marvelous tangible proofs of an eternal fellowship beyond comparison with any temporal union (Rev.3:11-13), proofs which corresponds to our true "union" with Him which was irrefutably if invisibly theirs all the time "in Christ" (Jn.14:20; 15:5-8; 17:23; Rom.6:3-11; 2Cor.5:17; Eph.2:4-10; 2:13). There is no greater "belonging" for the Christian than the reality and the experience of belonging to Christ, and, conversely, there is no fellowship or union apart from Christ which can in any way compensate for the loss of Him – such was the essence of the choice confronting the Philadelphians. For while scripture emphatically counsels unity with our genuine brothers in the true Church (e.g., Eph.4:3), it also emphatically commands careful separation in all things intimate from both those whose behavior has crossed the line into gross sinfulness, and from those who are not, in fact, truly followers of Christ, a stricture all the more pressing to the degree

that such associations carry with them subordination to false authority (cf. Rom.16:17; 1Cor.5:9-13; 2Thes.3:6; 3:14-16):

Don't let yourselves be mismatched together in the yoke with unbelievers (i.e., close, intimate association). For what partnership does righteousness have with immorality, or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement is there between Christ and Belial (i.e., the devil)? What agreement is there between God's temple and idols? For we are the temple of the Living God, just as God has said: "I will dwell among them and walk among [them], and I will be their God, and they will be My people. Therefore come out from the midst of them (i.e., the ungodly) and separate yourselves" says the Lord, "and do not touch anything unclean. Then I will receive you and will be to you as a Father, and you will be to Me as sons and daughters" says the Lord Almighty.

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:14-18

Difficult as it may be, there often comes a time when separation from pernicious influences is not merely a prudent course but really the only possible safe one, even if the group or individual from which we separate continues to exert a strong emotional pull. This was certainly the case for all true believers as the era of Sardis came to a close. To abide within the dead edifice of the traditional church was a course of action impossible for Philadelphia if she were to remain faithful to the Lord. For the logic of continued association with this now completely corrupt and spiritual defunct organization could only mean eventual death by association and severe moral compromise, no matter how hard one might try to make spiritually acceptable accommodations (a theme amply demonstrated by Luther's life and experience). In separating herself from the established church-visible, Philadelphia made the correct choice, a difficult choice, but the correct one. Without distancing herself from the spiritually dead system of Sardis, she could not have fulfilled her duty toward the Lord (as she did in the event: "*you have given heed to My Word and have not denied My Name*"; "*you have kept My Word of perseverance*"). For things had come to such a pass by the waning days of Sardis, that only in separation could true faith and faithfulness be maintained. By the time of the early sixteenth century the church visible had become so spiritually dysfunctional that no other course of action remained to those who genuinely desired to follow Jesus Christ other than to "come out of her, My people", or to share in her sins and punishment (cf. Rev.18:4).

There is a lesson in this for us all. While no separation from a longstanding relationship should be entered into lightly, as believers, whatever the era, we do need to take all necessary measures to avoid being dragged down spiritually by negative associations, even when the parties in question are ostensibly followers of the Lord as the traditional church-visible at that time claimed to be (cf. Jude 1:22-23). This is especially true where it is not merely a matter of stumbling, or weakness, or misinformation, but of willful, dedicated, self-justifying sinful behavior on the part of these reprobate associates. In such cases, no intervention on our part is likely to be effective in bringing about change. For organizations and individuals of this sort, the only hope of repentance before faith is entirely destroyed will lie in the intervention of divine judgment (1Jn.5:16-17; cf. 1Cor.5:5; Phil.3:18-19).

That does not mean that such separations are ever easy. Indeed, the fact that it is only in extreme circumstances that this ultimate course of action should be entered into virtually guarantees that parting will prove a rough experience. It should also be noted here that in our own era this (correct) principle has often been severely misapplied. Cults, in particular, are always eager to have new or potential adherents cut themselves off from all friends, family and former associations – the better to gain complete domination over their victims’ lives. That is not at all what is being described here. Quite the contrary, the believers of the era of Philadelphia seceded from *just such a wrongfully dominating organization*, one in which it was no longer even possible to coexist and at the same time truly follow the Lord. It is only in cases where one’s freedom to follow Jesus Christ has been essentially curtailed that such separation is called for. Friends, family, and longstanding associations may sometimes be time-consuming and may often fail to appreciate one’s own unique approach to Christian discipleship, but that is not at all the same thing as effectively preventing our worship of God, and in no way abrogates our divinely mandated responsibility to do what is right by these persons and groups.

The fact that the believers of Philadelphia had no real choice but to separate for conscience’ sake from the contemporary church-visible (other than to endure the shipwreck of their faith: 1Tim.1:19), did not lessen the trauma of separation or eliminate the grief which is often felt for an irretrievably lost relationship. This sense of loss and (vain) hope of reunion (still manifest in our own day in the form of the ecumenical movement) is reflected in the name “Philadelphia”, in its etymology bearing, as is well known, the meaning “brotherly love”, yet also reflecting in this context the pining of the believers of that era for unity lost. This sentimentality and nostalgia was, unfortunately, also reflected in many of the new organizational approaches adopted during the course of the Reformation and beyond. Somewhat ironically, although the forms of Church governance and ritual are in general not specifically treated in scripture (and therefore call for the greatest flexibility), it was this very nexus of issues which became the cause of the greatest controversies within the community of the true believers of Philadelphia.<sup>47</sup> Thus the name “Philadelphia” cuts both ways, exhibiting at once the genuine love of the true believers of that era for Christ and for each other, yet at the same time indicating a somewhat maudlin view of the past which soured the present, at least to some degree. This characteristic is reflected in the many facets of the reformed churches which remind and harken back to the old rituals and old ways, at least in form if not in substance. Looking back is always a dangerous thing from a spiritual point of view, as Lot’s wife discovered (Gen.19:16-26; cf. Lk.9:62; 17:32; Heb.6:4-6; 10:35-39; 11:15). It was impossible (as well as inadvisable) for Philadelphia to try and build something equivalent to the traditional church-visible she had left, and there were obvious dangers in making energetic attempts to have the new churches “look and feel the same”,

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<sup>47</sup> See the discussion under “Ephesus” above. The issue of Church governance is to be covered in part 6B of Bible Basics: Ecclesiology. Even a cursory reading of Acts will show that the apostles and company did not proceed from a dogmatically specific blue-print on this score, but rather combined old approaches and new ideas in a very practical way, adapting what was flexible (organization) in order to serve the true goal (the gospel of Jesus Christ: salvation, sanctification, spiritual growth, and service to Him).

especially since “secular form over spiritual function” had been a large part of the problem to begin with.

All this helps to explain why our Lord’s evaluation of Philadelphia, while extremely positive in many ways, is not as glowing as we might have expected. For in the phrases “I know your works” and “because you have *a little* power” we see, through our Lord’s very precise language here, praise of a somewhat muted nature (compare on the subject of works the clearly positive “your most recent works are more numerous than your first ones” in the case of Thyatira: Rev.2:19; or the decidedly negative “that you have a reputation of being alive but you are dead” in the case of Sardis: Rev.3:1). Despite her many virtues and accomplishments, Philadelphia was not perfect. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the believers of that era did brood carefully over their organizational, ceremonial and theological choices, even when many such actions were really nostalgic responses to what had been left behind. In our own Laodicean era, by way of contrast, like the dog that returns to its own vomit (2Pet.2:22), we have been all too quick to reassume many of the legalistic and unbiblical burdens which Philadelphia had left behind, even to the point of seriously contemplating reunion with the same dead edifice previously abandoned in order to ensure spiritual survival.

### **Christ’s Self-description:**

1. “the One who is holy and true”: Both of these words, “holy” and “true” speak to the issue of sanctified separation. The first of the two, “holy” or “saintly” embodies the quality of sanctification, that is, a setting apart from all that is profane, a complete separation from sinfulness and evil (to which all who follow Him have been called: Heb.12:14).<sup>48</sup> The second word used by our Lord to describe Himself here is “true”, the adjectival counterpart of the noun “truth” in both English and Greek. Truth entails separation from all that is false and from all lies. In distancing herself from the corrupt church-visible of her day, Philadelphia was responding to the prodding of the Holy Spirit to separate from moral and spiritual corruption (i.e., to be “holy”), and to take her stand instead with the truth against the false dogma that had come to dominate the church-visible (i.e., to be “true”). Thus in using these two words to describe Himself and His own character, our Lord Jesus Christ identifies with and approves the difficult course undertaken by Philadelphia in her separation from the sinful and false traditional church of her day. For He is the truth, so that we must speak the truth (Jn.14:6; Eph.4:25). He is holy, so that we must be holy as well (1Pet.1:15-16).

2. “the One who has the key of David, the One who opens and no one will lock, who locks and no one opens”: In the ancient world as is the case today, keys spoke of access and authority to enter. In the case before us here, the reference is to opportunity for action in the kingdom of heaven as it is being advanced upon the earth (Matt.16:19; cf. Is.22:22; Jn.10:3). No one has the ability to do a single thing for God’s kingdom without His authority, without His power, without His permission and access (Is.26:12; Zech.4:6; Jn.15:4). All that we do “for Him” can only be

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<sup>48</sup> See Peter’s Epistles: Lesson #13: “Sanctification”.

done in the power of His Spirit, through the gifts He has provided, in accordance with His plan for the ages in Jesus Christ. When such authorization *is* forthcoming, however, then nothing can stand in the way of the authority and power of the Lord: what God has locked, no one can unlock; what God has opened, no one can shut. The opportunity for spiritual advance and service to God provided to the believers of Philadelphia came from Him, the Messiah, David's greater Son who, as Savior of the world, has "opened" the gates of eternal salvation to all who would follow Him. This description in this context is an indication to the believers of Philadelphia that despite being "locked out" of what had been for centuries the only church organization, their opportunities for personal growth and fellowship with the Lord and for service to Him were entirely a matter under His control. Rather than feeling the sting of reproach on account of being *excluded* from their former associations, they were to take great comfort from these words, for they are here *included* in the power of God's plan to do His will. For without God, who can stand? But God is well able to make all those stand firm who follow Him (Rom.14:4).

