

Seven Letters to Seven Churches

"You Are Here"

(Revelation 2 and 3)



Introduction

A cartoon in an old Readers' Digest showed a confused looking hunter, obviously lost in the woods, puzzling over a sign with an "X" marking a spot. Next to the "X" was the explanation "You *were* here. Now you're lost."

No road map can help you find your destination if you don't know where you are in relationship to the map. If we are to "know the way," the first item on the agenda must be to correctly identify our own position in relationship to the guiding device.

The church of the 20th Century seems to be traveling at a very rapid pace. But where is it going? The Bible has already laid out a "road map" for the church in the second and third chapters of Revelation. For centuries, Christians have attempted to identify themselves, and their church, in relation to the letters written to seven churches in this portion of the Bible.

As is so often the case with God's divine prophecies, however, up until recent times it has been rather difficult to understand all that is contained in this passage and its miraculous picture of church history over the course of time – simply because so much of that time was still future. Today, however, we can look at these letters and hold them against the light of church history from the day of Pentecost to our present time. And if we will do that, it is utterly amazing what a picture of the present day church appears.

By way of confirmation, or as icing on the cake if you will, the messages can be further compared with the seven prophecies of the kingdom as spoken by Christ in Matthew 13. Again, a startling correspondence between these prophecies (as they are parables related to future events), and the progression that is evidenced in Revelation 2 and 3.

Finally, it must be stated that this is being written "by request." I have presented this material in several small meetings, and each time I have had someone ask me where they can "get this material." Although I make no claim to originality, I don't know of any similar published dissertations.

The basic premise is certainly not original. The historical approach to interpreting the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 can be found in the notes on those chapters in the Scofield Reference Bible. The same approach is taken in Watchman Nee's *The Orthodoxy of the Church* (Living Stream Ministry, publisher), although Brother Nee lived in a time when the final church period was a little more difficult to anticipate than it is today. Timothy LeHaye uses the same method of interpretation in his book *Revelation Unveiled* (Zondervan). A "Briefing Package" on the Seven Letters to the Seven Churches by Chuck Missler, which also views the seven churches as representing seven periods of church history, can be obtained by contacting Koinonia House, PO Box D, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83816 (1-800-KHOUSE-1) www.khouse.org. While all of these works are to be recommended, none of them have looked closely at the recurring themes of Nicolaitanism and amillennial theology and the results they have had for the church throughout the ages.

Other suggested reading for the subject at hand includes classics like *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and *The Pilgrim Church* by E.H. Broadbent (Marshall Pickering, publisher), and more recent works such as *Climb the Highest Mountain* by Gene Edwards (Seedsowers), and *A Woman Rides the Beast* by Dave Hunt (Harvest House).

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In Christ,

A brother in Kansas City

A word about interpreting Scripture...

One must always be cautious when attempting to interpret divinely inspired Scripture, whether for the purpose of teaching others, or simply informing or amusing one's self. Those of us who believe that every word of Scripture was given by inspiration of God must also keep in mind that each word was given for a specific purpose – *it is what God meant to say*. That is, there was something specific God intended to communicate by the words He chose to use.

Nevertheless, it is also obvious that any specific passage of Scripture can be subject to various methods of interpretation – literal or figurative, doctrinal or spiritual.

No one passage of Scripture has been subject to so many different methods of interpretation as has the Book of Revelation, including the letters to seven churches found in chapters two and three. In this article, I am attempting to arrive at the “doctrinal” interpretation of this passage. That is to say, the specific, primary true information the Lord intended to impart that could not be known apart from divine revelation. That does not mean that these passages could not be found valuable if put to a different interpretation, or even that God could not use that interpretation to bless and edify.

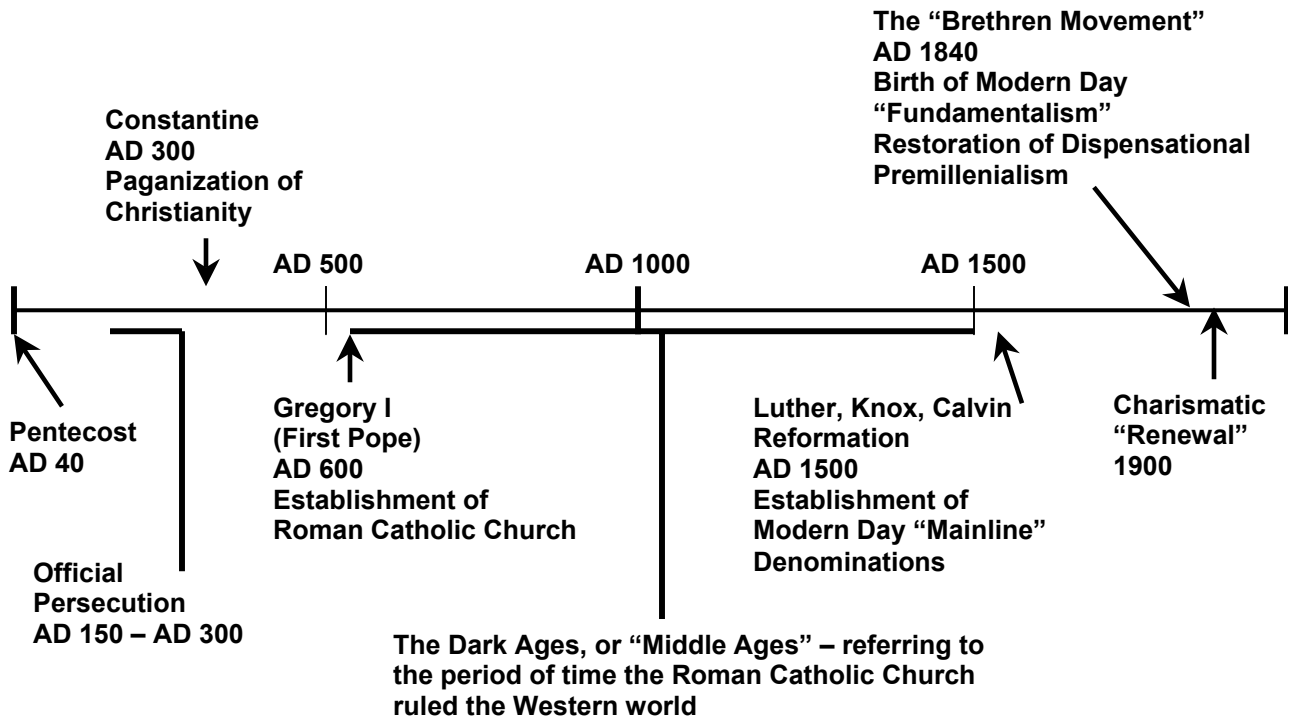
In the case of the letters to the seven churches, they have often been interpreted a) historically, b) spiritually, c) doctrinally, and d) prophetically. The historical interpretation explains the passage in relation to the church named in the specific letter as it existed at the time the letter was recorded by the Apostle John at the close of the 1st Century. By employing a “spiritual” application, every Christian can look for the traits associated with each church in his or her individual life, and thereby apply the encouragement and admonitions given by the Lord to these churches to his or her own spiritual walk. Doctrinally, the passage has been seen as having something to say to churches today. That is, all of the characteristics of the churches of Revelation exist to some extent or another in the various churches and congregations of our own time.

In this article, however, we will look only at the “prophetic” interpretation, as it will become apparent that the letters to the churches have been given in an order that exactly parallels the development of church history from the day of Pentecost to the present day and on to the end of the age. For this reason, I consider the *prophetic* interpretation to be the *doctrinal* interpretation as well. That is, the primary, true reason the Scripture was given to us in the first place. That does not mean that much good cannot be achieved by studying the passages in the light of the other methods of interpretation mentioned.

Finally, there is the issue of translations. That is always an issue these days. That is an issue that I will perhaps cover in another, separate article. Suffice it to say, for the purposes of this study all Scripture will be taken from the *Authorized Version* of the Bible (more recently – and more commonly – referred to as the *King James Version* or, simply, *King James Bible*). This should not be construed to mean that I am ignorant of the existence of other versions of the Bible or their readings. It simply means that I believe the AV supplies the correct reading and is exactly what God intended for us to read and believe.

Simplified Timeline of Church History

Showing Major Events That Changed Christianity



This chart represents an admittedly over simplified timeline of church history. Hopefully, any child who has gone to Sunday School would be able to think of a number of people and events that could be included on such a timeline.

Not every event one could think of resulted in a drastic, dramatic change in the organization, practice, and

one seat and we are all seated together in one body. May we give the Lord glory and honor here and now by practicing the same on earth!

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The Church at Ephesus

The Apostolic Church Period (AD 40~150)

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. (Revelation 2:1—3)

the first period of church history began on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit visited the 12 Apostles of the Lord as they gathered with 100—some other brothers and sisters in the Lord in an upper room in Jerusalem. That visitation resulted in a flurry of evangelistic activity that saw the church being added to daily—thousands of new believers at a time. Persecution by the Jewish leaders caused the Good News to be dispersed all over Judea and even to Syria. Churches were established throughout the region, comprised of Jewish believers all.

After his conversion on the road to Damascus, where he was headed to round up those who fled the persecution in Jerusalem, Paul and his fellow workers headed out from Antioch and traveled Asia Minor, or modern Turkey and southern Europe, and established new churches as they went. Paul took the gospel as far as Rome in Italy, even though it appears from his letter to this church that someone had preceded him with the Good News, as a great number of gatherings were already operating there (see Romans 16).

So we see God had ordained that the church be under the tutelage of *Apostles* (Ephesians 2:20). The only “scriptures” known at the time (see Acts 17:11 and II Tim. 3:15-16) were the Old Testament writings. The New Testament was, of course, still being written. Even after John penned his final epistle, it took some time for the New Testament books to circulate and gain acceptance. When they did, it was on the basis of *apostolic authorship* that they were included in the canon.

