

Christ Speaks To the Church Today



By Seven Pastors in the Church of God General Conference

Introduction

by Pastor Hollis Partlowe

This booklet will focus on the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2; 3). A different writer will expound on each of the messages of these seven historical congregations which were located in what is now Turkey. You will be richly blessed by their labor.

The human title given the last book in the Bible is "The Revelation of Saint John the Divine." A better title is found in the first line of the book: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." The Greek title *Apocalypse* is taken from the first word in the Greek text *apokalypsis* which means an "unveiling" or "revealing." This fascinating book is not meant to be a secret, but a revelation. Unfortunately, today it is a synonym for chaos and catastrophe. Good expositors differ a great deal on the interpretation of Revelation.

The Father gave the revelation to the Son and the Son to "his servant John" "by his angel" (1:1). The plan and scope of the book are also given in the first

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verse: to show His servants things which must shortly come to pass. The thought seems to be that when the events in view start unfolding they will come rapidly (cf. 1:3b; 22:7, 12).

This final book in the canon of Scripture is a record of what John saw and heard. Its theme is the consummation of this age when God sums up all things in Christ. It unfolds the great events of bringing human history to a close including the second coming of Christ. Jesus is first pictured as Savior of the churches, then as Judge and King. We must acknowledge that the destiny of everyone is under the jurisdiction of Jesus Christ.

Beginning with chapter four, John the Revelator presents future events with principal attention given to the time of tribulation, the seventieth week of Daniel (Matt. 24:21, 22; Dan. 9:24-27). "The words of this prophecy" (Rev. 1:3) in the introduction reveal that it is a book focused on the future.

Revelation was written about A.D. 95 during the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96). John had been exiled to the island Patmos, lying off the coast of Asia Minor in the Aegean Sea (v. 9). It is only ten miles long and six miles wide. Domitian died A.D. 96, and John was probably allowed to return to Ephesus.

During his exile on Patmos, John received various visions and was commanded: "What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia . . ." (Rev. 1:11). Some have entitled the book, "The Patmos Vision." Patmos is "an island that owes its fame to its prisoner." Four times the aged author's name is inserted (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). John wrote the last Gospel, the

last epistle according to time, the last book of the New Testament, and was the last apostle to die.

Revelation gives the necessary conclusion to God's message of redemption for earth and man. Without it, God's plan would be incomplete, left up in the air, would have ended on an unfinished note. It should be considered the book for the end time. The rebellious kings of Psalm 2 find themselves under the feet of Jesus Christ.

The second coming and the years immediately preceding it are revealed in Revelation more graphically than in any other book. Daniel describes the period from his time to Christ's first coming and speaks briefly of the tribulation and Christ's rule on earth. Revelation magnifies the great end-time events with many details culminating in the new heaven and new earth—eternity (chapters 21; 22).

John was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (1:10). That's neither Saturday nor Sunday. John had received the spirit of prophecy and had been transported prophetically into the future day of the Lord in a vision. The curtain was pulled aside and he saw the future day when God's judgments will be upon earth and His Kingdom established. It is most reasonable that the Bible should conclude with a book of prophecies, most of which will be fulfilled at the consummation of the church age. The visions are past but the prophetic fulfillments are future for the most part. This book is the work of a former Jew saturated with the Old Testament, although no quotes from it appear. At the same time, references to Old Testament events and prophecies abound.

Jesus is "the firstborn from the dead" (Rev. 1:5, NIV). He is the only One who has been resurrected from the dead to immortality—never to die again. He said of Himself: "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell [*hades*] and of death" (v. 18). "Keys" is

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an emblem of authority and access which God has given Jesus, who has conquered death and the grave. Jesus is "the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18). As in physical birth, the Head was born first.

The angels of the seven churches (v. 20) apparently were the pastors of the churches. It would seem strange to have celestial angels pastoring churches. The word "angel" means "messenger" and may refer to a mortal man or an immortal angel. John further informs us that the seven candlesticks (lampstands) are the seven churches. That would seem fitting indeed since the purpose of both is to give light (Matt. 5:14-16; John 8:12).