### **Christ's Particular Message:**

1. "I know your works. Behold, I have provided an open door before you which no one can shut": The open door represents spiritual opportunity (cf. Acts 14:27; 1Cor.16:9). Since this door of opportunity has been unlocked and opened up by the Lord Himself, it is genuine and not subject to curtailment by the powerful church-visible from which Philadelphia has separated herself. The provision of a clear way to seek God through a counter-organization truly dedicated to Him, the endurance of and perseverance through all contrary opposition, the pursuit of His truth in an organized and systematic way, and the transmission of it around the world are key characteristics of Philadelphia's four centuries, achievements or "works" which, while they may not have received the recognition of the world, were known by the Master to whom they were dedicated.

2. "Because you have a little power and have given heed to My Word and have not denied My Name, behold, I am going to give you some of those from Satan's synagogue who claim they are Jews and are not but are lying. Behold, I will make them come and worship at your feet and they will know that I have loved you": We may not be perfect, and we may not exploit and apply all the resources God gives us; we may only have or deploy "a *little* power", but in God's hands that little seed can grow, like mustard, into a massive tree. Whatever their faults, the Philadelphia era believers did make the most important investment that one can make in life. They seeded time, energy, their gifts and their material resources into the pursuit and the service of the Lord Jesus Christ. For this most prudent of investments, they are recognized by our Lord, for their works are "known", meaning that they have been found acceptable by Him, and as such they will endure forever. The "little power" brought to bear by these believers is directed toward personal spiritual growth ("*[you] have given heed to My Word*" – for the process of knowing, believing, and living the Word of God forms the basis for all spiritual growth), and towards service and ministry on His behalf ("*[you] have not denied My Name*" – for witnessing to and for Him, by

word and by deed, by Christian living, Christian witnessing, and Christian service is to fully acknowledge the Name of the One who bought us).

As a result of their dedication and service – in spite of opposition and pressure from those who (falsely) claim to be the “one true Church” – our Lord also promises the Philadelphians that some of that number (described here as “the synagogue of Satan”, since they represent the pseudo-church, and not, as they claim, the true Church) will eventually come and acknowledge that it is within the ranks of Philadelphia that God’s favor, God’s Church truly resides. These adherents of the church-visible “claim to be Jews” (that is, claim to be the true people of God), but are lying (to themselves and to God). Throughout the course of the era of Philadelphia, from its inception to its end, there has indeed been a steady stream of individuals who, while beginning in that old, spiritually dead organization, have come to see and understand who it is that is truly of God, and have, to their credit and eternal benefit, in true repentance abandoned the false and grabbed hold of the true, just as the original reformers and their followers did. In the end, this is the greatest sort of encouragement for the slighted, outcast Philadelphians, and the greatest proof of their salutary residence within the love of God (“*they will know that I have loved you*”).

It is necessary to briefly discuss the reference to “Jews”, here, as this quotation has often been misrepresented. The writer of this passage (the apostle John) was Jewish, and he is here quoting the Messiah, the God-man who is Jewish in His humanity. Later in the book of Revelation, the exalted status of Israel is undeniable (cf. the 144,000 from Israel in chapters seven and fourteen, and the New Jerusalem with its gates of the twelve tribes: Rev.21:12). Being Jewish is thus a decided advantage in the book of Revelation, a point verifiable in scripture generally (cf. Rom.3:1-2). And that is *also* the case in this passage – the “synagogue of Satan” here only *claim* to be Jews. They are *lying*, and are, in fact, not Jewish at all. The negative connotations of the context therefore fall entirely upon the spiritually dead pseudo-church of the reformers’ day who are being criticized for falsely identifying themselves as God’s people. There is thus absolutely nothing in this passage which is in any way anti-Semitic, and such meaning can only be derived by means of gross and willful misinterpretation.

The identification of the dead, organized church on the threshold of the Reformation as “those who claim they are Jews and are not” is a telling one. For since the days of its first decline, in addition to the many features which recalled pagan forms, there had also been much about the corrupt church-visible that deliberately mimicked ancient Israel. Temples (cathedrals), sacrifices (sacraments), ephods (vestments), a ruling high priest (pope), legalistic interpretations of the Mosaic law (canon law), tithing, are just some of the more obvious deliberate attempts to caste the organization in the role of a “new Israel”. This trend clearly marks an attempt to gain in (pseudo) authority through such an identification, but God knows who are truly His, who are truly the “Israel of God” (Gal.6:16).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see “The Uniqueness of Israel” in section II.8.b.i of part 5 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Judgment, Restoration and Replacement”.

3. “Because you have kept My command to persevere in Me, I will also keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the entire inhabited world to put the inhabitants of the world to the test”: The first point to notice here is that this promise has already been fulfilled. The era of Philadelphia has passed, as have all the great believers who served in her ranks, who *“kept My command to persevere in Me”*, that is, those who obeyed our Lord’s “word” to them to continue in their faith and faithfulness to Him throughout their lives. They, individually and collectively, *were* kept from experiencing the Great Tribulation, for that cataclysmic event is still future even now. The believers of the era of Philadelphia endured much: a difficult and costly separation, a period of extended persecution that followed, and the trial of reconstructing a visible church that would truly seek and serve God. They met the challenge of developing true and effective educational and scholarly communities for the preparation of teachers, and the challenge of expressing and exporting their zeal for God at home and abroad in biblically correct ways. They persevered in their faith in spite of “dungeon, fire and sword”, and they met the secular tests to faith which followed in Philadelphia’s latter years, preferring to the end to believe in God and to trust in His scriptures rather than in the cancerous, materialistic atheism (most visible in its Darwinian manifestation) that dominated her final century. Having been tested repeatedly and having met every test, Philadelphia is blessed with the relief of deliverance from the final, most horrendous test fated to befall mankind before our Lord’s return: the Tribulation.<sup>50</sup> In this blessing she stands in sharp contrast to our own era of Laodicea, who, having deceived herself in every prior test, will be forced to face that most severe testing in the history of the Church, a trial which cannot be ignored or explained a way, and one in which the true worth of every believer’s faith will be laid bare for all to see.

4. “I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have that no one takes your crown [away]”: In divine terms, given that “a thousand years is as a day” (Ps.90:4; 2Pet.3:3-10), the Lord’s return is indeed not far off (nor any of the events which precede it). Secondly, in terms of the very short span of every individual human life, the interval between the present and our blessed (personal) reunion with our Lord is but a brief moment distant (a perspective of which no believer can ever afford to lose sight). Lastly, while Philadelphia is promised a respite, for us today this really is a complete and urgent reality: it will not be long now before these things take place. And that is really the main point for the Philadelphia era believers – indeed for all believers – to garner from this passage. For as we saw in part 1 of this study (see section V., Rev.1:3 in loco), this principle of the imminency of the end times is an important and recurring theme in scripture, particularly in the book of Revelation. In spite of any and all other chronological information (like the promise to deliver Philadelphia, or indeed the entire schema of the Church Age as given in the messages to the seven churches), the “end” is nevertheless imminent. For the principle of “imminency of the end times” (the exact point made in this verse) means that God has the right (since our Lord’s victory at the cross) to put these events in train *at any time* (whether we with our weak human logic find that contradictory or not). Therefore, we believers must be prepared for these events *at all times*.

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<sup>50</sup> On the misapplication of this passage in support of the so-called “pre-tribulational rapture”, see Peter’s Epistles #27: Three False Doctrines that Threaten Faith.

As to the second sentence covered above, the phrase “what you have” refers to the progress in spiritual growth and ministry made by the Philadelphians, individually and collectively, while “holding on” refers to perseverance in the good behavior which has resulted in this progress in the first place. This is a sobering set of statements. For the clear implication of our Lord’s words here is that, regardless of past accomplishments (even exceptional ones like those of the Philadelphians), there is no point at which the Christian can afford to rest on his laurels. As long as we are in this vineyard, it is because the Lord has left us here for a purpose. In universal terms, that purpose will always involve continued and continuing sanctification (separation from sin and evil), spiritual growth (based upon all our good applications of truth, learning and living the Word, prayer, etc.), and serving Him (functioning with our gifts, in the ministries, according to the effects that He provides). Only by continuing to press forward on all these fronts are we assured of not drifting backwards (Heb.2:1), and only by so doing do we ensure our “*holding on*” to the results and rewards of “*what you have [accomplished]*”.

Thus forward progress is the only truly safe approach to the Christian life, the only way to make absolutely sure that we do not “lose our crown” of reward promised to all who have faithfully followed Jesus Christ in this life. For every believer who attains spiritual maturity rates at least one crown, the “crown of righteousness” (2Tim.4:8). For spiritual advance and growth to the point of maturity followed by a life that exemplifies this growth *confirmed in testing*, the “crown of life” is promised (Jas.1:12), and the highest prize is the “crown of glory”, reserved for those who fulfill the call of their personal ministries (whatever these may be) in a fashion acceptable to the Lord (1Pet.5:1-4).<sup>51</sup> That all who are effective in the Christian life will receive at least one crown is certainly good news. But this verse also serves as a stark reminder that the loss of that crown (and of everything which such loss entails) is a distinct possibility if we are negligent about “holding on” and slipshod in our efforts to persevere along the path which our Lord has shown us and commanded us to walk in. This is especially true inasmuch as this particular caveat is addressed to believers of Philadelphia, even though their collective behavior comes in for some of the highest praise of any of the seven eras of the Church.