However, not everyone who claimed to be “sent by God” was a true Apostle. In His letter to the believers of this age, the Lord Jesus *commends* them on their discernment and their ability to know true apostles from those He calls *liars*. It was this special grace that

prevented “the gospel of Thomas” and First Clement from being included in our New Testaments today.

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. (Revelation 2:4,5)

You have probably heard many sermons based on this verse exhorting you not to lose your “first love” for Jesus. While this is a fine spiritual application of Revelation 2:4, in context it would appear that the Lord is referring to an entirely different issue in this first period of church history.

For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. (I John 3:11)

While the Lord commends this church for its discernment and faithfulness, He admonishes them for “losing their first love,” or the kind of brotherly love that was expressed among them in the beginning. This is understandably an “occupational hazard” for those who are zealous to safeguard doctrinal purity in the church.

The *church* or *Body of Christ* today is split and fractured into literally countless denominations, fellowships, associations and the like, so many of which will allow no fellowship with a brother of another denominational stripe. Oftentimes, the differences over which these factions separate are so trivial as to be almost comical. The churches that are associated with these factions and “schisms” as they are referred to in the Bible, apparently take little stock of Romans 12:16; I Corinthians 1:10-13; or I Peter 3:8. And yet they all claim to be followers of the One who said, “*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*” (John 13:35).

The Lord did not intend for HIS church, that is His BODY, to be split and divided over practice, preference, or even doctrine. There is ONE BODY, and it is NOT divided, and divisions men recognize are artificial and man-made.

And more to the point, they invariably are the result of a lack of love for the brethren, and a lack of revelation of what the Body of Christ truly is. Let us set our hearts and minds to love the brethren—all those who are in Christ—regardless of any differences of race, social standing, denominational affiliation, pet doctrine, or favorite Bible version. Let us recognize division in the Body as the ploy of the enemy, and let us stand against it, and refuse to practice it, at all costs. Let us owe no man any-thing, but to love him as a brother in Christ.

There is much more that could be said in this regard, but we move on...

*But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.
(Revelation 2:5)*

The Lord here makes an incredibly strong statement. He mentions a sect, or group of people within the church whom he refers to as *the Nicolaitans*, and then states in unequivocal terms that He *hates* the things they do. We will see that later on, the *deeds*, or the *things they do*, will become a *doctrine* or teaching of the church (Rev. 2:15). But even though the church *adopts* these practices and even incorporates them into the doctrines of the church, the Lord continues to *hate* them nevertheless.

What sort of deeds could the Lord be referring to here? Noting the vehemence with which the Lord states his dissatisfaction, we should be ever the more so curious as to what those deeds might be so that we can be sure to avoid practicing them. But here, Christian commentators generally tend to shrug their shoulders and say, “Maybe these were followers of a man named Nicolas (Acts 6:3, 5), or a guy who showed up much later named Nicolaos” (see *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; Zondervan).

Really? What were they *doing* that the Lord hates so much?

Well, “we’re not really sure... All we know for sure is that it was something God hates” (see Bullinger, *The Companion Bible*, Bagster & Sons).

And how is it that they show up in two different churches over a hundred miles a part, and the Lord promises to come and fight against them personally with the sword of His mouth (Rev. 2:16)?

We are finally given a clue in the *Believer’s Bible Commentary* by William McDonald (Nelson):

*We cannot be positive who these people were. Some think they were followers of a religious leader named Nicolas. Others point out that **the name means “rule over the laity”** and see in this a reference to **the rise of the clerical system** (page 1172).*

The name means to rule over the laity or laymen. Why not accept the term for the clear meaning that it would have had to a Greek speaking believer in the first century when the letter was first written? One problem is that the church has been overly reliant on those who rule over laymen for a living to interpret the Bible for them.

(Most of the commentaries and “Bible helps” you have read have been written by “professional” Christian scholars—whether they are “ordained” ministers or simply have a

couple of doctorates to their credit. These are men who depend on their superior knowledge vis-a- vis the “sheep,” or laity, for their livelihood. There is good reason to believe that many of these men wouldn’t explain the term *Nicolaitan* to you *if they knew* what it meant.)

Getting back to the letter to the church at Ephesus, fact of the matter is that from the first century on there were “false apostles”, or “liars,” infiltrating the church, and their intent was to present themselves as ones having *authority*, and they attempted to use this authority to *rule over the laity*, or common people of the church. The church at Ephesus is commended for resist-ing this attempt to bring Christians, who are all under the headship of Christ, under the rule of a *clerical*, or *clergy* system.

Even though the Lord Himself expressed His hatred for this practice, we see it becoming established as a *doctrine* of the church in Revelation 2:15, and most Christians accept it as a natural part of the church today. The clergy are held in great esteem and respect by the population in general, even (or especially) the unsaved. But remember, *that which is highly esteemed among men is abom-ination in the sight of God* (Luke 16:15)!

You can search the New Testament books in vain in an attempt to identify anything the like the professional, paid clergy that “run” most of our churches today. It has been a predominate characteristic of the recent movement of the Holy Spirit in the church to empower “laymen” in every spiritual endeavor while generally ignoring the established professional clergy. As the church continues its final transformation, traditional clergy/ laity distinctions become increasingly irrelevant.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. (Revelation 2: 7)

The Lord Jesus closes the first letter to the first church with an exhortation to all to open their ears and hear what is being said to the churches. This exhortation will be repeated in each of the subse-quent letters we will look at. In this case, the exhortation is followed by a promise to “those that overcome.” And the promise is that they will be allowed to eat from the tree of life situated in middle of the “paradise of God.”

And so ends the first of seven letters to seven churches – this first letter being addressed to the church that represents the apostolic age of the church, or the beginning stage when the church relied on the Apostles and their disciples for teaching and leadership. This teaching and leadership was spirit-led, and not the attempt of men who felt they were smarter or better educated than others to capitalize on their supposedly superior understanding of the ways of God to make a living at the expense of the gospel and the liberty which believers are said to have in Christ (Galatians 5:1). This period began around AD 40 and came to an end somewhere around AD 150, as the New Testament really began to come together and

be circulated as scripture within the church, covering incredible geographic expanses and reaching all who “named the Name.”

At the same time, local persecution by religious Jews continued. In time, the “Christian problem” would become an issue of note for the Empire, and official edicts or decrees banning Christianity and subjecting believers to punishment, imprisonment and death would be promulgated. And that is the background for the next letter we will study.

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The Church at Smyrna

The Period of Persecution (AD 100~312)

And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. (Revelation 2:8—10)

Before He was crucified, the Lord warned His disciples, “*If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you*” (John 15:20). Therefore, Christians should not be surprised when persecution arises. Even in this century we have heard the tales of the countless martyrs for the faith in China, India, the Philippines, and so many other places around the world. Here in our own country, the “Christian Right” is continually mocked and maligned by the popular media. One can read the plight of countless martyrs who, throughout the ages, suffered humiliation, torture and death rather than deny the faith in such works as George Fox’s *Book of Martyrs*.

Yes, persecution has always been with the church. But never has this been so true as during the period immediately following—even overlapping—the Apostolic church age. This period of incredible persecution ended only with the ascension of Constantine to the Roman throne in AD 312. This intervening period is the period so often depicted in Christian-versus-gladiator films. It was a time when the catacombs provided a hiding place and refuge from the lions prowling the coliseum, seeking whom they could devour.

In all, there were ten official decrees or edicts banning Christianity from the Empire, and sentencing those who refused to renounce their loyalty to the King of Kings to death or worse. This may be foreseen by the phrase, “ye shall have tribulation ten days.” Certainly the message is intended to comfort these martyrs by reassuring them that the period of persecution should last for a finite period of time, and then it would come to an end.

Also comforting is the Lord’s description of Himself to this church. He emphasizes the fact that He also was killed, but behold, He is alive again and shall never die. How appropriate a

message for those about to face the ravening lions or the executioner's ax.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death. (Revelation 2:11)

The Lord closes the letter repeating the formula used in the first letter; an exhortation to those who are willing to hear and understand to listen to the message the Holy Spirit is giving to the church—a message to the overcomers, reassuring them that death is only the prelude to a glorious eternity with God.

Before closing the discussion of this rather short but direct letter to a suffering church, it should be pointed out that in contrast to all of the other seven letters, save one, the letter to the church at Phila-delphia (Revelation 3: 7 – 13), this letter contains only commendation and no hint or trace of admon-ishment or rebuke in any fashion. This is most likely because there is nothing that will purify like persecution. When the axes fall and the bodies begin to pile up, all phonies and fakes and liars find somewhere else to go and something else to do.

We don't find the Nicolaitans giving these people much trouble. These are people who are living their faith daily, and dying for it. They have no need and no time for professional religious leaders to help them approach God. They and those about them are going on to meet God face to face every day. And through it all, The Lord's presence is with them. There is nothing a priest or a pastor in a robe and fine vestments can add to their first-hand experience of the Lord.

The Nicolaitans will surface again as soon as the heat is off and there is no longer any danger in being publicly recognized as a great leader of Christians, and when Christian "laymen" are in a posi-tion to be able to afford their services.

Persecution under the Roman emperors was brutal and merciless. As early as AD 64, Nero used the Christians as scapegoats, blaming the fire he himself started in Rome on them. Both Paul and Peter were martyred. The Apostle John himself was, some 35 years later, suffering official banish-ment on a prison island as he penned the vision the Lord gave Him, including these seven letters to seven churches.