The word "church" (*ekklesia*) is used 16 times in Revelation 1-3, but is not used at all in chapters 4 through 18.

Common to the message to each church is the admonition: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." We would assume that that is equal to Christ speaking through His Spirit.

The key to the Book of Revelation is found in 1:19

The Lord told John to write:

1. "The things which thou hast seen,"
2. "The things which are,"
3. "The things which shall be hereafter."

This is really a threefold outline of the book.

Like the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel, Revelation uses apocalyptic and symbolic forms of revelation extensively. Most students acknowledge that it is a difficult book. Many diverse interpretations have emerged because the symbols must be interpreted. One authority has observed 50 different interpretations of this intriguing book.

Revelation, the only apocalyptic book of the New Testament, claims to unfold the future—beginning as it does with *apokalypsis*. The first-century church was under intense persecution. Perhaps that's the main reason much of the book is symbolic. The message wouldn't be understood by the Roman authorities.

There is no indication until the end of the book that the kings of the earth acknowledge Christ as King of Kings. In order to rightly understand Revelation, one needs a working knowledge of all parts of the Bible. Revelation is the Grand Central Station of Bible prophecy. All the themes of prophetic truth come into this magnificent book.

Suggested Outline to the Book of Revelation

- Chapter 1 — Introduction
- 2, 3 — Seven Letters to Seven Churches
- 4-18 — The Day of the Lord, with God's Wrath
Beginning in 6:16, 17
- 19 — The Second Coming of Christ to Set up
the Kingdom
- 20 — The Millennium
- 21, 22 — New Heavens and New Earth—
Eternity

Revelation 21 and 22 constitute the final revelation given to us in Scripture. It is a glorious climax of all that God has inspired men to write. Here we move from time to eternity (10:6). Here we, with John, get a glimpse of our eternal home—the new heavens and new earth. All that was begun in Genesis, the book of beginnings, is consummated here in Revelation. Our prayer with John's is, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (22:20).

A Letter to the Church at EPHESUS

by Pastor David W. Cheatwood

Revelation 2:1-7

What is wrong with the Church today? John F. Walvoord says, "Many of the evils and shortcomings which exist in the church today are a direct outgrowth of neglect of the solemn instruction given to these seven churches."¹

"The messenger of the church at Ephesus, which at that time was a large metropolitan city, was undoubtedly an important person and a leader in Christian testimony at that time. When the book of Revelation was written, Ephesus, the most prominent city in the Roman province of Asia, had already had a long history of Christian witness. Paul had ministered there for three years as recorded in Acts 19. The effectiveness of his ministry is stated in Acts 19:10: 'All they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.' The preaching of the gospel had affected the worship of Diana, in whose honor the temple of Diana had been built in Ephesus, a structure considered one of the seven wonders of the world. The reduction in the sale of idols of Diana and the Christian teaching that these idols were not worthy of worship resulted in the riot recorded in Acts 19:23-41."²

"After Paul's ministry at Ephesus came to a close, evidence indicates that Timothy for many years led the work as superintendent of the churches in the area. There is reason to believe that the Apostle John himself, now exiled on Patmos, had succeeded Timothy as the pastor at large in Ephesus. It was to this church and to Christians living in Ephesus at the close of the first century, some thirty years after Paul, that the first of the seven messages is addressed."³

So, what did Jesus have to say to the church at Ephesus?

The seven stars were probably the seven pastors, and the seven lampstands represented the seven churches of Asia. So we can see that Christ holds up His leadership and observes the churches with His presence. The word for "hold" in this case means "to hold authoritatively." If Christ is this involved with the church, we might want to consider our own relationship with the church and the pastor.

Christ is not only watching the church, He is taking notes. He has noticed their hard work, their endurance, and their deeds. It drew His special attention that they hated evil. As a group of believers they had

stayed on target. They checked out their leaders to see if what they had to say was truth or another fabrication of man. They were on their toes. It was also observed that they kept to the task and did not become weary. It can also be noted that they worked for the cause of Christ and His name.