### **Christ’s Promised Rewards:**

1. “The one who wins the victory I will make a pillar in the temple of My God and he shall never go out again”: This blessed promise, made to all victorious believers, that is, to all followers of Jesus Christ who complete their earthly lives with their faith in Him intact, has often been misunderstood. Clearly, we who have trusted in Jesus for the resurrection of our bodies, and whose hope is firmly set upon having a glorious new habitation just like His (Rom.6:5; 8:11; 1Cor.15:45-49; 15:53; 2Cor.5:1; Col.3:3-4; 1Jn.3:2), an eternal personal temple for the indwelling of God (compare Jn.4:21 with 1Cor.3:16 and 6:19; cf. Eph.2:20-21; 1Pet.2:4-5), are

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<sup>51</sup> The doctrine of crowns is covered in Peter’s Epistles, lesson #18, “Eternal Rewards”, and in part 6 of this series, section I.7, “The Judgment and Reward of the Church”.



most assuredly *not* going to be turned into literal stone pillars in eternity.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, within the New Jerusalem, our final, eternal home, *there will not even be a temple*, let alone one filled with believers metamorphosed into columns of rock (Rev.21:22). No, this is a metaphor, and a blessed one which in a truly wonderful way emphasizes the solidity of our eternal fellowship with our God and with our Lord Jesus Christ. For *just like* a pillar is an integral and irremovable part of the unity of a temple, *so by way of comparison* we shall be integral and irremovable parts of God's eternal family, and in an indescribably and wonderfully intimate way. From the day of our resurrection, we shall be in full and tangible reality what we are now in essence: united with Jesus Christ as part of His Body the Church forevermore. No relationship any of us has ever known on this earth can come close to the intimacy and the wonder which we shall all experience on that day with the Father and with the Son as part of them forever in an experiential way (Rom.6:3-5; 2Cor.5:17; Col.3:1-4). This incredibly encouraging promise is all the more comforting to the believers of Philadelphia who found themselves essentially "put out" of the visible church of their day, excluded from all the architecturally great temples with all their high ritual, pomp and circumstance. Though they knew in their hearts that they were right and had to do what they did in separating from the dead traditional church, this knowledge did not completely eradicate the emotions of loss, shame, and fear. With these few words, our Lord more than restores everything they had lost by choosing what they knew was pleasing to Him, promising them a better fellowship with God Himself, and one that will never end.

2. "And I will write upon him the Name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem (which is going to come down from heaven from My God), and My new Name": We have already made mention of our future renaming as a reflection of the role we have played in the Lord's service here on earth (see above under Rev.3:12). This engraving of each believer with God's Name and with the name of our eternal abode, the New Jerusalem, and with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the ultimate badge of "belonging". To such a complete degree will we belong to the Father and the Son from the day our eternity commences, and to such a complete degree will we be a part of the glorious eternal city, New Jerusalem, that we will actually bear these identifying names. This is an extremely encouraging promise for believers of all eras, especially in times of isolation and shunning. For the systematically excluded, rejected, harried and despised believers of the era of Philadelphia, its meaning is all the more powerful. There is also a clear contrast here (one most important for us who are on the cusp of the end times to appreciate) between these three eternal names on the resurrected bodies of faithful believers on the one hand, and the "mark of the beast" to be tattooed on the mortal bodies of those who have rejected God during the Tribulation on the other (Rev.13:16-17; 14:9; 14:11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). For those who receive the mark of the creature confirm their condemnation (and their names have, as a result, been removed from the Book of Life: Rev.13:8; 17:8), but those who refuse to take the mark to save their mortal lives, will be marked as members of the family of God and the Bride of Christ in the paradisaical New Jerusalem, memorialized forever by these blessed names (cf. Is.56:5; 62:2; 65:15; Rev.2:17; 3:12; 14:1; and compare Rev.19:12-16):

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<sup>52</sup> For more on our eternal body, see Peter's Epistles, lesson #20, "The Resurrection".

And they [believers] will see His face, and His name [will be] on their foreheads.  
Revelation 22:4

Like Abraham and so many faithful believers before them, the Philadelphians were, in a sense, pilgrims wandering on this earth (cf. Heb.11:38; 1Pet.1:1). They may have felt abandoned; they may have been homeless (in the sense of being cast out of their former organization). But, for us as well as for them, the future fellowship with the Father and the Son and their permanent residence in the New Jerusalem which is “coming down from heaven” are wonders not to be compared to any privation, exclusion or suffering this life may offer us, even in the depths of the Great Tribulation to come, if only we would see these matters with our Lord’s eyes. And of these things on that day there will be no doubt, for we shall bear these names of glory on our persons forever.

Revelation 3:14-22:

(14) And to the angel of the church in **Laodicea** write: "This is what the Amen says, the reliable and truthful Witness, the origin of God’s creation. (15) I know your works, that they are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! (16) As it is, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth. [I will vomit you out], (17) because you say “I am rich and have become wealthy and know no lack”. And you do not realize that it is you who are the one who is wretched and pitiful and poor and blind and naked. (18) I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become wealthy, and white clothing so that you may be clothed and so that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed, and salve to rub on your eyes, so that you may see. (19) As many as I love, I reprove and discipline. So become zealous and repent. (20) Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking. If anyone will listen to my voice and open the door, I will go in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. (21) The one who wins the victory, I will grant him to sit with Me on my throne just as I also have won the victory and have taken my seat with my Father on His throne. (22) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

## **7. Laodicea: “The Era of Degeneration” (1882 to 2026 = 144 years)**

Laodicea represents our current era, that is to say, sadly, the era of the degeneration of the Church. The first thing to note is that we need to be careful here to make a distinction between the degeneration of the present and the corruption of the era of Sardis. For what has been happening in our own day (both as it is reflected in current events and in the prophetic description given by our Lord in Revelation 3:14-22) is not so much a willful rebellion against God as it is spiritual atrophy and growing complacency. In other words, we Laodicean Christians, collectively speaking, very much resemble the younger brother in our Lord’s parable who verbally expressed an eagerness to do His father’s will when called upon, but never got around to doing anything in fact (Matt.21:28-31). This sort of complacency is the chief characteristic of our era, the final era of the Church before our Lord’s return. And it is indeed a character trait which commonly results from relative ease of life and material prosperity.

Scripture is clear enough on the subject of God's intolerance of complacency (cf. Deut.8:10-20; 31:20; 32:15; Ps.123:4; Prov.1:22; Is.32:9-14; Ezek.28:5; Hos.13:6; Amos 6:1-7; Zeph.1:12-13). The entire reason for continued creature existence in this post-fall world we inhabit is to give us the opportunity to make a choice for Him. By this is He glorified.<sup>53</sup> And even in the case of those who turn against Him contrary to His first, best will for them, He is nevertheless glorified in the justice with which He treats them (Ps.51:4; Rom.3:4). But those who are complacent, lukewarm about the central issue of our existence, that is, our attitude towards God and His Son, for all such His patience is limited (especially in the case of those who profess to be His) as Christ's words to us here indicate so clearly.

We of Laodicea think that we have it all, but in spiritual terms we fall far short of previous eras. Our era is in fact the only one which receives no positive comments whatsoever from our Lord (until the final promise given to those who "overcome" which is common to all seven messages). Even in the case of Sardis, the era of corruption, we find "a few persons ... who have not befouled their clothing". For in an era of reprobation such as Sardis was, it was no doubt inevitable that some would reject the trend of willful rebellion against God, choosing to follow Him instead. Not so the era of Laodicea, where rather than movement away from Him or towards Him, there is precious little movement at all. The bland complacency and self-satisfaction which has permeated the last hundred plus years of the Church on earth has produced a general approach to Christianity so neutral, so lukewarm, that there is little to assertively shrink back from or to wholeheartedly embrace. Put another way, in a collective sense the church visible of our day (in all of its myriad manifestations and organizations) stands for very little in terms of depth, in terms of fire of conviction, in terms of spiritual fervor. It is, to use Christ's word, "lukewarm", neither willfully reprobate, nor deeply dedicated to serving Him. Like the younger brother in the parable cited above, we talk a very good game, but are essentially inert when it comes to truly following and serving Him.

The previous era of the reformers, that of Philadelphia, was not, as we have pointed out, perfect, but their "little power" with all its kinks and blemishes was sufficient to earn Christ's praise, and to vouchsafe for them deliverance from the coming "great hour of testing", the Tribulation (Rev.3:10). By way of contrast, it is precisely because of our collective need for refinement that our era will not only terminate in this fast-approaching terrible time destined to "test all those who live on the earth", but will do so in truncated fashion, with Laodicea serving out not even half of the years of the previous five eras.<sup>54</sup> For the Philadelphians "kept My command to persevere in Me", and that is the difference. We of Laodicea have, by and large, drifted into gray compromise, not out of cowardly fear or arrogant rebellion, but rather out of convenience, comfort, and complacency. This can be seen in nearly every church and church organization.

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<sup>53</sup> See "Man created for the glory of God" in section I.3 of part 3 of the Satanic Rebellion series, "The Purpose, Creation and Fall of Man".

<sup>54</sup> See the discussion above in the general introduction to this section on the Seven Churches.