Perhaps the most cruel trick of all was that after the supposed establishment of "Christianity" as the official religion of the Empire, that Bible-believing Christians continued to be hunted down, per-secuted and killed for such crimes as reading the Bible, being baptized in water, refusing to worship Mary and the apostles, not to mention refusing to honor the pope as though he were Christ Him-self. This persecution continued right up to the time of the Reformation, and strangely enough, was even perpetrated after the Reformation by some of the reformers (see John Calvin and Servitus, as an example).

So, even though persecution existed from the beginning (see the Book of the Acts), and

continues to this day (see missionaries in Mexico), the *age* of persecution—that is, the period of time when persecution was the predominant feature of the visible church on this earth—lasted a relatively short while and came to an end just as the Lord had promised in the letter to the church at Smyrna. (Smyrna, by the way, is a reference to the fragrant herb myrrh, which releases its fragrance as it is being crushed—an appropriate metaphor for the church that is being crushed by persecution, which crushing releases a “sweet savour” from the Lord’s point of view.)

But would the termination of the official persecution by Rome be a blessing or a stumbling block for the church? The surprising answer is found in the next, third letter, written to the church at Pergamos.

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The Church at Pergamos

The Paganization of the Church (AD 300~600)

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. (Revelation 2:12,13)

in his work *The Pilgrim Church*, E. H. Broadbent remarks that following an age of untold persecution of believers by the Roman Empire, that the empire was eventually overcome by the devotion to the Lord Jesus of those who knew Him. “Their patient, unresisting endurance had changed the bitter hostility and hatred of the Roman world, first into pity, and then into admiration” (page 19).

In 312, the Emperor Constantine had won a decisive victory in the struggles that had divided the empire. He entered Rome and immediately issued an edict bringing the persecution of Christians to an end.

The story is told that a sleepless Constantine had seen a vision while in his bed—a vision of the cross, the sign of Christ, and the words, “In this sign conquer.” He arose and baptized his army, and then proceeded to march on to victory, reuniting the sprawling empire under his rule. Some imagine that this represented a conversion of sorts on the part of the Roman ruler, but the fact of the matter is that he retained the old imperial dignity of the chief priest of the Pagan religion of Rome, even while assuming the role of chief arbitrator of issues pertaining to the Christian church.

As Broadbent affirms: *The Church and the State quickly became closely associated, and it was not long before the power of the State was at the disposal of those who had the lead in the Church, to enforce their decisions. Thus, the persecuted soon became the persecutors (page 20).*

Indeed, the banishment of the Donatists, and the convening of the Council of Nicea, which resulted in the Nicene Creed, were just a few of the matters that were personally directed by Constantine, who himself continued to worship the sun god Ra.

Here we see a strange marriage of Christian church and pagan state, which resulted in pressure on Bible-believing Christians to conform to the new form of the church that was born of this amalgamation. Or, as the Lord states in His letter to this church, “I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat (throne) is.” It is interesting to note in this regard that the Greek word “Pergamos” can be translated “much marriage” or, as some have suggested, “perverted marriage.” Church and state had become strange bedfellows, indeed.

Through his great influence and patronage of the church, Constantine had much to say about who was promoted and given power and authority in the church, and who should fill places of leadership in the dioceses that formed throughout the empire. Obviously, these men would be beholden to the State and the Emperor personally, and in return for his support would not say or do anything to offend him or his religion. In fact, it is at this point that the “church” began to accommodate many pagan rites, icons and holidays. The Lord seems to suggest this in the next portion of the letter:

But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. (Revelation 2:14—16)

The story of Balaam and Balac is found in Numbers chapters 22 to 24. It is only by this statement found in the last book of the New Testament that we learn of the relationship of these events to the events that take place in Numbers 25. For in this chapter, the men of the camp of Israel “began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab.”

And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods, and the people did eat and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself to Baalpeor... (Numbers 25:2,3)

What was not obvious from the Old Testament passage is made clear in this message from the Lord Jesus. Balaam was unable to curse the camp of Israel and gain the reward offered by Balac if he would do so because God directly forbade him. We learn here, however, that Balaam sold Balac a plan whereby the children of Israel would bring a curse upon themselves—by joining themselves to pagan idolatry. The plan was to have the women of the Moabites “hang out” around the outskirts of the camp and entice the young men to engage in sexual immorality with them, and then as a reward for their favors, the young men would be compelled to join the Moabite women in their sacrifices to Baal.

That’s all very interesting, but what does that have to do with the church? The Lord Jesus here is speaking to and about the church. According to the Lord Jesus, someone has taught the church to ‘worship idols’ and ‘eat things’ sacrificed to idols.

It would take another book to retrace in detail how the spring rites of the fertility goddess Istarte, replete with fertility symbols such as eggs and rabbits, replaced the primitive Christian observance of the Lord's resurrection, or how a special "mass" honoring the birth of "Christ" came to be celebrated on the winter solstice (December 22–24) at the same time Constantine and the pagans celebrated the birth of the sun. Then there is the interesting history of the pagan cult of the "mother and child," which provided the empire with countless shrines built to honor "Mary and the Christ Child" before Christianity had been given the green light to be practiced freely in the empire.

Due to the patronage of the State, men whom Constantine wanted to reward in some way easily made the transition from pagan devotee to positions of leadership in the "church." In fact, there are many stories of men who were not baptized until after they had taken up the position of priest, or even bishop. Many were totally ignorant of the scriptures or any of the tenets of the Christian faith.

And so, the victory of the Nicolaitans over the "laity" in the church was complete. From this point on Christianity would revolve around mystical rites and rituals, (or "sacraments," from the same root as the word "sacrifices") performed by priests on behalf of the people who had no other access to God, Jesus, or salvation. And since all people are in need of salvation, all citizens of the empire would be compelled to provide financial support to the church for the upkeep of the priests and bishops, and the State would back up that claim.

The *deeds* of the Nicolaitans, whose *teachings* were exposed and resisted in the Apostolic age, were now institutionalized as "church doctrine," the Lord's proclamation of His displeasure notwithstanding.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.
(Revelation 2:17)

During this period of the paganization of the church and the establishment of a high clerical caste to rule over the laity, there were still those who truly knew the Lord and desired nought but to worship Him in spirit and in truth. They refused to acknowledge the rites and duties of the institutional, official state church, often at great peril to person and property. The "manna" the church provided was contaminated, having been "offered to idols." The Lord promises to provide these overcomers with "hidden manna," manna not obscured and obfuscated by the layers of paganization and idolatry which now pervaded the church—the true manna, that bread "which came down from heaven," the Lord and nothing but the Lord (John 6:51).

Hallelujah!

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The Church at Thyatira

The Roman Catholic Church (AD 600~Tribulation)

And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass; I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. (Revelation 2:18-21)

We have seen how the church had its primitive roots in an apostolic era, which ended in a general, systematic persecution of believers by the world system of the day. That persecution came to an abrupt end when the church suddenly found itself befriended by a pagan Roman emperor, bringing the church under the protection of and into cooperation with the political power of that time.

Although Constantine maintained control over both east and west divisions of the empire, he moved the political seat of government to Constantinople. By AD 475 the Roman Empire had ceased to exist, and the Western empire, or Europe, eventually fell into disarray—until AD 590. That year Gregory I, or Gregory the Great, was named *supreme pontiff* in Rome. He quickly consolidated power and revamped the papal government. He asserted direct control over the papal estates from France to North Africa.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “Gregory’s pontificate is the first and best example of ecclesiastical authority replacing, throughout the machinery of government, the political power of a declining state” (Macmillan Publishers, 1987).

Gregory’s reign marks the beginning of the modern papacy, and coincidentally, the beginning of the “Dark Ages,” the term used to describe that period of Western history when the church ruled over vassals and kings alike. All were required to bow to the pope, “venerate” Mary and the saints, cherish the icons of the church, and express unconditional faith in all of the doctrines of the church, regardless of how unscriptural or antithetical to the true practice of New Testament Christianity they may be. Dissenters were dealt with quickly and brutally. Anyone found with so much as a single page of scripture in their

possession stood in peril of torture or death. Whenever scripture was confiscated, it was burned.

The scriptures were deemed to be the *possession* of the church and were to be “handled” only by the bishops and priests (the Nicolaitans). The church officially recognized only Jerome’s Latin translation of a text produced by Eusebius for Constantine as divine scripture, and all other texts were considered “heretical.” They were not to be preserved, but destroyed. This policy would have grave implications for future generations as men began to sift through the extant exemplars, or manuscripts, on which our Bibles are based in an effort to determine the “original text.” Even with full knowledge that entire libraries of Greek Bible documents had been destroyed by papal authorities, and countless New Testament manuscripts burned over a period of 1,000 years, modern “textual critics” continue to insist that the only versions of the New Testament in circulation during this period were those that agree with the Roman Catholic versions—which of course, the church did *not* burn.

But that, as they say, is another subject.

Nevertheless, with all of this background in mind, let us look at the letter the Lord Jesus asked John to deliver to the angel of the church of Thyatira. After assuring them that His eyes see all and His judgment is true, He commends them for the good work they have done.

It is true that the Catholic church, since before the time of Gregory and up to the present, has done much good, charitable work from a human point of view. James tells us *true religion* is to take care of widows and orphans. During the Dark Ages, there would have been no schools, orphanages, or hospitals were it not for the Catholic church of that era. The popes have, from the beginning, had the “*religion*” thing down pat.

Having said that, the Lord goes on to rebuke this church for allowing the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach the Lord’s people a false system of worship. This worship entails worshiping idols, and eating things sacrificed to idols.