Things were sounding pretty good until . . . Jesus started talking about the faults of the church. The church had lost its way. He tells it to get back on track and return to the old ways. What were those ways? Ephesians 1:15, 16 gives us a good clue: "For this reason, ever since I heard of your

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faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks to God for you. I remember you in my prayers" (TEV). The church at Ephesus had been known for her faith and her love for the brethren. Had she lost these important elements of the Christian walk?

Unless the church repented and returned to the ways of God she was destined to fail and be removed from her place of influence.

What were the Nicolaitans? "A group of persons whose works both the church at Ephesus and our Lord hated (Rev. 2:6) and whose doctrine was held by some in the Pergamene church (v. 15). Nothing else factual is known about them, but some have guessed that they were the followers of Nicolas of Antioch, one of the first so-called 'deacons' (Acts 6:5), but there is no evidence for this. Their doctrine was similar to that of Balaam through whose influence the Israelites ate things sacrificed to idols and committed fornication (Rev. 2:14, 15). A sect of Nicolaitans existed among the Gnostics in the third century, as is known from church fathers of the time (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, etc.). It probably had its origin in the group condemned in Revelation."⁴

The church of Ephesus was praised for her hatred. Does that surprise you? There is a time for hate in the life of the church. They understood that the Nicolaitans taught those things that were in opposition to God and therefore they hated their deeds.

What now? Christ has some more good news for the church. If you overcome you will have a place in the paradise of God. Overcome what? Their weaknesses and sin. Here we see a preview to Revelation 22:14-16: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood. I, Jesus, have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright morning star" (TEV).

It needs to be understood that the Kingdom of God is only for the

overcomer. Unless sin is overcome and defeated by the blood of Jesus Christ, we are without hope. The tree of life is the same tree mentioned in Genesis 2:9: "And out of the ground the Lord God made grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (TEV).

Paradise will be restored. What God intended in the beginning will be put back together and we can be a part of it. The early church was given this opportunity and it is also ours.

Where do we fit in the big picture? Christ still holds up His messengers with the truth and His word. The church rises and falls in direct relationship to its faithfulness to Christ and the Word. We can either decide to follow Christ and His ways, or follow the wide path to destruction that the world places before us day by day.

What does Jesus know about us? What are our deeds? What kind of work are we doing for Him and the church? Are we staying faithful to the work He has given to us? Do we really hate that which is evil? Are we willing to question our leadership and check them out? Does the Word of God have its rightful place in our hearts?

There is much hardship for the child of God to endure. He talks about perseverance because Christianity isn't easy. It requires faithfulness, devotion, commitment, and action. It is not for the faint of heart.

What have you suffered for the name of Christ? Maybe you aren't invited to some of the office get-togethers because of your stand for Christ. Maybe your honesty has kept you from being the yes man your boss is looking for. Maybe you have stood for the unpopular cause because it is also Christ's cause. The important thing is that we stand with the Christ, not against Him. We must make that decision every day of our lives.

Do you love all the brethren? Is your faith planted in the Christ and taking root? This is not an option. We must follow Christ or we are drifting away from Him and His influence.

Repent of your sins and get right with God. Place your faith in His Son and walk the ways of the Lord. Overcome sin and its influence in your life. Hate evil and its influence in the world in which we live.

Listen to the Christ, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God. Hear what Christ says to all the churches. If we overcome He will give us a place in the paradise of God and will let us eat from the tree of life. That's what I want; what about you?

¹John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 51.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 53, 54.

³*Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴Merrill C. Tenny, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, p. 586.

A Letter to the Church at **SMYRNA**

by Pastor John T. Welch

Revelation 2:8-11

Being Fitted for the Crown

The mighty Niagara River plummets some 180 feet at the American and Horseshoe Falls. Before the falls, there are violent, and turbulent rapids. Farther upstream, however, where the river's current flows more gently, boats are able to navigate. Just before the Welland River empties into the Niagara, a pedestrian walkway spans the river. Posted on this bridge's pylons is a warning sign for all boaters: DO YOU HAVE AN ANCHOR? followed by DO YOU KNOW HOW TO USE IT?