Serious prayer and personal sanctification, serious discipleship to Jesus Christ, and, in particular, serious study of the Word of God by lay and clergy alike, grow rarer with every passing year. Is it not ironic that in a time when, generally speaking, Christians have more resources, more time, more opportunity, more freedom than ever before to pursue our Lord, His Word, and His will for our lives, that we, as a group, are guilty of putting aside that best part in favor of the vain pursuits of this world (cf. Lk.10:38-42)? That is the very definition of lukewarmness, namely, paying God a sort of lip-service, and, as a substitute for true discipleship, getting involved in “Christian activities” which we may find fun, interesting and entertaining but which are mere distractions from the hard work we know in our hearts constitutes true spirituality and contributes to true spiritual growth. Worse yet, we have a tendency to justify this approach to ourselves – as if God could be persuaded that the colossal squandering of the time, resources and opportunities we have been given should be justified on the basis of our “good intentions” (Gal.1:10).

This tendency to self-justification of our flawed approach to the Christian life can be seen in the etymology of the name chosen for our era, “Laodicea”, a compound word of two Greek morphemes meaning at the root level “people” and “just”, and admitting of the translation “the [self]-justifying crowd”. There is a subtle difference between this meaning and that of the Nicolaitans (“the people conquer”), for, in that former instance, it was a case of a decidedly non-Christian, actually anti-Christian element attacking and invading the church visible. In our own day, it is more a question of we Christians adopting a very lackadaisical approach to seeking God (if seeking is even the correct word), then taking comfort in our self-established low standards of who we should be and what we should be doing. Mega-churches which focus on entertainment, easy-listening Christianity-for-everybody approaches, and an overall “relativistic” philosophy that seeks inclusion to the detriment of truth (removing the “offense” of truth, we might say: cf. Gal.5:11) are symptoms of this lukewarm trend. This trend has brought matters to such a pass in these latter days that almost the only religious fire and zeal still to be found originates from cults and heresies (and is therefore pointless as being “not according to true knowledge”: cf. Rom.10:2).

Relativism, the intellectual counterpart of spiritual apathy (lukewarmness), began infecting the churches early on in the era of Laodicea. That such a philosophy and method of approach to Christian truth must necessarily result in superficiality of thought is *prima facie* obvious. More distressing yet is the fact that our relationship with Jesus Christ can never be deep and pure and fiery apart from the concentrated power of the truth contained in scripture. To ignore the teachings of the Bible or to diminish their importance in any way is, by default, to ignore the dynamic potential of a close relationship with Him with the result that everything in the spiritual life suffers, especially the individual ministries to which each and every one of us have been called.

The (relative) political stability, material prosperity, and scientific progress which followed in the wake of the era of Philadelphia was, from the standpoint of opportunity, a blessing, for it provided heretofore unheard of possibilities for individual Christians. In no other era have Christians collectively had as much time, as much freedom, and as much availability of necessary

materials (everything from scriptures in original languages, opportunities for education, books, pamphlets, and potentially well-trained teachers) for spiritual advance. But as so often happens in the secular realm, the “prosperity test” is a difficult one for most human beings to handle, and followers of the Lord are in no wise immune.

Jeshurun grew fat and kicked – [Yes,] you grew fat and heavy and were sated – so that he abandoned God who made him, and considered foolish the Rock, His Savior.  
Deuteronomy 32:15

In times of persecution (such as obtained during much of the Reformation), true priorities are easier for believers to maintain. For only by standing firm with God is there any deliverance, and the folly of relying upon secular forces is made clear for all to see. Following the subsiding of such forces and in a world of growing tranquility (at least as far as the Church is concerned), one in which the religion of science and material prosperity has been progressively gaining sway, the advantages to the church visible of compromise are, from the worldly perspective at any rate, very clear. On the other hand, the disadvantages of an other-worldly focus, from an acquisitive, material point of view, are also abundantly evident.

Small wonder then that, even among Christians, more are familiar with the teachings of Charles Darwin than with those of Charles Hodge. These two are, in spiritual terms, appropriately symbolic figures at the beginning of the Laodicean era.<sup>55</sup> Hodge, perhaps the last, great Bible-oriented theologian of worldwide stature, represents the high point of applied linguistic, systematic and historical knowledge to the search for truth from the scriptures by spiritual means and on God’s terms. Darwin, on the other hand, represents the rise in influence of an entirely different philosophical point of view: an empirical search for “answers” (one can hardly call it truth) from the material world apart from God and apart from the Bible. The former looked to God alone for direction, the latter to Man and Man’s scientific prowess with hardly a glance in God’s direction. While no one would wish to turn back the scientific-technological clock, it is fair to say that the ascendancy of the Darwinian point of view and the decline in terms of general

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<sup>55</sup> Hodge, who died in 1878, is most famous for his Systematic Theology, a careful combination of the best of the reformed teachings along with a scholarly apologetic directed against the new religion of science. Darwin, best known for his Origin of the Species, died a few years later in 1882. According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, he “gradually became more and more of an agnostic in religion.” Darwin therefore is paradigmatic of the Laodicean Christians, waffling and wavering until finally allowing his skepticism and faith in science to quench his faith in God (apparently). One might also include F. Delitzsch (d. 1890) as a middle figure between these two. Delitzsch, a great man whose works are still of tremendous value to those pursuing biblical truth today, began to waver in his old age (under the influence of his secularly inclined son, in this writer’s opinion), eventually giving credence to “modern” text-critical views of the Old Testament. In this way, it is possible to see his life as a paradigm of the transition from the Philadelphia reformers to the “modern” Laodiceans, as faith breaks down under the influence of “scientific proof”.

favor of Hodge's approach within society at large (that is to say, the increasing reverence paid to science from all quarters, and concomitant decrease in respect for seeking the truth from God's Word) has made no little contribution to the general character of this last of the seven Church eras. Even Sardis, as we have just noted, had "some who had not stained their garments", but in Laodicea, most all of us are guilty of being over-proud of things we ought not to be proud of at all (prowess in the material world), and are in general less interested in the Lord and in the Bible than any previous generation of the Church. That is not to say, dear reader, that there are not some of us intent on "bucking" this trend (one would hope that the writing and the reading of these words is an indication of just such a healthy attitude), but we are still all children of our times, so that we all need to take to heart our Lord's words directed specifically to us and examine ourselves on this score (Ps.139:23-24; 2Cor.13:5; Gal.6:4).

Those of us who do stand firmly with the Bible are constantly asked to defend such a position from its philosophical base, as if it were an outrageous, outlandish, and completely unbelievable point of view in light of the modern world's vast materialistic knowledge. Assaults on scripture and its authority, however, are all too often "born well" (i.e., accepted as reasonable) in a turning of proper values on their head analogous to the Corinthian rejection of Paul's inspiration and authority (2Cor.11:20; cf. Jn.5:43). And just as the Corinthians were more responsive to those who treated them poorly (2Cor.11:20; cf. their response to Paul's reluctant use of harsher methods: 2Cor.7:8-16), so in our own era those seeking something more than lukewarmness are often drawn in by hyper-authoritative false teachers and cults (who likewise "enslave, exploit, take advantage, push, slap in the face": 2Cor.11:20). This sad state of affairs is the result of a failure by both leaders and followers, by "clergy and lay". For, in general terms, our Laodicean era has seen for the most part rank and file Christians not respecting the authority of teachers and leaders as they should, and teachers and leaders not being worthy of their respect in the first place. The instances where both ends of this essential equation have been adequately fulfilled have been few and far between. What has been lacking from all parties is true commitment, true dedication, a true willingness to sacrifice and strive for what we claim with our lips is the most important thing in our lives, our relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, to learn to be like Him and to truly follow Him, joining fully in the ministry to which He calls us (and we are all called to something).

In our defense, it is possible to say that the satanic attack upon the fire of Christian zeal in our era has been incredibly subtle and effective. Rather than a direct assault upon our existence, values and standards, the adversary has instead been playing a game of enervation since the beginning of the nineteenth century, seeking the gradual atrophy of fervent spirituality and unreserved faith rather than blatant apostasy (a perfect preparation for just such an apostasy which will indeed break forth during the Tribulation's first half). One can trace this tactic through all areas of human life and society during the Laodicean era. Whether it be Darwinism and scientific relativism (i.e., what truth there is must be sought in the material realm), psychoanalysis (i.e., human rather than divine means of problem-solving), or the growing scholarly skepticism about

the Bible (i.e., “higher criticism” et al.),<sup>56</sup> myriad “modern” societal trends have as their practical effect the diminution of faith. And this attack has been two-pronged. For not only have we been resoundingly and continually told by the pillars of the scientific and scholarly community that our faith has been misplaced, but we have also been tempted by the offering up of science and technology as a *substitute* for God’s truth. Ideally, we who believe in God ought to be able to avail ourselves of whatever is at hand in our day for personal sustenance and the prosecution of our individual ministries (provided we do so in a sanctified way) without at the same time trusting in these worldly media as if they were the means of that sustenance (every truly good thing we have comes from God: Jas.1:17; cf. Job 1:21). But every time we are led *to rely* on the things of this world instead of upon Him, our faith is undermined, and it has certainly been a trend of the modern age that the development, expansion and exultation of scientific, material and technological means has led to a corresponding rise in their valuation in our collective thinking (a trend against which believers need to guard themselves carefully).