It is interesting to note here the derivation of the word “Thyatira.” It comes from two Greek terms that basically mean “continual burning” in the sense of burning incense or sacrifice. The Catholic system of worship revolves around the *eucharist*. This is not “the Lord’s table” that non-Catholics know. In the performing of the eucharistic rite, the Lord Jesus is offered up to God by the officiating priest and suffers anew, just as He did on Calvary, so that His Blood is shed again—a continual sacrifice. That Blood mystically fills the cup of the eucharist, just as the Lord’s Body is mystically broken again and offered to the penitent in the form of the blessed bread, or *host*. It is through receiving this “host” that sins are forgiven in the Catholic church.

Just as Jezebel in the Old Testament introduced the priests of Baal and false worship to the northern Kingdom of Israel, so the papacy has instituted idolatry and false worship in *the church!*

The Lord says, “I have given her plenty of time to repent, but she hasn’t done it yet.” It has been more than 1,400 years since Gregory I established the modern-day papacy, and there is no sign that the Catholic church is about to renounce any of its unscriptural practices any time soon.

Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. (Revelation 2:22-25)

So then, because this church continues in these practices, the Lord promises she will be cast into great tribulation, or the Great Tribulation—a period soon coming upon the earth, which will be a time of greater suffering and sorrow for the inhabitants of the earth than has ever been known before. This will be a time when a Holy God will pour out punishment after punishment upon an unbelieving world that has refused to turn to Him that they might be saved.

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. (Revelation 2:26-28)

Those who have been able to maintain true faith under such despotic spiritual tyranny are promised that they will one day be the rulers. What a comforting message for the countless faithful martyrs who died at the hands of the inquisitors for the crime of believing the Bible and nothing else.

And now we note something rather unusual. In each of three previous letters, the exhortation to “hear what the spirit saith unto the churches” has been issued first, followed by the promise to the overcomers. In this case, and in each of the following letters, however, we see this pattern reversed, as if to signal that the first three churches have something in common with each other and the last four have something in common between them. It’s as if a line of demarcation is placed between the first three churches and the last four.

We know that chapter and verse divisions were not included in the original Bible manuscripts. It's almost as if the Lord wanted to be sure we knew where to divide the letters to these seven churches!

Therefore, it's interesting to note as we look at the timeline of church history that each of the first three churches came into existence and then ceased to exist, being replaced by the next era. The church represented by Thyatira, however, came into existence at a point in history and has continued to exist to the present day, and is promised that it will continue to exist following the rapture of all true believers from the earth, and continue on into the Tribulation, which God will send to punish all those who have rejected His Son and the Truth.

From this point on, future church ages will come up alongside and coexist with the church represented by the church in Thyatira. Perhaps it is due to the fact that there will now be a plurality of churches existing coterminously that the Lord sends His message first directly to the individual overcomers and then to the church. Or, is it because the institutionalized church has now become incapable of passing on the Truth to its members that the Lord speaks first to individuals? Or is it a combination of both of these factors?

Whatever the reason, from now on the Lord will primarily address the overcomers in every age, and entrust His message for the churches to them. In this regard, we cannot state enough times that we by no means mean to imply that there are no true believers in the Roman Catholic Church, or that "all Catholics are going to hell," or any such thing.

What is under discussion here is an ecclesiastical system and a political system that has played a major role in Western history for nearly 1,500 years. No one can read its history and not weep, not even its staunchest defenders and allies. Neither can one read its history and find *anything* anywhere in the New Testament that even remotely resembles this horribly dark, corrupt, vicious system of raw spiritual and political power—nothing except this extremely succinct description of the woman Jezebel, whom later in the book of Revelation is seen riding the Devil himself as she accomplishes world dominion.

In the meantime, however, the first church to share the stage with Thyatira is the church at Sardis.

[The Letter to the Church at Pergamos](#)

[The Letter to the Church at Sardis](#)

The Midnight Cry

The Church at Sardis

The Tragedy of the Reformation (AD 1500~Tribulation)

And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. (Revelation 3:1-3)

The Lord has followed a distinct pattern in each of the previous letters; each begins with an introduction of the Lord Himself, followed by a commendation, which in turn is followed by an admonishment or rebuke. To the suffering church at Smyrna, the Lord offered only commendation and praise, with no hint of rebuke. The letter to the church at Sardis stands out then, as it opens with a rebuke, followed by another rebuke, and no word of praise or commendation at all.

Could it be that in the Lord's eyes this period of church history is less to be praised than the period of paganization, or the period led by "Jezebel?"

Evidently, that is the case. And what sad period of church history would this be?

The name "Sardis" comes from the same root as the "sardine stone" (Rev. 4:3), which was a rich, blood-red gem. The picture here is one of bloodied men. Truly, the Reformers carried out their rebellion against the Roman Catholic church at great peril to their own lives, and many of them eventually lost their lives after cruel torture. Surely the Lord has something good to say about the brave defenders of the Truth that dared leave the Catholic church and begin their own spiritual communities.

And yet we search in vain for any such praise in the letter before us. What does the Lord say about the Reformation? Simply this: you have a reputation (or *name*, see Proverbs 10:7; 22:1; Ecclesiastes 6:4; 7:1, etc.) for being a living thing, but you are a dead thing.

Reputation wise, the Reformation is credited with restoring the vitality of the Christian faith after long centuries of Catholic demoralization. Martin Luther's assertions that scripture alone, *sola*

scriptura, is the only authority for the church, and that the just shall live by faith (that is, that salvation requires only faith in the Lord Jesus, not the Roman Catholic sacraments) all sound very good, very true, very orthodox.

The Lord appears to acknowledge that while it is orthodox, it is “dead orthodoxy.” The fact of the matter is, the Reformation produced much intellectual consent to the truths of scripture, but no life flowed from it. This is true because the Reformation was in reality only a baby step towards true Christianity. While some of the grosser excesses and errors of the Catholic church were shed, the order and organization of Jezebel’s religion were imported wholesale into the new churches that sprang from the Reformation.

First of all, the Nicolaitan separation of clergy and laity was retained. The church continued to teach “sacraments” and insisted that these sacraments be performed only by specially ordained, professional “holy” men *on behalf* of the unwashed laity. The nature of “transubstantiation” in the eucharist was debated, for example, but instead of standing tall for the truth, Martin Luther and other reformers settled for a compromise; the wine and bread do not become the Blood and Body of Christ, but the latter are somehow mystically present in the elements.

Of all the compromises made to appease Jezebel, (and to not rattle the sensibilities of the masses who had been raised under that system in Germany, Scotland, Geneva and other centers of the Reformation,) perhaps the two most “deadening” aspects of the Reformation were the retention of infant baptism—which supposedly ushers noncomprehending souls into the kingdom of God through a *rite* or a *ritual*, rather than through *faith* in the gospel; and amillennial theology—which denies the future return of the Lord Jesus to rule a literal, physical kingdom on this earth.

In effect, the Reformation replaced one militant, amillennial state church with another militant, amillennial state church. All it managed to remove from the mix was the pope. But the leaders of the new churches were not always that much better. John Calvin has often been referred to as the “protestant pope” due to his severe control over the church in Geneva.

The liturgy and the “church calendar” with its long list of psuedo-scriptural “holy days” and feasts was brought virtually intact into the new Reformed communions.

Another “deadening” factor was the introduction of full-blown predeterminism, which eventually became popularized by the term “Five-point Calvinism,” even though there wasn’t much difference between Calvin and Luther in their approach to this issue. This intellectual conceit, when taken consistently with its tenets, invariably quenches the fire of evangelism and brings a palpable deadness of the spirit to every congregation that adopts it, or succumbs to a pastor who converts to it.

This church (the church at Sardis) is told to “strengthen the things that remain.” The truth of the gospel is there, and needs to be “beefed-up” for this church to please the Lord.

Then, underscoring the error of amillennialism, the Lord points out that this church is not looking for

the Lord's return. Contrast the Lord's statement to the church at Sardis, "*I shall come upon thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I come upon thee*" with this statement by the Apostle Paul to a "premillennial" church:

For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night... But ye, brethren are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. (I Thessalonians 2:2, 4)

Is the Lord coming as a thief in the night? Yes. Should Christians (brethren) expect to be overtaken by this day? No! The reference to the "day of the Lord" points to the Great Tribulation and the coming of the Lord to the earth in the final victory over a God-rejecting world. Note that Paul says the reason this day should not overtake us is because "God has not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Thessalonians 2:9)."

So here we have the second church in this series of seven that has been given the dubious honor of a promise by the Lord Himself that they will miss the Rapture and continue into the Great Tribulation. This promise is to mainline, dead orthodox denominations that hold to "Reformed theology," that sprinkle infants into the kingdom with no scriptural authority for doing so, and maintain their amillennial theology to this day. In recent years it has been resurrected under the name "Dominion Theology," "Kingdom Now" theology and the like. Regardless of what it is called, it is the same old error that began with Augustine's City of God. It is to be shunned and avoided at all costs.

Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. (Revelation 3:4-6)

It must be said again and again, and ever kept in mind, that the Lord is judging a system here, a church system and system of theology. He is quick to acknowledge that within this system there are true believers—those who are trusting in the Lord for their salvation and anticipating His return in spite of the teachings of the church system with which they are affiliated. These believers will be taken to be with the Lord at the Rapture, even though the church they belong to officially denies that any such event is to take place. We are not suggest that "all Lutherans and Presbyterians are going in the Tribulation." We are suggesting that the mainline denominations will continue to operate even after the redeemed among them have been removed.

This is as true of the church at Thyratira as it is of the church at Sardis. We do not judge a person or make a determination as to whether they are "truly saved" based on the denomination they belong to. Believers find themselves associated with denominational churches for any number of reasons. What counts is what the individual believes about the Lord. If they are trusting in Him alone, and not their church or denominational affiliation, they are true members of the Body of Christ, and will obtain the rewards the Lord has promised to those who overcome the system to find the Lord.