"Faith, like the capacity to anchor a boat, is something we need to develop and use before a cataclysm."¹

In His message through John to the Christians at Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11), Christ encouraged His believers to "*be faithful*" even if it meant their lives. How can we as individuals and as a church develop such a faith in our own lives? To find out, let's look at this unique message to a unique church.

The City

The city of Smyrna is present-day Izmar and is the second largest city in Asiatic Turkey (approx. 250,000 people). If one looks at a map, he would find biblical Smyrna about 35 miles north of the city of Ephesus. The city itself had a fine harbor which made it a great trade city² full of great wealth and commercial greatness. The city's tremendous beauty³ gave it the title "The Glory of Asia." Not only was Smyrna beautiful, but it was also a politically important city.⁴

The Church

No one knows for sure just when the gospel first reached Smyrna, but it's probable that it came from Ephesus (Acts 19:10). However, we do know that there was a group of believers faithfully meeting in that city. Christ's followers at Smyrna did not have it easy, either. At least two characteristics of the city made the life of a Christian difficult in Smyrna: 1) it was a great center for the worship of Caesar⁵; 2) there was a very large Jewish population there.⁶

The Message

The difficulties the Christians faced in Smyrna are what Christ addressed in His message to them. In His commendation to the church at

Smyrna Christ said, *"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan"* (Rev. 2:9, NASB).

The church at Smyrna faced pressures from various directions. First, because of the idol worship that took place in the city the Christians faced the pressures of conforming to society's heathenistic rituals. One form of

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idolatry was that of the worship of Caesar. Each person was to sprinkle incense in a fire that was burning before a bust of the emperor and call Caesar "Lord." Obviously the Christians wouldn't do that so they were under fire and faced tribulation.

Second, they faced the pressure of financial poverty. However, in His commendation Christ contrasts their lack of material wealth to their abundance of spiritual wealth. They may not have been financially rich, but they were spiritually stable.

Third and final, Christ mentions the pressure of blasphemy the church at Smyrna faced from the Jewish population. The Jews were doing their best to destroy the church at Smyrna. This is why Christ called them "a synagogue of Satan."

Amidst the troubles the church faced, Christ counseled them with these words: *"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life"* (Rev. 2:10, NASB). Some sort of tribulation was facing them, but Christ said not to be afraid. If they stayed faithful to Him (even if it cost them their lives) they would receive *"the crown of life."* What their enemies used against them (death) could not rob them of what Christ promised them (the crown of life) if they stayed faithful.

Finally, Christ challenges the believers at Smyrna by saying, *"He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death"* (Rev. 2:11b, NASB). Christ reiterates His counsel to them. "If you overcome the trials and tribulations facing you, the second death, the lake of fire, cannot hurt you."

The Lesson

What words of encouragement! There are so many demands for the church to conform to and accept the images of the world (homosexuality, abortion, illicit cohabitation, fornication, adultery, prestige, power, materialism, just to name a few). We as churches and individuals may even face tribulations as a result of these pressures to conform. If we do, praise the Lord! Unfortunately, this is not often the case.

I was challenged by the words of John Stott in his book, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*. He wrote,

Supposing we raised our standards and stopped our compromises? Supposing we proclaimed our message and tightened our discipline with love but without fear? I will tell you the result: the church would suffer. There would be an outcry. We should be called puritanical, Victorian, old-fashioned, unpractical, rigid. Indeed, every imaginable derogatory epithet would be called into service of the unbelieving world, and the Church would again find itself where it belongs—outside the gate, and in the wilderness.

I am not advocating a harsh lovelessness towards the weak, the sinful or the penitent. Nor am I recommending that we court opposition with rash and foolish indiscretion. I am simply suggesting that we should not compromise on clear moral and spiritual issues. I am just saying that we should face this fact, namely, that if we do not suffer it is probably because we compromise and that if we do not compromise we certainly shall suffer.⁷

The question we must face then is this: "Are we as individuals, churches, and a denomination suffering, or are we compromising?" Christians are not promised an easy life. As a matter of fact, we are promised the opposite (John 15:20). We need to realize that suffering is a part of the life of a Christian (1 Pet. 4:12-19). I believe this realization will lead us to the proper attitude toward suffering—joy (Jas. 1:2-4).