On the science and technology side of things, this is particularly evident in the realm of medicine, where Satan uses the latent fear of death so universally human as a powerful hammer to blunt the believer’s faith by encouraging a *reliance* upon the healing arts to the neglect of God when bodily troubles arise (Heb.2:15; cf. Ex.15:26; 23:25; Ps.103:3; 107:20; Hos.11:3). On the academic side, the subtle corruption of simple faith in the truth of scripture can be clearly seen from late nineteenth and twentieth century trends in the “scholarly” treatment of the Bible. Source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, archaeological revisionism, scientific attacks on the accuracy of the Bible, the “quest for the historical Jesus”, attempts to isolate the true “kerygma” of the Gospels, demythologization, etc., etc., all represent a self-indulgent, self-glorifying quasi “search for the truth” of the Bible in word, but in deed are dedicated to destroying it (out of arrogance and jealousy for its true power). We have in just a few short generations come to the place that great institutions of learning expressly founded to teach and understand the Bible are now only interested in its refutation (to the extent that they are concerned about it at all).

The fact that Laodicea is also the only one of the seven Church eras where there is no external or internal opposition mentioned (besides “dead” Sardis where the true believers are forced to withdraw entirely) means that by the time of our era the leaven of complacency has so thoroughly permeated our collective thinking that it is scarcely possible to make a distinction anymore between right and wrong, at least as far as the teachings of the various visible church organizations are concerned. The result is a situation where instead of opposing groups expressing sharp points of view, we find one largely homogenous collection of groups (differing only in the superficialities of appearance) which is “neither hot nor cold”. The effectiveness of this satanic strategy of relativism is clear. For instead of posing a direct challenge to the truth, the compromise of faith brought on by the progression of prosperity, laziness, loose standards, and apathy about the Word of God, has gradually rendered the Church of our era (taken

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<sup>56</sup> Wellhausen’s work ca. 1871 may be taken as the origin of source criticism, while Gunkel, ca. 1901, marks the inception of form criticism.

collectively) a largely insipid, superficial, vapid, and “lukewarm” institution. In terms of our dedication to the Word of God, the Person and the teachings of Jesus Christ, this “easy-listening” Christianity, as we may characterize it, has essentially reduced the vigor of a great symphony performed live to recorded “elevator music” playing in the background – it may be recognizable as music on some level, but it is not the same thing, not the *real* thing. In just this same way, our “Christianity” has all too often become something merely gratuitous and incidental for the purpose of light entertainment, rather than something to be treasured, respected, and given our full attention.

The entertainment portion of this equation is one upon which we should reflect for a moment. In all serious undertakings, it is very easy for an element of entertainment (ostensibly employed to gain attention) to become the end as well as the means. It may well be asked, if the God of our salvation and the sacrifice of His Son are not sufficient in themselves to gain our attention, then to what end entertainment? But pleasant and pleasurable distractions are virtually the only thing left in much of what passes for Christianity in our day. For lukewarm Christians, fun-filled services of little or no true spiritual content seem a perfect way to enjoyably “cover the base” of their responsibility to God. This comes close to being the very definition of the “lukewarmness” for which Christ indicts us in these verses. This trend to lukewarmness in all of its aspects – science over faith, materialism over spirituality, glossy appearance over inner reality, quantity, celebrity, and enjoyment over quality, true substance, and sacrifice – has the effect of rendering us all the more vulnerable to the Great Apostasy predicted during Tribulation’s first half which is all too soon to come.

### **Christ’s Self-description:**

1. “This is what the Amen says, the reliable and truthful Witness, the origin of God’s creation”: All of these elements in Christ’s description of Himself to us speak to the authoritative nature of His words. That is to say, contrary to the entire fundamental attitude of our era, we are not the font of truth and authority – rather it is Jesus Christ who, as the Head of Church, is the ultimate and the only true source of truth, our ultimate and our only true authority (1Cor.11:3; Eph.1:22; 5:23; Col.1:18; 2:19).

**The “Amen”**: As “the Amen”, Jesus is the truth (Jn.14:6), and the One who ratifies and declares truth. The word amen, a Greek transliteration from the Hebrew, means “in truth”, or “truly”. Therefore as a title for our Lord, it clearly underscores the fact that He not only truthfully represents the truth, but that He *is* the truth. This is an important attention-getter for the constituents of a Church era who make it plain by our actions and our words that we believe it is we who have all the answers. The folly of establishing one’s own standards, then judging oneself (favorably) by such self-developed standards, is patently obvious and incredibly arrogant (and is declared to be so by the scriptures: 2Cor.10:12-13). The only correct and proper standard of faith and practice for Christians is the Bible, the very words of our Lord Jesus Christ who is the “Logos”, the Word of God (Jn.1:1-2; 1:14; 5:39; 6:63; 8:47; 17:8; 18:37; 1Jn.1:1; Rev.19:13; cf. Is.55:11; Jn.17:17; Rom.10:17).



**The “Witness”:** In refutation of our false assertions about ourselves (claiming to be rich and wealthy when we are really blind, naked and poor in spiritual terms), Christ is here a “Witness” to the real truth of the matter, a witness who is both “reliable” (i.e., “faithful” in all He reports), and “truthful” (i.e., the content of His witness is completely accurate). Therefore we are without excuse before Him no matter how we might excuse ourselves in our own eyes, for He knows what we are really like, knows what we really esteem. As the reliable and faithful Witness, truth issues forth from Him, not from us. We may belittle the scripture in our thoughts and words, and by our deeds, but His Word still reigns supreme. Moreover, the day is fast approaching when all our self-deception of this sort will melt away in the brilliant light of His presence, on His return to rule the world in righteousness, when the secrets of our hearts will be laid bare, and all the truth will out (Rom.2:16; 1Cor.4:5; cf. Eccl.12:14; Is.26:21; 1Cor.3:13; 2Pet.3:10).

**The “Origin of creation”:** Although we are merely creatures of Christ’s making, as the Father’s Agent, Jesus is the very “Origin of creation” (Jn.1:3; 1Cor.8:6; Col.1:16; Heb.1:2). This final phrase in our Lord’s self-description deliberately recalls the many passages of scripture where the arrogance of the created thing (“the pot”) is held up for ridicule in the face of the power and authority of the Creator (the “Potter”: Is.29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jer.18:6; Rom.9:20-24). As this title makes plain, it is surely we who must take our lead from Him, and not the other way around. Consideration of His innate authority as the One who has made us ought to be corrective of the attitude endemic in our era that would have us dictate to Him what is acceptable and what is not.

### **Christ’s Particular Message:**

1. “I know your works, that they are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! As it is, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of My mouth.”: Christ’s initial comment here about the quality of our collective work in the era of Laodicea is quite a shocking one, and is clearly meant to hit us where it hurts. For if there is one thing which believers of this era might think to put forward in their defense it is precisely this: “we may be found wanting in our zeal, spirituality and spiritual growth, but surely our *works* must in some way make up for our faults!” This is a common and a dangerous error made by all too many believers and pseudo-believers throughout the ages. The idea that we can ever “do something for God” is an entirely erroneous, arrogant, and blasphemous notion (1Cor.4:7; cf. Rom.11:35). We were not saved by our works but by grace (Eph.2:8-9; cf. Rom.11:6). How then do we expect to be rewarded for our works apart from grace (Phil.2:13; Eph.2:10)? Yes, it is true, a large part of God’s purpose for our lives as believers in Jesus Christ is to perform “works worthy of our repentance” (Matt.3:8; 5:16; Lk.3:8; Acts 26:20; Gal.6:9-10; 2Thes.3:13; Tit.2:14; 3:1; 3:8; 3:14; 1Pet.2:12; 2:15). But it often escapes the notice of the inhabitants of Laodicea, who are more impressed with their own works than with the gifts and especially with the Gift which God has given us, that it is in fact God who has given us everything we have, “breath and life and everything else” (Acts 17:25). Indeed, we would not be able to serve Him were it not for the fact that He has given us all distinct spiritual gifts, particular ministries, and has foreordained their effectiveness (1Cor.12:4-7). He has given us His Spirit to guide, empower, and encourage us in our service (Zech.4:6). And He has *even prepared the very works*

*we should do* in eternity past (Eph.2:10). It should be very clear to all serious, Bible-reading Christians that we have absolutely no basis for boasting before Him because of works which we have done (Rom.4:2), for we can do nothing apart from Him (1Cor.12:3). True good works are, moreover, part of a spiritual continuum in the Christian walk. It should go without saying that for such works to be valid, the person in question must be a believer in Jesus Christ (for there is no salvation by works). Furthermore, it is only after growing spiritually, recognizing one's distinctive gifts, and preparing for the unique ministry God has ordained for each of us individually, that production becomes most effective. In other words, anything that is not done according to God's plan, according to His will, and according to His ground rules, is likely to be only slightly effective, if indeed it is even to be adjudged "good works" by Him at all. Jesus is the true Vine, and we are merely branches in Him; as He told us, only by "remaining in Him" can we bear true fruit (Jn.15:1-8). That is to say, only by being truly His disciples are we in a position to produce works which are not "lukewarm", works which truly glorify our God (Jn.15:8).

So therefore we may say that a "cup of cold water given in the Lord's Name" – a right thing done in a right way from right motivation – will not lose its reward (Matt.10:41-42), but millions given only ostensibly on Christ's behalf, or from wrong motivation, or to a bad cause, not in accord with God's plan, are pointless exercises in self-promotion at best (and arrogant attempts to advance our own pseudo-righteousness at worst). This error, of seeking salvation and personal righteousness by works, became institutionalized in the pre-reform church-visible, and was no small contributing factor to the death of spirituality in that institution. For it is the essence of arrogance to assume that God needs anything from us (Rom.11:35). How are we any better than idol-worshiping pagans when we take such an approach (Acts 17:24-25)? We may take it as a matter of faith based upon our Lord's words here that there is much that is being done in the church visible on earth in our day which is ostensibly for Christ, but which is in reality only "wood, hay and stubble", works of the flesh issuing forth from false motivation and destined to be burned when Christ evaluates our lives (1Cor.3:12-15).