This is perhaps the best explanation of why, from the fourth letter on, the Lord addresses his message to the overcomers first to individuals, and then asserts that this is the message the Holy Spirit has for the churches.

It will be obvious that this is not the interpretation one will find in most commentaries written by “dead orthodox” scholars who belong to mainline denominational churches, not a few of whom are themselves clergymen, and *nearly all* of whom are amillennial by training and conviction. This is why you must read these letters carefully, prayerfully, sincerely asking the Lord to reveal the truth of these matters. Those who truly love the Lord, and who genuinely want to know the truth have more than a thousand years of amillennial, dead, orthodox Christian scholarship to overcome if they are to avoid being one of those on whom Christ promises to come upon as a thief in the night.

But let us move on to probably the greatest period of church history since the days of the suffering church at Smyrna. Let us see what the Lord has to say to the church of “brotherly love,” the church at Philadelphia.

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The Church at Philadelphia

Glorious Restoration of the Truth (AD 1800~Rapture)

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. (Revelation 3:7-8)

Although it appears the development of the church thus far has been on a decidedly downward spiral from one age to the next, it will be understood that during every age, no matter how dark and no matter how obfuscated the testimony of the church-at-large, there has been a constant stream of true witnesses to the salvation that is by faith in the Lord Jesus alone. Often-times, those who shared this common faith would attempt to congregate for the purpose of being edified by the fellowship that is in Christ.

From the time of the Great Persecutions of the second century on, this was always a very risky business. If discovered by church authorities—whether under Constantine’s rule, the papacy, or the ever vigilant eyes of the leaders of even some of the protestant churches—punishment, if not excommunication and death, was certain.

With the seeming success of Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, more “dissenting” congregations came to be formed. The Congregationalist, the Puritans, and the Baptists were all regarded as “dissenters” by the state church in England, which itself had joined the Reformation for historically well-known reasons. This church became the Anglican Church in England, and is known as the Episcopal Church in America.

Although differing in various points of doctrine or emphasis, all of the churches mentioned above—including the so-called “dissenters”—held a number of things in common. First of all, each of them insisted on an ecclesiology revolving around an ordained clergy class—specially ordained men who alone could perform baptisms, administer the Lord’s supper, officiate at marriages and funerals, and the like. That is to say, they were (and remain) *Nicolaitan* in regards to their ecclesiology.

Secondly, they all practiced “closed communion.” That is to say, the sacraments or ordinances of the church were to be dispensed among members only, and an individual could be a member of only one of these spiritual communities. Therefore, by their strict denominationalism, they denied, and continue to deny to this day, the Truth of the unity of the Body of Christ.

Thirdly, in doctrine they all held to the amillennial interpretation of scripture, equating the thousand-year reign of Christ promised in the Book of Revelation with the proliferation of their own party, or church body.

In the mid-1700s, John Wesley and George Whitefield fueled the “Great Awakening” in England. The Methodists were formed. While relatively flexible in doctrine, ordination was still a prerequisite for preachers and missionaries. The same situation prevailed in the New World, as well.

It was not until the early 19th Century when a dentist by the name of Anthony Norris Groves began meeting with a handful of other believers in Plymouth, England, determined to know nothing and practice nothing that was not clearly spelled out in scripture as being the desire of the Lord for His saints, that something along the order of true “first century” Christian fellowship began to be restored.

Thus, a table was cleared for their weekly meetings and laid upon with wine and bread. The Lord was remembered and praised, and the participants broke bread together, “as at the beginning.” The meetings were open for all to pray, to share, to study together the Word of God. All who were “accepted of Christ” were accepted into the fellowship, with no requirements to officially join. There was *no one in charge* but the Lord Jesus Christ, who was present through His Spirit. No one *administered* the *elements* to the *congregates*. Those who gathered around that table were all equally brothers in Christ and members of His Body. They were doing something virtually unheard of since Constantine crossed the Milvian Bridge in AD 312. *They were meeting without the benefit of a professionally trained, ordained clergyman.* And the meetings flourished as a result, and the Lord ministered Himself to these sincere believers who wanted nothing but the Lord Himself.

Not long afterwards, it was discovered that other “brethren” had begun meeting in a similar fashion in Dublin, with very much the same results. The Plymouth group was joined by a young clergyman named John Nelson Darby, an Anglican priest by training who nevertheless acknowledged that in the fellowship God was no respecter of persons. Tracts began to be published promoting a return to primitive Christianity and the scriptural form of meetings for believers. All denominational labels were eschewed. The Plymouth Brethren and the “Brethren movement” had been born, although they never took any name for themselves other than “brethren,” (small “b”), believers, or, simply, saints.

For the first time since AD 312, people were meeting without the leadership of ordained clergy of any kind. The Holy Spirit was to be the only teacher recognized among them. As they began to depend solely on the scripture, the glorious teaching of the still future advent of the Lord came into view, with its attendant promise of deliverance from the wrath to come for all believers in the Lord Jesus. For perhaps the first time in 15 centuries, men began to teach that God was not finished with the nation of Israel, but that when the “fullness of the Gentiles” had come in, the Lord would once again establish believing Israel as “the head and not the tail” of all nations on earth, that the natural branches would be grafted back into the olive tree, and that the Greater Son of David would rule from David’s throne in Jerusalem over a literal, physical earthly kingdom for a period of 1,000 years.

Fundamental, premillennial, dispensational Truth had been unleashed upon the world. And it would do more to change the face of Christianity than any other single event since the victory of Constantine, perhaps even since Pentecost itself.

I have gone into these events in some detail because this period of church history is nowhere near as well known as the Reformation or “Great Awakening.” It is impossible, however, to truly understand the Lord’s message to the “church of those who love the brethren” (a more accurate translation of Philadelphia than “brotherly love”) without some knowledge of this background.

Having said that, let us look together at the message.

First of all, the Lord confirms what the brethren have discovered about the focal point of all prophecy regarding the Kingdom—mainly, that it does not culminate with the church, but with a restoration of God’s people Israel. Listen.

*These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, **he that hath the key of David.***

Keys in the scripture, as in our day, speak of authority. Here Jesus confirms that He is one who has authority to rule in David’s place, as He is the Son of David, and God has promised that there should be One who would rule from the throne of David and that His rule should be forever.

*Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, **which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie...***

This is an interesting statement! Who in the first century (if indeed we are to believe this letter was primarily addressed to first century churches) would go around pretending to be a Jew? And for what conceivable purpose?

For some 1,500 years, however, the “church” has officially taught that God was through with Israel and all of the unfulfilled promises to God’s chosen people of the Old Testament

would be fulfilled spiritually in the church. This is the heart of amillennialism. It is the usurpation by the church of the promises of God to His people Israel. It is saying you are Israel when you are not! That is, to claim you a Jew when you are not. The Lord uses some pretty strong language in His condemnation of those who use Romans 2:28-29 to avoid the implications of Romans 11:25-26. He says they will bow down and worship at the feet of the Philadelphian brethren. This is a hard saying. Who can hear it?

The Lord says He has set before this church an “open door.” This is clearly a reference to missionary opportunity. He notes that this group has “a little strength,” or little strength, but because of the Lord’s personal intervention in holding open the door, they will be able to accomplish great things with the little strength (small numbers) they have.

It is amazing to realize how much effect this little, short-lived movement had on the future of Christianity. As we have mentioned, the premillennial, dispensational teachings of the brethren were popularized by such writers as C. I. Scofield, Harry Ironside, Clarence Larkin (who provided the charts), and countless others who traveled far and wide speaking on the imminent return of the Lord, Daniel’s 70th week, and other such provocative topics.

These events are often cited by many modern church historians as the seeds of the modern Fundamentalist movement. It is not uncommon today for hard-line fundamentalist sects to insist on the dispensational, premillennial view as a “fundamental” of “fundamentalism.” In fact, on our timeline, we could replace “the Brethren Movement” with “Fundamentalist Movement” and cover pretty much the same ground.

But the brethren contributed to more than just a doctrinal redefinition of eschatology. In addition, the knowledge that the Lord was going to return to this earth for His own one day promoted a missionary zeal among the brethren disproportionate to their small numbers. And their presence on the missionary fields of the world have always been disproportionate to the small number of practicing “Plymouth Brethren” (*Note: true “brethren” do not accept the name “Plymouth Brethren,” seeing it as a divisive label that others apply to them, but which they in no way take unto themselves to separate themselves from others in the Body of Christ.*)

Because they recognized no clergy class of any kind, but relied solely on what has come to be called “lay ministry,” many more individuals from their ranks could become missionaries since they didn’t have to find a way to be ordained and certified by a denominational institution first. Secondly, because the brethren had such little ecclesiastical “overhead” (that is, no clergy class requiring their financial support to maintain), the believers had significantly more money to contribute to evangelistic efforts at home and abroad.

One of the more well-known brethren of this century was Watchman Nee. Brother Nee practiced the spiritual principles of gathering and ministry he learned from English brethren

such as Austin T. Sparks and others. He trained his young workers in these principles, which emphasized that the church is saved believers, not a building. Full time church “workers” are servants, not masters. (*“Worker” is the highest attainable “office” in the house church movement started by Nee.*) He sent young missionaries out in teams all over China—lay workers with no papers, no pedigrees, no certificates, no titles, who would meet in homes and would not build buildings no matter how large their works grew. Instead, they would spin off into “manageable-sized” meetings. This, of course, was the Lord’s way of planting His church all over the mainland of China.

When the communists came to power, the first thing they did was run every foreign missionary out of the country. Then they closed the church buildings. Then they began looking for Nee’s disciples. They found Nee and he was incarcerated and died in a communist prison. But they could never find all of the churches this brother had planted. No buildings. No clergy. No beads. No incense. No statues. Nothing physical or tangible to track down. Just people with Jesus living in their hearts who fellowship with each other in living rooms and barns, in spirit and in truth.