When we face the pressures of the world, we must stand up against them. The reward is too great to pass up if we do not. The wonderful thing about overcoming these pressures is that Jesus has already done the fighting for us. He said in John 16:33, "*These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulations, but take courage; I have overcome the world.*" Let us take courage in Jesus Christ no matter what we face in life.

Again, Jesus promised, "*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*" Are you being fitted for your crown today?

¹Paul Adams, *Leadership*, Summer 1992, Vol. VII, No. 3 (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.), p. 47.

²William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p. 29.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), pp. 44, 45.

A Letter to the Church at **PERGAMOS**

by Pastor Gordon Landry

Revelation 2:12-17

The third message of the risen Christ to the churches of Asia was addressed to "the angel of the church in Pergamos." Little is known of the origin of this church. Though Paul, on his third missionary journey, traveled in the vicinity, there is no indication that he went through Pergamos.

The town of Bergama, Turkey, is near the site of the old village of Pergamos. It's about 20 miles inland from the Aegean Sea, and is situated just to the north of the Bakir River. An old tradition says that parchment (sheep and goat skins prepared to be used as writing material) was perfected here, and given the name *pergamena*. The town library is said to have contained 200,000 volumes, so it seems to have been a place given to education. But the education must have been largely liberal, for idolatry abounded, as did sexual sins, and the townspeople (and evidently many in the church) accepted this behavior as normal.

Jesus was pictured in the first chapter of Revelation as having a number of rather strange attributes, and from these attributes at least one is chosen to show to each of the seven churches. To the church at Pergamos He is shown as having a mouth out of which proceeded a sharp sword with two edges. And this reminds us immediately of Hebrews 4:12: "The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." A twoedged sword cuts two ways: it can pare off any unproductive branches so the others can produce more fruit, or it can simply destroy.

Verse 13 of our text shows that Jesus is aware of everything going on in this church (as well as in the other churches). Though Satan's seat was in Pergamos, and Satan dwelled there (depicting the utter depravity of the influences abounding within the society), there were still some good things that could be said for the church itself. Its works were good, Jesus' name was held fast, and His faith was not denied. One member, Antipas, had been martyred, and that's as much as we know. Speculation is that he was killed by a mob that was upset with him for some reason (perhaps as an earlier mob was upset with Stephen, Acts 7:51-60), but nothing in Holy Writ explains the reasons for his martyrdom.

“But I have a few things against thee” (v. 14) shows the other side of the coin. “A few things” may possibly indicate to us that the problems were not too severe, but the opposite is true. There may not have been a great *number* of “things” Jesus had against this church, but those He did see were outrageous. He threatened retribution if the church did not improve its spirituality. “The doctrine of Balaam” (v. 14) and “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (v. 15) may have been the same doctrine. In other

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words, the Nicolaitans may have been following and promoting the doctrine of Balaam.

Balaam was a prophet, evidently, but not an Israelite. He was probably a Midianite (Num. 31:7, 8), a descendant of Abraham from his wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1, 2). Balaam was contacted by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the tribes of Israel who were nearing the Jordan River on their trek to the Promised Land. The elders of Moab and Midian who approached Balaam with Balak’s proposition brought with them “the rewards of divination” (Num. 22:7). To Balaam’s credit, he said to the emissaries, “I’ll have to check with God before I can give you an answer.” And God said, “No.”

But Balak was a persistent king, and he sent several princes back to Balaam with a counter offer: “I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people” (v. 17). We’ll not go through the whole story, but it was in the course of Balaam’s trying to balance his greed with obeying God’s Word that Peter said he “loved the wages of unrighteousness; but was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man’s voice forbad the madness of the prophet” (2 Pet. 2:15, 16). During the time Balak was insisting that Balaam curse Israel, the prophet uttered these marvelous prophetic words, “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel. . . . Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion” (Num. 24:17-19). Also in the context of seeking to curse Israel are these words of Balaam which unfortunately did not come to pass: “Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!” (23:10.)