Such is our Lord's evaluation of Laodicea's "works" *in the aggregate*. Clearly, not everything done in this era has been to no avail, but the fact that this indictment is a true indication of Laodicea's character should give us all pause. The command following this blanket evaluation to "become zealous and repent" is therefore one which all believers of our era should take to heart, no matter how much we may feel that it does not apply to us personally. For if the logic of our Lord's words here has any meaning it is that to the extent that we *do feel* this assessment is for others, *to just that extent* it is likely to be applicable to us. It is, after all, those in these verses who think themselves rich and well off (in a spiritual sense) who are in reality poor and naked and blind.

The need to prod ourselves to take to heart Christ's command to us to "become zealous and repent" is all the more pressing given our Lord's clear disgust here with the attitude of complacency (with which Laodicea is infected). Complacency, the state of being (spiritually) neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm as far as our enthusiasm for God is concerned, is largely a

question of priorities. We say that we love and value God ... but how much? He loved and valued us enough to make the ultimate sacrifice of His own Son on our behalf. His love, His “zeal” has been made clear by this supreme “work” on our behalf, and by all His myriad, manifold and miraculous works of care and concern for us. What do we have to show in return? The answer in the case of Laodicea is “not very much at all”, for her works are “neither hot nor cold”, not the stuff of intense love and sacrifice, not the stuff of true “zeal”.

When it comes to priorities in the era of Laodicea, God is only one among many, and, generally speaking, not the top priority. For a zealous/jealous God (such as our God is), a God who demonstrates His zeal toward us every day and did so once and for all so overwhelmingly in the gift of His Son (1Jn.4:10), this lukewarm attitude of esteeming Him, but not terribly highly and not first and foremost beyond all other persons and things (whether gods, idols, or false priorities), is an abominable one (“You shall have no other gods before Me” is the *first* commandment: Ex.20:3). The only acceptable attitude in His eyes is the one Paul confesses: to count the world and all that is in it (apart from God) as “rubbish”, and to count everything accomplished and gained or capable of being accomplished and gained in this world as nothing in comparison to gaining Jesus Christ’s approval on that day to come (Phil.3:7-11).

It is just this eternal perspective which most consistently eludes our era. In contrast to the unequivocal faith of earlier times, one hears today a constant litany of doubt, doubt about heavenly realities, about eternal life after death, about eternal rewards, about the resurrection. And even where these truths essential to a healthy and zealous Christian walk are accepted, their logic is all too often not being applied to the way we are living our lives. For while Paul’s “for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” ought to be our point of view (Phil.1:21), all too often the attitude is rather one of prizing the present life and fearing death. Fear of death, doubting the glories to come, and a hyper-myopic focus upon this earthly life are all, in the case of believers, symptoms, symptoms of a consistent failure to learn and apply the truths of the Bible, of poor priorities translating themselves into a poor appreciation and application of the true realities, in short, of lukewarmness, both in cause and effect. For as true zealous followers of Christ, we must understand and believe that God rewards our faithful service here on earth (Heb.11:6; cf. 1Cor.3:8; Heb.6:10; 11:26; Rev.11:18; 22:12), believe in the surpassing value of the rewards to come as compared to anything to be gained on earth (Rom.8:18; 2Cor.4:17; cf. Matt.6:19-20; Phil.1:23), and believe in the resurrection (Jn.11:25; 1Cor.15:19). Through such deeper realities, we have been liberated from the need to fear death (Heb.2:14-15; 1Jn.4:16-18; cf. 1Cor.15:54; 2Tim.1:7-10). What we have in the future is so much better than anything this world offers, it is on those things to come that we are to put our focus (Col.3:1-4). It is not this present world we are to love (Jas.4:4; 1Jn.2:15-17; cf. Lk.14:26-27; Jn.15:19), but the one to come where our true citizenship lies (Phil.3:20).

In addition to being attributable to lukewarmness in the way we are living our Christian lives (i.e., in spiritual immaturity as a result of a failure to grow spiritually in spite of all opportunities to seek God and His truth), this culture of Christian doubt is in no small part a function of the relativism mentioned earlier. Part of the problem is that we, as an era, have accepted an apparent

reality not only dictated by the eyes, but also reinforced by the authorities of this world, giving far too much heed to such preachers of relativism, while paying far too little attention to the words of God on this subject. We need to remember that there are no truly independent agents in this world. We are not our own. Therefore we believe what we listen to, what we give our attention to (whether it be to the diabolical ruler of this world or to the Spirit: Gal.5:16-18). There is no denying that we as a Church era have been overly concerned with the noise and wisdom of this world, the scientific, technical and cultural babble that spouts forth in an uninterrupted stream from every media outlet. But how much attention do we pay to God? How much time and effort do we devote to seeking Him and His counsel? How often do we read our Bibles? How often do we pray? How much time and effort do we spend on seeking out and understanding the teaching of His Word? For we are here in this world not to allow it to recast God in our thoughts through a weak appreciation of the truth (i.e., relativism: cf. Jer.23:26), but instead to completely *transform* our worldly thinking through His truth and His Spirit (Rom.12:2; Eph.4:22-24; cf. 2Cor.5:17; Col.3:9-10).

These are all things the great believers of the past knew and understood (through solid grounding in the Bible and its teachings), so much so that these things were set deep in their hearts as fundamental principles of all they thought and said and did. For those who really and truly believe the truth, the truth will influence everything in the life, and apart from such belief in the truth, there can be no true enthusiasm and zeal. Temporary, short-lived fervor may be worked up or induced by a variety of means (e.g., pep-talks, inspirational music, or emotional rituals), but such pseudo-zeal dissolves like the morning mist just as soon as the stimulus that produced it is removed, and it is of absolutely no use under the pressures of life (let alone the pressures of the coming Tribulation). In the place of consistent teaching of the Word of God, teaching which delves into every aspect of God's truth and into every portion of the scriptures, we have in this era of Laodicea settled for a series of superficial and simplistic approximations of what the Bible has to say on a number of important fronts. Three key examples of this unhealthy trend include the teachings of "the rapture", "organizational security", and "eternal security" (all three of which we have studied in the past: see Peter's Epistles #27: "Three Doctrines which Threaten Faith"). The importance of preparing for the Tribulation has been undermined by the simplistic and incorrect teaching of "the rapture". The importance of taking personal responsibility for spiritual growth has been undermined by the mistaken emphasis on church membership and denomination-centered Christianity. The importance of individual sanctification and discipleship to Jesus Christ has been undermined by the erroneous teaching of "once saved, always saved". All three of these teachings, oversimplifications to the point of incorrectly stating the scriptural view, are examples of how inattention to the Bible has contributed to the lukewarmness of our era. For if we were not to have to face the Tribulation, if we were spiritually "on the right track" merely on the basis of participating in an organization, and if we were secure for all eternity no matter what we did in this life, then a great deal of the natural motivation for the zealotry God requires from us would be lacking. Such is not the case in fact, but in the minds of many of those in our era who should be the most zealous, faulty teachings of this sort which are seen as true serve to quench much of the ardor for Him that would otherwise be theirs.

Akin to these three prominent false teachings that enervate faith is the notion that material prosperity on this earth, especially extraordinary material prosperity, is the ultimate and necessary result of a close relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We have treated before in some detail the fallaciousness of this idea (known in its most extreme form as “the prosperity gospel”), but what needs to be pointed out here is that even a tacit or barely conscious assumption that our material wealth is in some way related to the attainment on our part of some exceptional spiritual status is inevitably a misreading of events and incredibly dangerous in the bargain.<sup>57</sup> God does bless in material as well as spiritual terms, and it is true that some great believers of the past were the beneficiaries of astounding worldly blessings. Job, Abraham, and David are all recorded in scripture as owing their exceptional wealth and status to God – but how many of us would wish to experience the exceptional trials and tribulations these three great men of God endured? And which of us honestly thinks that believers today are spiritually superior to those of the early Church when poverty, especially as reckoned in today’s terms, was the rule among the community of the faithful (cf. Acts 2:44-45; Jas.2:5-7; 5:1-6)? Yet even among the relatively impoverished believers of that day, it is the poverty-stricken Philippians who receive scriptural praise – superior to that of the more well-off Corinthians (compare Phil.4:10-19 with 2Cor.8:1-9:5).

So consider your calling, brothers, namely [the fact] that [there are] not many who are wise by fleshly standards, and not many who are in positions of power, and not many of privileged birth [who have been called to Christ]. But God has instead chosen what is foolish from the world’s point of view, that He might put to shame the wise. And He has chosen what is weak from the world’s point of view, that He might put to shame the strong. And He has chosen what is ignoble from the world’s point of view, yes, what is considered completely worthless, of no account whatsoever, that He might do away with what does count [in the world’s opinion], so that no flesh may boast before God.

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:26-29

The principle stated in these verses applies equally to the matter of personal wealth, whether acquired or inherited. Relative prosperity is a circumstance of life and ultimately depends upon our Lord’s providence and disposition. To the extent that material wealth enables a person to accomplish the purpose God has for him (such as in the case of the gift of giving: Rom.12:8), it may be considered a spiritual asset. But to the extent that it alienates the believer from God (as wealth has a tendency to do), it may be rightly considered a spiritual liability. This is the real point behind our Lord’s command to the “rich young ruler” to give all that he had to the poor (Matt.19:16-26). Christ was not telling all His future disciples to liquidate all our assets to the point of having nothing (for this would leave us without the means to serve God: cf. Lk.22:35-36), but rather to depend and rely upon Him rather than amass wealth (Matt.6:19-24; cf. Job 31:24-28; Ps.49:6; 52:7; 62:10).