Yes, for its small numbers, or “little strength,” the brethren movement of the 19th Century radicalized the church in a brand new way, a way that had not been seen *as a predominant feature of the visible church* since shortly after John had finished penning the letters we are now studying.

Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. (Revelation 3:10-13)

The Lord commends this church for keeping “the word of (His) patience.” “Patience” is a word used many times in the New Testament in the direct context of waiting for the Lord’s return:

Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. (James 5:7)

(See also Rom. 5:4; Rom. 8:25; Rom. 15:4; 1Thes.1:3; Heb. 6:12; Heb. 10:36.)

This is the church that revived the teaching of the Second Coming of the Lord in our day. The Lord further promises this church, in contrast to the promises to the two previous

churches, that it will *not* see the great day of tribulation that is coming upon the earth prior to the Lord's return to establish his Kingdom in Jerusalem. This fact, that the future Kingdom is to be ruled from Jerusalem by a descendent of David, is emphasized in the Lord's reference to the New Jerusalem. This is not the City of God that Augustine wrote about, that was adopted by the Catholic and denominational churches.

How will this church be spared from the horrible judgment that the churches at Thyatira and Sardis are promised they will *not* be spared from?

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord him-self shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (I Thessalonians 4:15-17)

It is commonly referred to as the *Rapture*. It is described in detail in the above passage and in I Corinthians 15:51,52, and strongly suggested in Revelation 4:1, following which *the church is not mentioned again in the narrative of the entire Book of Revelation*. And while this is so, this blessed event is unknown to dead orthodox amillennial theology. It is the reason "that day" will not come upon true believers (regardless of denominational affiliation), for they will be taken to be with the Lord before that "great and terrible day of the Lord," which the prophets spoke of as being "darkness and not light," comes upon an unbelieving, unrepentant world.

We have now traversed nearly 2,000 years of church history. We have seen that the church has not been "perfect" in the eyes of her Lord. We find through it all there are only two churches that receive only praise with no admixture of rebuke or admonishment. The first is the suffering church under Roman persecution in the second and third centuries. The other is the church of "brotherly love" that strove to be faithful to the Word of God alone in every aspect of faith, regardless of whether it flew in the face of the whole of church "history" and tradition. They hated Nicolaitanism just as the Lord hates it and refused to bow down to it or accommodate it in anyway. In return, the Lord gave them a clear understanding from scripture of the things that are shortly going to come to pass.

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

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The Church at Laodicea

The Deception of the Charismatic Renewal (AD 1900-Tribulation)

And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. (Revelation 3:14-19)

By now it will be obvious to anyone who has been reading these messages with one eye on the timeline of church history that with the letter to the church at Laodicea, we have entered the final period of church history. It will be just as obvious to anyone who has any perception about what has characterized the church in this century that the predominant unique characteristics of this period have been brought about by what has been termed “the Charismatic movement.”

In our discussion of the nature of the final period of church history, we are not any longer focusing on the state of the mainline denominations, because they are the subject of the letter to the church at Sardis. We are not overly concerned with recent events in the Roman Catholic communion, because that is a continuation of a branch of “the church” that was covered in the letter to the church at Thyatira, wherein we noted that that church will continue on into the Great Tribulation.

We are not even overly concerned with recent developments in “fundamentalism,” as we saw that the rise of the dispensational, premillennial fundamentalist movement, and the churches that have flowed from that, were the subject of the letter to the church at Philadelphia. We noted that that church is given a promise that it will not enter into the Great Tribulation along with the Catholic church and the denominations, but that it will be “kept from” the judgments that are to fall during that period of time.

So we are looking for a 20th century testimony of the “church” that is not primarily associated with the Catholic church, the mainline denominational church, or the premillennial fundamentalist church movement—but which itself embodies a “spirit” and a “testimony” unique to this century.

So, what aspect of the present day church can be said to have been introduced subsequent to the rise of fundamentalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? There are many clues within the message itself.

First of all, note the derivation of the name. Lao, as we noted when discussing the Nicolaitans, is the Greek term for the laity, or the people, in the sense of the common man. Dicea is the Greek word for “power” or “authority”, or even “rights.” This then is the church of “people power,” “people’s rights,” or “civil rights.” It is interesting that the mindset of our age is an overriding concern with people’s rights—human rights, women’s rights, senior’s rights, patient’s rights, children’s rights, everyone’s rights but “God’s rights.”

Secondly, let’s look at the attitude this church holds of itself. It is a church that feels it “has arrived.” The Lord says this church claims to “have it all.” This is the church of the “prosperity gospel,” the “name it and claim it” church, the church that believes that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are found within it—they have the “recovery” of all that has been “missing” in the church for two millennia, they have been blessed by the “refreshing” of the “latter rain.” The leaders of this church have no problem filling huge halls, amphitheatres, and stadiums where self-congratulatory services are held—where the communicants are reassured, “We are the people!” This is cable-channel Christianity in its most glorious, most enthusiastic, most extravagant display of “Christ’s power” to overcome the world, the devil, sickness, and poverty.

And what does the Lord, who is supposedly to be “honored out of his gourd” by all this pageantry, think about it? It makes Him literally sick to His stomach. The vernacular would have it, “It makes Him want to puke.” In fact, the nicety of the King James English almost obscures the fact that the Lord promises this church that He will vomit them up and spit them out. Taken in context with the promises given to the other three churches that exist up to the time of the Rapture regarding what will happen to them at the Lord’s return, there is a picture here of a church that is almost taken up in the Rapture, but then is spued out back to the earth.

Although there have been any number of books and articles published in recent days comparing Laodicea to the current condition of the church. They generally focus on the issue of lukewarmness, and a preoccupation with material wealth. But it is easy to read these books and believe they are about those other Christians out there. The fact of the matter is, this is the age in which we live. In effect, we are all of the Laodicean era of church history. Therefore, we should take extra care to study this letter with the aim of

discovering just what it is about this particular church that the Lord finds so unpalatable.

Anyone who has been active in “the church” over the last several decades is aware that believers outside of the mainline denominations tend to identify themselves as either “fundamental” or “charismatic,” and these two camps tend to be at odds with each other over a host of issues. “Boiled down,” however, the main issues could be summarized thusly:

- Charismatics tend to believe they have more of everything than their fundamentalist brethren, more “gifts,” more “anointing,” more “power,” including the power to heal, the power to prophecy, and the power to bring down the blessings of Deuteronomy 28 upon their finances and business dealings.
- Fundamentalists tend to interpret scripture literally and therefore they see the promises of Deuteronomy 28 as pertaining to promises literally specific to Israel, and New Testament miracles as “signs” given at the beginning of the age to mark the introduction of a new “dispensation.”

In the same vein, fundamentalists tend to be premillennial in their eschatology, teaching that it’s going to get worse before it gets better; that our “hope” is the soon return of the Lord Jesus in the air to “rapture” true believers from the earth before the judgment of God falls on an unbelieving world. This is easily contrasted with the eschatology of the Catholic church and the mainline denominations, as they believe in neither the rapture, nor the return of the Lord to establish a kingdom on this earth.

When it comes to charismatic eschatology, however, there is much confusion about what we are waiting for. For the most part, the movement *in general* seems to feel God is going to gain the victory over the world system by empowering “His church” or “His army” to spread the gospel. Most charismatic congregations are preparing in one way or another to “go through the Tribulation” and win the victory in the end. This is the heart of amillennialism, and is the kind of thinking that influenced the Catholic and Reformation churches to militant action to take over lands and kingdoms by force if necessary in the name of God.

We have already seen that this issue of amillennial eschatology versus premillennial eschatology has been an issue addressed in each of the churches that will exist on the earth at the time of the Lord’s return. There are those in the church today who feel this is a “divisive” issue and doesn’t effect how we live our lives as Christians and so should not be discussed or “worried about.” One of the purposes of this article is to show that this issue is of the greatest importance to the Lord, and His assessment of any church necessarily takes into account the attitude of that church toward His promise to return for His own and keep them from the Tribulation that is coming upon all the world.

A little meditation on this issue reveals the reason why. A church’s teaching in this area

will have a significant impact on the attitude of believers toward the world—this world in which we live. It is a generalization to say—and nevertheless true—that amillennial eschatology will result in a church that is basically “at home” in the world. It feels its place is here in the world—it’s mission to change the world and bring in the Kingdom in a spiritual or allegorical sense that the Lord intends to bring literally.

“Premillennialism” on the other hand results in a church where the believers are expecting to be “outta here” in short order. These believers will be more concerned with storing up treasures in heaven than in learning how to “cash in” on their “heavenly bank accounts” to meet current needs here on this earth. Realizing the time is short, they generally have a greater sense of urgency about “saving souls,” while “charismatics” are generally more concerned with befriending fundamentalist believers so that they can lead them into the “fuller gospel” of gifts, miracles and prosperity. The fundamentalists beat the bushes and “get them saved,” and then the Charismatics get a hold of them and get them “baptized in the Holy Spirit” so that their focus changes from the soon return of the Lord to such distractions as the “fullness of the five-fold ministry,” the recovery of the gifts, spiritual mapping, etc.

The rather muddled eschatology that teaches that the church is headed for a time of great persecution, while also teaching that the church is headed for its most glorious period of awing the world with signs and wonders and miracles makes for a rather unclear scenario of the end times. And it is this confusion that causes most believers of the Charismatic persuasion to be “lukewarm” in regards to His return. If indeed the church is to take the brunt of the judgments during the Tribulation, that is not much to look forward to. And if the church is going to rise up in might revival and win cities and nations to Christ unlike ever before, who wants to see such a glorious time come to an end? So, although Charismatic teachers use fundamentalist terminology in speaking of the Last Days and the Second Coming, it is not clear at all what it is we are really to expect.

Just as in the first letter to the church in Ephesus, many teach that the “first love” the Ephesians lost was their love for the Lord, most teachers today teach that the Laodicean church is lukewarm in its love for Jesus. But just as in the first case, that “first love” may very well be referring to the love of the saints for each other rather than their love for Jesus, so in this last latter the lukewarm attitude could very well be a reference to a “moderate” position between amillennialism (cold) and Premillennialism (hot). Charismatic eschatology does not deny that the Lord is returning to the earth (it's not that cold), but on the other hand, they have a lot of things to do first. Their eyes are on themselves as they anticipate going out into the world to lead the greatest revival that has ever been. Therefore, they are not waiting for the Lord to return any day (they are not that hot). Not cold, and not hot. Not amillennial, and yet not quite premillennial. A muddled, wishy-washy, lukewarm eschatology, or attitude toward the Lords' return, is a major characteristic of the Charismatic movement, which encompasses Third Wave, Third Day, Kingdom Now, Latter Rain, Manifest Sons of God, and Man Child scenarios—but speaks little of the Lord

Himself actually setting His feet on the ground and sitting on a throne in Jerusalem.

So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot...

No doubt this will be a hard pill to swallow for many in this age who are involved in this type of church or even this type of ministry. The primary message is that those who are most involved are totally unaware of their true condition, from the Lord's point of view. Of course, according to the message itself, the predominant trait of the Laodicean church is self-deception. That is to say, one of the outstanding characteristics of a true Laodicean church is that it has no idea that it is a Laodicean church!

But deception, and self-deception, is the hallmark of the end times. The Lord Jesus talked about it in Matthew 24. Paul expounded on it in II Thessalonians 2, calling it "strong delusion." Paul indicates that those who fall prey to this delusion would be those who "received not the love of the truth." Although this passage is generally accepted by Premillennialists as referring to a deception that takes over the world following the rapture and the revealing of the Antichrist, when taken with Jesus' own warning that the deception that would come in the last time would, if it were possible, deceive even the very elect, it should be ample warning that in these closing days of the church age, the winds of deception and delusion are reaching tempest proportions.

Let us simply note a few other things about this final letter that indicate further evidence that this message is to the church of the 20th century, not the second century.

First of all, note the Lord's self introduction to this church. He asserts and affirms that He is the "beginning of the Creation of God." A good message to a church that exists at a time when the world has decided there is no God and there was no creation.

Another sign that this letter was written with the 20th Century in mind is the admonition, "I counsel you to buy from me white raiment, that you may be clothed, that your nakedness not appear." We live in an age when Paul's admonition to women to maintain "modesty" and "shamefacedness" seems almost comical. Nakedness and near nakedness do not shock us anymore.

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.
(Revelation 3:20-22)

Revelation 3:20 is one of the most well-known verses in scripture. It is also one of the saddest when seen in its context.

In the passage, it is the Lord Jesus standing outside His own church. The church doesn't even realize the Lord is not among them—but rather standing outside, seeking any individual that will hear His voice. This again underscores the fact that since AD 600, the Lord has placed his message to the overcomers before the exhortation to hear what the spirit is saying to the churches. He continues to speak in any age to those individuals who are willing to follow Him, and not some denomination; Him, and not some creed or statement of faith; Him, and not some “historical position.” The Lord has not changed one bit since the day He ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father. The church has changed, and with the exception of one bright, shining moment, it has generally been a change for the worse.

I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star. And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Rev. 22:16--19)

The Lord obviously takes the prophecies contained in this last book of the New Testament very seriously. The book is called the Revelation, not because it is intended to be difficult to understand, But because it is intended to reveal. The problem is we don't particularly like to see what it is that is being revealed in the seven letters to the seven churches of Revelation. If taken seriously, these messages could result in a drastic change in your Christianity, your attitude toward the brethren, and how you choose to worship the Lord in spirit and truth. Taken seriously and believed, these letters could really shake up your life. Certainly, if the church really understood these letters, they would definitely shake up the church.

Note again that the Lord bears witness to the fact that He is not only the Root, but the Offspring of David, the King—the King that was promised would be a descendent of David's to sit on the Throne of Israel, to order it forever.

He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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The Seven Letters to the Church & The Seven Parables of the Kingdom

During the period of time between the First and Second Advents of the Messiah to establish the Kingdom, the kingdom is said to be in a “mystery” period. Paul revealed the “mystery that was hid” in the Old Testament, claiming it is the mystery of the church, the Lord’s Body and Bride, a body of Gentile believers that are joined to the root and stock of Israel.

In Matthew 13, the Lord presents seven parables concerning the “mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven” (verse 13). It is interesting to use this passage as an additional overlay while viewing the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, and the timeline of church history.

The Apostolic Age ~ The Parable of the Sower & the Seed

This is perhaps the most familiar of all the Lord’s parables. He explains that the sower is he that spreads the Word of God. Some falls by the wayside and is snatched away by the “fowls,” some grows quickly and then fades, some grows among thorns and is unfruitful, and some grows in good earth and bears much fruit.

The analogy to the Apostolic Age is clear, as this was the period when the Apostles, like sowers, were spreading the Word of God and “planting churches.” There was Satanic opposition everywhere they turned. The evil One attempted to get rid of the Word any way he could.

The Parable of the Tares & the Wheat ~ The Smyrna Period

The Lord Himself explains this parable. He states that the tares and wheat grow together until the judgment at the “end of this world” (verse 40). While the ultimate fulfillment of the parable will be at the final Day of Judgment, there is nevertheless a picture of violence in the “reaping”—the cutting down of the crop in such a way as to separate the tares from the wheat—that is suggestive of the oppression and persecution suffered by believers in the second and third centuries.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed ~ The Pergamos Period

The Lord says the Kingdom is like a grain of mustard that grows up to be a great tree, so great that “the fowls of the air” make their home in the branches of it. In the first parable, the Lord states that the term “fowls” is a reference to the “evil one” or the devil. Remember where Pergamos was? The Lord said it was where Satan’s throne was! This picture of the demons themselves coming to make their home in the branches of the mustard tree corresponds precisely to the paganization of Christianity that occurred as a result of the church being “married” to Constantine’s secular administration in the fourth century.

The Parable of the Woman & the Leaven ~ The Thyatira Period

How many of the seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3 feature a woman? One. The fourth one. How many of the seven kingdom parables feature a woman? One. The fourth one. In the first instance, what is the woman doing? She is introducing false doctrine by teaching false worship to the church. In the latter instance, what is the woman doing? She is introducing leaven into “three measures of meal” so that the whole lump is leavened.

It is interesting to note that the “leaven” or false doctrine of the church of Thyatira has contaminated three major branches of Christianity—the Roman or Western branch, the Orthodox or Eastern branch (which is essentially the Roman Catholic Church minus the papacy), and even the mainline denominations that resulted from the Reformation. All three streams feature a priesthood or high-order of clergy who dress in vestments to distinguish them from the “laity” on sight; all three practice infant baptism and claim it to be the door into the “kingdom.” While mainline denominations do not teach the blasphemy of a continual sacrifice of Christ each time the “eucharist” is observed, they maintain that it is a “sacrament” that can only be “administered” by the “clergy.” And all three streams are amillennial in their eschatology, denying the “glorious hope” of His appearing.

The Parable of the Treasure in the Field ~ The Sardis Period

In this parable, a treasure is hidden, buried in a field. To obtain the treasure, a man must purchase the entire field—or in other words, he must take a lot that is basically worthless to obtain the thing that is worthwhile.

While the Reformation was successful in shaking off some of the more blatant heresies associated with the papacy, it retained much that obscured the supposed central teaching of *sola scriptura* and salvation by faith. Keeping with the analogy suggested by the parable, it is as if these central truths are buried beneath layers of pompous ecclesiology, dead orthodox theology, and unscriptural eschatology. There is something good there, but you really have to dig to find it.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price ~ The Philadelphia Period

Nearly the inverse of the previous parable, this one recounts a man who found one single

pearl of such great value that he got rid of all the other “stuff” in his possession to obtain that pearl. In contrast to the previous parable, the pearl is not hidden. It is brought out in the open in plain view.

The “brethren” of the Philadelphia period sought only one thing—the Lord Jesus Himself. They sought Him through the Word of God and through sincere spiritual fellowship with each other. They “sold” everything that did not, could not, bring them into a closer relationship with the Lord and a clearer understanding of the Word of God. They abandoned church buildings, altars, pulpits, clergymen, the liturgy, the church calendar, robes and vestments, infant baptism, and the accumulated theological wrestling and wrangling of more than a millennia. They found none of these things to be of the slightest value compared to the one goodly pearl they had found in the fellowship of the Lord and His Body.

The Lord Jesus—as Savior of all mankind. The Lord Jesus—as the very Word of God, who is Truth Incarnate. The Lord Jesus—the Soon and Coming of King who will sit in the seat of His father David to rule over all the earth just as He promised. It was the single-minded devotion to the Lord Jesus and the Lord Jesus alone that drove and motivated the Brethren to go into all the world with the Gospel, to proclaim His Truth, to publish tracts and books on His soon coming, to lift up and magnify their Lord above all else—in simplicity and truth. A Pearl of Great Price, indeed!

The Parable of the Dragnet – The Laodicean Period

In the parable of the wheat and tares, only two kinds of people are envisioned—believers and non-believers. In the parable of the dragnet, it appears there are fish, or people, of “every kind”—good, bad, and indifferent (the lukewarm of Revelation 3:16).