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<sup>57</sup> See section I.2 of part 4 of the Satanic Rebellion series, “Satan’s World System”. Additionally, there are a number of e-mail responses on this topic posted at the Ichthys website.

Satan’s accusatory words directed at Job, “strike everything he has and he will curse You to your face”, were, in the normal course of things, entirely wrong as the devil no doubt knew (Job 1:11). For it is *prosperity* that has a tendency to detach most of us from God, while hardship has exactly the opposite effect (Ps.78:34-35; cf. Deut.4:30; Hos.5:15). Job, Abraham and David were all exceptional in that they continued to revere and walk with God to an extraordinary degree *in spite of the fact* that they had already been made rich and powerful by Him. It is no coincidence, therefore, that each of these three were also called upon to undergo exceptional testing to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith and the depth of His mercy as an example to us all (Heb.11:17-28; cf. Rom.15:4). A far more common reaction to material prosperity, whether or not it comes as a blessing from God, is to grow negligent in respect to our relationship with Him, and to make the faulty assumption that the presence of such *wealth* is an indication of spiritual *health*. The result of this more common human reaction to prosperity is the very complacency we see in the case of Laodicea (Deut.8:10-20; 31:20; 32:15; Prov.30:7-9; Is.32:9-14; Ezek.28:2-5; Hos.12:8; Amos 6:1-7; Zeph.1:12-13).

When I fed them, they were satisfied. Once they were satisfied, their hearts became arrogant and they forgot Me.  
Hosea 13:6

When we consciously or subconsciously take credit for our prosperity and arrogantly begin to think of ourselves and our possessions as of the highest importance, then God is diminished in our eyes – but that does not in any way mean that He is diminished in fact! For all our present material well-being, Laodicea is not the Millennium. And in the progression of Church eras related above, it seems clear that the material prosperity we enjoy today is much more the result of residual blessing from the era of Philadelphia than from our own efforts (in a manner analogous to spendthrift children enjoying an inheritance from thrifty parents). For all those who feel that we are on the threshold of even greater material wonder (as a result of our “great efforts” and “great spirituality”), what a shock it will be to find the era of Laodicea “vomited out” instead, deposited not into a time of unprecedented blessing, but straight into the Tribulation, and there complacency will come to an end.

Let us therefore resolve to combat this dread complacency which is so characteristic of our time. Let us put God and His Son first in our hearts and first in our lives. If we do esteem Him beyond everything else in life, then we will seek Him and seek His truth – not as a matter of occasional interest, but as a matter of sincere and consistent devotion. If we do this, then lukewarmness will cease, and good works that are definitely “hot” in God’s estimation will follow as a matter of course, hand in hand with our spiritual growth.

2. “[I will vomit you out], because you say “I am rich and have become wealthy and know no lack”. And you do not realize that it is you who are the one who is wretched and pitiful and poor and blind and naked. I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become wealthy, and white clothing so that you may be clothed and so that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed, and salve to rub on your eyes, so that you may see”:

Laodicea's estimate of their spiritual situation is entirely incorrect. In contrast to the humility of a Paul, who, erring on the side of caution, refused to become overconfident about his own spiritual status (exceptional in the extreme though it was: 1Cor.4:3-5; Phil.3:10-14), believers in the era of Laodicea have a tendency to assume the best, even though the spiritual circumstances suggest the opposite (cf. 1Cor.4:7-8). Laodicea assumes she has cause for rejoicing and ought to be envied by others, but in spiritual things she is in wretched shape, an object of pity for all who see things aright. Laodicea assumes she is rich, inferring spiritual riches from material ones, but in reality she is in dire spiritual poverty, in spite of (and, in part, because of) her material wealth. She may have constructed massive and impressive church buildings, but the spiritual content of what is going on in them is lamentable in the opinion of our Lord. Laodicea assumes she is well-dressed, but by and large her deeds are unacceptable to God, and she is unwittingly walking around naked, her shame visible for all with spiritual sense to see. In short, Laodicea assumes she knows it all, but in fact she is blind to the true nature of her spiritual condition, and her arrogant self-esteem has been entirely misplaced. Collectively speaking, Laodicea is in for quite a shock at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ.

As individual believers of this era, therefore, it certainly behooves us to give heed to these verses and to make sure that we are not following in this shameful pattern which is characteristic to Laodicea in general. To do so, we need to follow Christ's specific instructions here. Our Lord commands all of us to "buy from Me" gold, clothing, and eye salve. The "gold refined by fire" (for representing our achievements) stands for genuine spiritual accomplishment, that is, acceptable production for God (cf. Matt.6:19-24; 1Cor.3:12-15). The "white clothing" (for covering shame) represents personal sanctification, that is, a Christian walk that brings honor to our Lord rather than reproach (cf. Is.61:10; Zech.3:4; Rev.3:4-5; 7:9-14; 16:15; 19:14).<sup>58</sup> The "eye salve" (for clarifying the vision) symbolizes spiritual discernment, that is, true wisdom and enlightenment which come from spiritual maturity (Matt.6:22-23). All three of these "purchases" (rewards for true works done for God, a holy life, and wisdom) are results of spiritual growth, and the process of spiritual growth is the "coin" with which they are procured. What is most important in the Christian life cannot be bought with money. It takes commitment and dedication to the painstaking process of spiritual growth to achieve the genuine production, sanctified walk, and spiritual discernment which are part and parcel of the mature Christian's life for Jesus Christ. Consistent, disciplined, and heartfelt Bible reading, prayer, Bible study, the application of Bible principles to our lives, and production from our spiritual gifts to aid the rest of the Body of Christ in this same endeavor constitute the fundamentals of this process, with each part becoming deeper, more effective, and more blessed the closer the believer walks with Christ.

Tragically relying upon material wealth instead, too many of our era of Laodicea have rejected (by omission or commission) this admittedly demanding process in favor of mere appearances. Our Lord's word to them is a clear reproof. Whether one rejects or neglects the Word of God

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<sup>58</sup> Compare the very obvious analogy in Revelation 16:15 where clothing represents just such personal sanctification, while the lack of it occasions shame.

(instead of reading it, praying according to it, being taught by it, living it, and serving in accordance with it), though this may seem to make for an easier life and therefore be “wise” in the eyes of the world, such a course of action is, in truth, complete folly (Job 5:13; Jer.8:9; 1Cor.3:19).

3. “As many as I love, I reprove and discipline. So become zealous and repent. Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking. If anyone will listen to My voice and open the door, I will go in to him and dine with him, and he with Me”: Reproof (*elengchos*; ελεγχος) is generally verbal, while discipline (*paideia*, παιδεια) is more normally corporal, but the two are sometimes blended together as they are here to suggest the whole gamut of warning and punishment.<sup>59</sup> What we have here is a very clear picture of our Lord getting the attention of the lukewarm believers of Laodicea through a series of measures which escalate from verbal threats to serious and painful punishments. As this verse makes clear, He would not be acting in this way towards us if He did not love us. It is certainly comforting for us to be reminded of the fact that our Lord’s “rod and staff” are ever used with an attitude of love and mercy, and always for our own good (Ps.23:4; Heb.12:4-11). At the same time, however, punishment, no matter how fairly and lovingly administered, and no matter how positive in its ultimate effects, is still painful and embarrassing to experience (2Cor.7:8-12):

Now no punishment is a cause of rejoicing as it is being experienced, but rather of regret – only later does it bear fruit for those who have been trained through it – the fruit of [personal] righteousness that makes one whole and complete.  
Hebrews 12:11

Therefore there can be no doubt about the fact that the preferable course of action is for us to respond to this general reproof before the matter becomes personal between us and Him, and before it escalates to *paideia*, tangible disciplinary measures taken by our Lord to straighten out our individual Christian walk. Inasmuch as this is a message to all of Laodicea, the primary application of these verses is to our Church era as a whole. Christ is “standing at the door”, and is “knocking”. And while it is true that this has individual application (He is getting our attention, and if we respond, our fellowship with Him will be wonderfully enhanced as it should be: “I will ... dine with him and he with Me”), from the collective point of view He is “at the door” in the sense that His return at the conclusion of the end time events we are studying is imminent for us in the era of Laodicea: between His 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent and where we are now stands only what is left of our era and the intervening Tribulation. His “knocking” indicates, again on the collective level, the ultimate attention-getting event in the form of the Tribulation (where lukewarmness will be virtually impossible). And for all who respond to this call in those dark times (rather than falling away in the Great Apostasy), we shall indeed “sup with Him” at His victory celebration on that grand and glorious day, the wedding supper of the Bride, His Church (Is.25:6-8; Rev.19:6-9).

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<sup>59</sup> e.g., these same two roots are also paired in the Hebrews 12:5 quote of Proverbs 3:11.