Of course, it is the “indifferent” kind that characterize the Laodicean Age—that is, our own age, and our own day. In contrast to the steadfast devotion to the Lord we saw in Philadelphia, these people are devoted to social programs, to “theological relevancy,” to personal health, wealth and prosperity, to great works and great ministries, to fund-raising, to filling stadiums, to being on television, to “being recognized” as great ministers of God, to building programs, to every kind of scheme and contrivance man could possibly imagine to promote the “work.”

It is interesting to note that in this chapter the Lord explains two of the seven parables, and in each case the Lord underscores the explanation with the admonition, “Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.” It should be obvious, then, that as the Lord repeats this exhortation to each of the seven churches, it is not His intent that the letters should be obscure and unintelligible, but that He wants them to be read and understood. It also brings to mind His saying in the letters themselves, “He that hath an ear, let him hear...”

And how is it with you, brother? With you, sister? Do you have ears to hear? Can you receive the message the Lord sent to His church by his servant John, the message He is sending today? It is the same message, because the Lord is the same today, yesterday, and forever. If He hated the deeds and the doctrines of the Nicolaitans in the first century, is there any reason to believe He has now changed His mind?

The Truth is not just a “blessing.” It is a responsibility. We know God from time to time will wink at the ignorance of His people. But when they know the Truth and refuse to act on it because it is inconvenient, or because it might result in ridicule and rejection on the part of good, godly Christians, whose approval they esteem above all else, there is trouble brewing.

Ask the Lord to reveal to you if any of this is true, and if so, what He would have you to do about it. Pray for grace. Remember, all things are to be done decently and in order. We can know these things and still maintain grace in our relationships and fellowship with those who have not this knowledge. This is not a call to rebellion or revolution. It is a call to get our eyes opened as to our true condition as a church. And having our eyes opened, we will pray to the Lord as brothers and sisters, and together we will wait for Him to show us what’s next.

And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. Romans 13:11

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A Few Final Considerations

There has been no attempt to exhaust any of the material presented here. In fact, what has been presented has been presented with the hope that it will encourage believers to study these things for themselves—to study church history, especially the history of the persecution that true believers have suffered at the hands of the recognized, organized, institutional church throughout *any* age of history.

Before leaving the subject however, it does seem useful to revisit the passage as a whole and point out some often overlooked truths that are consistent throughout, as well as to clear up some common misinterpretations of some of the key terms and reoccurring themes in these two chapters of Revelation.

Overcomers

First of all, having looked closely at all of the seven letters, it will become obvious that the term “overcomers” in each of the letters is being used by the Lord in a rather unexpected way. The casual reader will infer that the term is used to denote “Christians” generally, and that the promises here are to Christians who have overcome sin, the world, and the devil.

In context, however, it will become clear that in fact the Lord is speaking to the believers in each age who have overcome the fallacies and heresies predominate in the churches mentioned. For example, in the first letter the overcomers are those who have managed not to lose their first love. In the third letter, the overcomers are those who have not gone the way of Balac; in the fourth, those who have not learned the ways of Jezebel and the deep things of Satan; in the fifth, those who have not “defiled their garments” with the dead orthodoxy and institutions handed down from the papal system to the Reformation; in the seventh, those who hear the voice of the Lord knocking at the door and allow Him to enter.

The overcomers mentioned in the letter to the Church at Smyrna and the letter to the Church at Philadelphia have won the victory over persecution; in the first case, the persecution of Rome, and in the second, persecution at the hand of the established, institutionalized amillennial churches who claim to be “the Israel of God” but who lie.

Nicolaitans

One of the things the Lord repeatedly rebukes the churches for is for allowing false doctrine

and spiritual fornication to be incorporated into what is supposed to be the Lord's Body. This is especially true during the period from Constantine to the time of the Reformation when blatant idolatry is not only tolerated but taught in the "church." It can also be seen that much of the blame for this lies at the feet of the Nicolaitans. This is the group within the church that sees itself as an elite group of superior training, knowledge, and spiritual understanding that takes upon itself the responsibility for teaching the "laity" the things of God. When these men go wrong, they steer the entire ship off course, and that is why the Lord did not intend for believers to be under the domination of a few men who often take more stock of their scholarship and knowledge of the original languages than they do of their personal relationship with the Lord.

It is the rise and acceptance of the Nicolaitans—a professional, paid clergy—that has resulted in so many of the other problems we see in the churches, which include false doctrine and false worship. Yet in spite of this clear teaching in the Book of Revelation, these men remain firmly entrenched and firmly in control of the visible, institutionalized church today.

Jews, Lying Jews, Synagogue of Satan

These often difficult to exposit passages become much easier to understand and explain if one looks at them in the light of a conflict between amillennial theology and premillennial theology throughout the course of church history. If we interpret those who "say they are Jews and are not" (Rev. 2:9; Rev. 3:9) as those believe and teach that the church has replaced Israel in God's divine "Plan for the Ages," the messages are consistent with the rebukes to those churches which are not expecting the Lord to return to this earth to establish His own physical, literal Kingdom.

Many people are confused by a passage in Romans chapter 2 where Paul speaks of those who are Jews "inwardly," and the circumcision of the heart, and the spirit (vv 28-29). It is from this passage that the term "spiritual Jew" originates, although the term does not appear in the passage.

In the context, Paul has been speaking only of Jews and Gentiles throughout the passage. What he is really saying is that the Old Testament Jew had no more promise of salvation than a Gentile if he was not a believer. Simply having the law would not save him if he did not believe in it and act on it. Paul is asking, "Would not God accept a Gentile who *obeyed* the law he had written in his heart before he would accept a Jew who *disobeyed* the law given by Moses?"

A careful study will reveal that in chapter 2 Paul is speaking of the Old Testament world. Jews and Gentiles. There are no Christians around because Christ doesn't show up and die on the cross until Romans chapter 3 verse 21, where he introduces the common era with the phrase, "But *now*..." That word "now" in verse 21 is the great watershed of Holy Writ. It

brings us into a new age. In this age, there is not only Gentile and Jew, there is the Body of Christ, which according to the same apostle, is neither Jew nor Gentile (Galatians 3:28).

Therefore, there is no room for a Christian in the church age to go around saying he is a Jew, that the church is Israel, or anything like that. If he does, he is either woefully misinformed, or he is a liar. In either case, he is spiritualizing (eliminating) the promises God has made in regard to Israel, to Jerusalem, and to Zion, the city of the King who is still to come, and who will rule the nations with a rod of iron (Revelation 19:15). He is the Root and Offspring of David, and the government shall be on His shoulder, and of the increase of His government there shall be no end.

Other references to eschatological theology

Again, one cannot help but point out that in spite of the oft expressed attitude that eschatology is a “non issue,” that it isn’t worthy of discussion or debate, if read correctly the Letters to the Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation are all about eschatology. Perhaps the most practical lesson we learn from this study is that *if your church teaches the church will go through the Tribulation, most likely your church will!* If your church teaches there will be no Rapture and no Tribulation, and no Millennial Kingdom of Christ on the earth, someone is trying to “steal your crown” (Rev. 3:11), which is the crown Paul promised would be given to “all that love His appearing” (II Tim. 4:8). How can you love His appearing if your church teaches He is not going to appear at all?!

It is time for all the eschatological fence sitters to come down on one side this issue or the other. Now that you’ve seen what the Lord’s side is, which side do you want to come down on?

Unity in the Body of Christ

Finally, it is very easy to misunderstand what has been said here in regards to the unity of the Body of Christ. Some will see this as an attack on the Roman Catholic Church, the mainline denominations, and the charismatic movement. It may be, but as they say, we didn’t write the letters to these churches, the Lord did.

The attack then, if there be any, is not against individuals who happen to be associated with any of these communities, but with the systems themselves. It needs to be clearly stated again and again that the scripture and love of Christ compel us to accept all who name the Name of Christ, and to recognize that all who are accepted of Christ are of one Body, and that there are absolutely no grounds for any division between brothers and sisters in Christ.

This, then, is one of the major failings of all of the churches mentioned above. Or, as one of the early brethren writers said, the problem with the state churches (the Catholic and mainline denominations) is that because admission to the church is through birth and infant

baptism, they treat many who are known *not* to be Christ's as though *they were*, making the gate to the Kingdom wider than the Lord has made it; and the error of the dissenting churches (post-reformation denominations) is that they treat many who *are known* to be Christ's as if they *were not*, but rather regard them as gentiles or heathen because they are not of their membership, therefore making the gate to the Kingdom more narrow than Christ has made it.

Our goal in our gatherings, whether held in church buildings or living rooms, should be to respect the same gate the Lord has made. All who are accepted of Christ are our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Period. Amen.

We do not judge another's spirituality on the basis of the denomination, church, association, or fellowship they are associated with. We do not even judge their relationship with the Lord, (and ultimately to ourselves) on the basis of their knowledge of scripture, or any particular interpretation of scripture.

That is to say, a brother in Christ is a brother in Christ, be he amillennial, premillennial, or if there be any other thing in between. To paraphrase Anthony Norris Groves, our fellowship is based on a common life from the Lord of the Scripture, not common light on the scripture. They may choose to divide themselves from us, but we must never purposefully or intentionally cause ourselves to be divided from any. Again, to paraphrase Paul, the love and tender mercies of Christ constrain us. We cannot do otherwise—any more than a hand can reject a finger, or a face it's nose.

And so we have reached the bottom line. The Lord is coming soon. Let us love each other and edify each other and build each other up as we endeavor to exhibit the unity that exists in the Body of Christ on the other side of the wall of Time and Space, where we all are seated with Him in heavenly places. I assure you there is no special seating for the Baptists, and none for the Methodists, and none for the Presbyterians. There is but one seat and we are all *seated together* in One Body. May we give the Lord glory and honor here and now by practicing the same on earth!

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