The only way to respond for us who read these words today, however, is on an individual basis. Therefore the command to “become zealous and repent” is one that we are definitely meant to take personally. In Greek, the word translated here “repent” is *metanoeo* (μετανοεω), a verb whose root meaning is “to change one’s mind”. The problem is that the two most obvious renderings of this word (i.e., “repent” and “change your mind”) each run the risk of conveying a meaning which is not there in the original Greek. The notion of changing one’s mind seems a relatively easy prospect, of no particularly great cost or consequence, but, while that can be true in the abstract, *metanoeo* is only used in the Bible for decisions of serious moment. There is a difference, to use an example, between changing one’s mind about what to order for lunch, and about whether or not to marry a particular person, and biblical *metanoeo* is always of the latter order of magnitude. That is to say, biblical *metanoeo* is always a deeply felt and potentially life-changing “change of mind”, a turn around in one’s thinking on an issue of fundamental importance, often, as here, a determined turning away from a wrong course of action back to God. That is why the word has been translated “repent” above. But while this is the traditional meaning of repentance, that is, turning away from sin and evil and back to God, the word has acquired a certain amount of “baggage” over the years, and often provokes a reaction not completely in keeping with its true meaning. For while there is an emotional element in the process of turning away from sin and back to God, repentance is achieved only to the extent that we truly, deeply and fundamentally “change our minds” about our present course. It is not achieved by the intensity of emotional outbursts. Emotion surely accompanies true repentance, but true repentance is not based upon emotion, and is certainly not dependent upon the intensity of emotion which the penitent person may wish to demonstrate. For God is concerned with what we are really thinking deep within. He is neither fooled nor persuaded by impressive, visible displays of emotional regret which may or may not accurately reflect what is going on in the heart (and are often notoriously short-lived). It is possible to be truly repentant, to take Christ’s words here to heart and embark faithfully on the true path He has laid down apart from an outward display. On the other hand, it is also possible (and it is a very common thing indeed) for an individual to feel such regret that an outward display is made, and yet slip back into the old ways soon after, not holding course after the “expression of repentance” (cf. those who in the parable of the sower initially receive the Word with joy, but fall away in times of trial: Matt.13:20-21). The lukewarm believers of Laodicea are commanded here by Jesus Christ to make a fundamental change in their thinking, to recognize the error of their half-hearted ways, the wrongness of their evaluation of their own spiritual life, and to turn away from their compromised and compromising pattern of placing the material here-and-now in front of their commitment to the Lord. To do so in truth is true repentance.

The positive side of this equation is found in the other closely related command “become zealous”. Just as the Laodiceans are to turn away from spiritual inertia, so they are to turn towards the right path, towards spiritual growth, the increase of their love, production, good works, faith and hope beyond this life, that is, to turn towards Jesus Christ with all their hearts. Although we are considering this command second, our Lord places it first, indicating that once one has truly determined in the depths of the heart to make Him their all-in-all, then turning away from everything that compromises this decision will tend to follow as a matter of course: once

we truly commit ourselves to competing in this race, the disciplined lifestyle necessary to do so effectively will be an easier task in that the motivation for doing so is already present (cf. 1Cor.9:24-27; Phil.3:14; 2Tim.2:5; Heb.12:1).

Of the two commands, “become zealous” is clearly the more emotional of the two, so that the area where many of us would wish to place and confine emotion (namely repentance) is less dependent upon emotion in God’s eyes, and the area where many of us would wish to reduce or exclude emotion (namely the Christian life after repentance: Laodiceans resist being seen as “zealots”) is more needing of emotional commitment in God’s eyes. For while it is a very common thing in this era of Laodicea to want to make a “once and for all” re-commitment to the Lord of a very emotional nature, then relax (since the “work” is done), in God’s eyes, as shown by these two commands, the situation is exactly the reverse. We should instead become zealous about living the Christian life, about our role in God’s plan, about our intended production for Him. We should make spiritual growth with all its good consequences our first priority, and be excited about the prospects of our life for God! Should we do so, maintaining a “new attitude” will be a natural result (in contrast to our previous, lackluster life lived for ourselves alone). For our God is a God who is “jealous” and “zealous”<sup>60</sup> about us for our good, unwilling for any of His creatures to perish (Matt.18:12-14; Jn.12:47; Acts 17:27; 1Tim.2:4; 2Pet.3:9; cf. Lam.3:33), unwilling to let any of us who have chosen for Him waste our lives with false objects of devotion (Ex.20:5; 34:14; Deut.4:24; 5:9; 6:15). He has shown us no cold unemotional side in His desire for our salvation, but rather one characterized by the most sublime love, sacrificing in our behalf the One He loved before the world began (Jn.3:16; Rom.5:8; 1Jn.4:10). It is no wonder then that He both commends and commands a godly zeal – that is, a genuine attitude of heart manifest in consistent application of the Word rather than external emotional displays – from all those who would respond to this great love of His in the proper way (Num.25:13; 2Cor.11:2; Tit.2:14; 1Pet.3:13; cf. 1Cor.12:31; 14:1; 14:39; 2Cor.7:7; 7:11; 9:2; Gal.4:18). We ought, then, to respond to this command from our Lord Jesus Christ, and become “zealots” for doing God’s work in this world (Tit.2:14; 1Pet.3:13), boiling in our enthusiasm for Him and His Word (Rom.12:11), and refraining from any and all substitutes, for our God “is a jealous God” (Ex.34:14).

With our Lord “standing at the door and knocking”, it is certainly high time for us to respond, as individuals and as a Church era, that we may experience the power and intimacy of close fellowship with Him before personal and collective discipline begins, before the onset of the Great Tribulation to come. It is time for us to realize and admit that our entire lukewarm approach is wrong, that it is wrong to “put God on the back-burner”, so to speak, wrong to put our spirituality in a box, wrong to pay Him lip service without any true follow-through or deep commitment, wrong to live our lives as if we were not really Christians at all while all the time professing that we are, wrong to claim that Jesus is the most important thing in our lives, while in

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<sup>60</sup> “Jealous” and “zealous” are the exact same word in Hebrew: *qana`*, anq. The root idea is of redness in the face, betokening a deep inner stirring that may be for positive (“zealous”) or negative (“jealous”) ends. See *BDB in loco*.

reality running after other “gods”, wealth, success, fame, pleasure, the excessive enjoyment of the things of this world to the exclusion of the One who made it, wrong to keep Him at arm’s length and to give no truly serious attention at all to the main point of our lives, which is to live for Him, to do His will, and to work our “corner of the vineyard” in the way He would have us to do.

To accomplish the fundamental change of attitude required here by our Lord, we must both *hear* and *respond* to His words in a meaningful way. It does no good to express sorrow and regret for a short season, then “return to our vomit” (for in this way we risk being “vomited out”: compare 2Pet.2:22 with Rev.3:16). It does no good to be like the man who looked in the mirror only to go on his way and let the true image of himself fade from his consciousness (Jas.1:22-25). To accomplish what our Lord commands and demands here requires a determined and dedicated change in our entire way of thinking, a commitment to put Him first, a commitment to the process of spiritual growth and production to which we have been called.

### **Christ’s Promised Rewards:**

1. “The one who wins the victory, I will grant him to sit with Me on my throne just as I also have won the victory and have taken my seat with my Father on His throne”: While one would not wish to underestimate the profound and sublime blessedness of intimate fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ here and now in this present life (“supping with Him”: Rev.3:20; cf. Jn.14:23; 15:4; Rom.8:9-10; 2Cor.13:5; Gal.2:20; Eph.3:17; Col.1:27; 1Jn.2:24; 3:24; 4:13-16), it is nevertheless beyond all dispute that “to be with Christ is better by far” (Phil.1:21-23). One of the many surpassing blessings promised to those who “overcome” and win the victory of faith is that of sharing in His kingly rule during the coming Millennium (Rom.5:17; 1Cor.4:8; 2Tim.2:12; Rev.1:6; 5:10; 20:4-6; cf. Rev.22:5). Later in Revelation, we are actually given to see the fulfilment of this promise, with resurrected believers occupying “thrones”, symbols of our authority as we participate in the administration of our Lord’s earthly kingdom for a thousand years (Rev.20:4-6). While this promise is similar in nature to that given to Thyatira of exercising “authority over the nations” (Rev.2:26-27), here we are actually promised a “sharing of the throne” together with our Lord Jesus Christ, suggesting an intimacy with Him in the administration of His worldwide kingdom that is truly remarkable and worthy of anticipation. This particular promise, therefore, is especially apropos of the situation in which we find ourselves in this last era of the Church Age. For the prospect of sharing the closest intimacy with Jesus Christ in the future contrasts markedly with the reality of our era’s characteristically lukewarm response to Him at present. The message to us from this juxtaposition of disparate situations is clear: to share His throne then, we had best respond to Him and His commands now, considering Him the most important thing in our lives – as in fact He is (Jn.14:23; 15:4).

With this promise, moreover, we have our first and only indication that there are indeed some in Laodicea who have been walking the way Christ would have us walk (or at least who will respond to His “knocking” and do so). That this extraordinary privilege of sharing in His throne has been promised to the least extraordinary of the seven Church eras is less surprising when one considers the fact that Laodicea will terminate by emptying into the Tribulation. The “victory of

faith” in that last terrible period preceding Christ’s return will require the most zealous dedication, a reality reflected by the fact that the image of “the throne” here is picked up in Revelation 20:4-6 by the “thrones of the martyrs”, individual believers, many of them no doubt saved during the era of Laodicea before the commencement of the Tribulation, who zealously choose to die for Jesus Christ rather than compromise away their faith in that most terrible crucible of testing. Many in the era of Laodicea have chosen to “sit upon the laurels” of the past. But for those who choose instead to zealously follow the Lamb wherever He leads, the ultimate “session” with Him in the sharing of His throne awaits.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Revelation 2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:29; 3:6; 3:13; 3:22

[For a Synoptic Chart of the Seven Churches, see in loc.  
[http://ichthys.com/Bible\\_charts\\_and\\_illustrations.htm](http://ichthys.com/Bible_charts_and_illustrations.htm)]