When Balak saw that Balaam would not (could not) curse Israel, he tried to send him home, and said to him: “I thought to promote thee unto great honour; but, lo, the Lord hath kept thee back from honour” (24:11). After Balaam left the presence of Balak and returned home, Balak’s words must have galled him. He finally hit on a solution. Loving “the wages of unrighteousness,” he decided to counsel Balak to get the women of Moab

and Midian to tempt the men of Israel “with their wiles” (25:18), which they obediently did. Those whom God would not allow Balaam to curse because they were His people submitted to the intrigues of the flesh, and not only did they “commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab,” but they also “bowed down to their gods” (vv. 1, 2). As a result 24,000 Israelites died in a plague sent upon them by their forsaken God. In a later battle with Midian, Israel’s warriors “slew all the males. And they slew the kings of Midian . . . : Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword. And the children of Israel took all the women of Midian captives, and their little ones. . . . And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him” (31:7-17).

It was no little sin on the part of the congregation at Pergamos to hold to the doctrine of Balaam. Idolatry and fornication (which often went hand in hand) resulted from that doctrine which, in our modern lingo, would demand, “If it feels good, do it!” (Rev. 2:14.) This was the stumbling block, the doctrine, if you will, of Balaam. The Nicolaitans may have been causing havoc among the members of the church by telling them that the old ways of idolatry and temple prostitution weren’t so bad after all; they could still be good church members and indulge themselves with the other citizens of the city. Did Antipas denounce those sins? Is that why he was slain? Whatever the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, Jesus said of it, “I hate it” (v. 15).

The culmination of the story for the indulgent would be that Jesus will fight them with the sword of His mouth—perhaps a quick retribution at the time the words were spoken, and the judgment to eternal death at the great judgment day. “With the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked” (Isa. 11:4).

Jesus’ final message to the church at Pergamos, as to the other six churches, was an encouragement to continue faithful and a reward will be forthcoming. The “hidden manna” shows that Jesus, because God’s power rests upon Him, can give life eternal to the faithful. The “white stone” may refer to acceptance or a judgment to “let live,” as sometimes occurred, whereas a black stone would mean condemnation and death. The name written on the stone presents a puzzle, since everyone who receives a stone seems to have a name on it known only to him. It has been suggested that the name could be that of Jesus which was never used of Him after His birth—“Emmanuel” (Matt. 1:23)—but this would be unlikely if each name is different.

“Christians” today are not very different from those of the world. We all want our share of this world’s goods, as did Balaam and those of Pergamos who adhered to his doctrine that the end justifies the means. When Balaam’s advice took hold and fornication raged out of control in the camp of Israel, Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, grabbed a javelin, followed Zimri and Cozbi into a tent, and thrust them through while they were engaged in unlawful intercourse. Zimri was an Israelite; Cozbi was a Midianite woman. This sad story is recorded in Numbers 25. We need to remember that Jesus has a sharp sword that cuts in two directions, and we can use that same sword—the Word of God—to slice through the spiritual fornication that rages ‘round the church today, and too often lodges therein. We need more people like Phinehas, of whom God said, “Phinehas . . . hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy” (Num. 25:11).

Satan’s seat—whatever you may deem that to be—is among us today. The temptation to idolatry is more toward the “almighty dollar” than to images of wood and stone, but it is there nonetheless. Fornication is a constant temptation, with sexual diseases all-too-often being the inhibiting factor to indulgence rather than the Word of God and the desire to follow Jesus’ life of purity. Potiphar’s wife gave an open invitation to Joseph to commit fornication with her. How many “Christian” men would jump at the chance? But Joseph said to her, “How . . . can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9.) Oh, that we had more men with the stamina of Joseph!

We must not forget that the fact that “everybody’s doing it” was no excuse for the brethren at Pergamos to indulge their fleshly desires. Jesus looked askance at the idolatry and debauchery of those who upheld the doctrine of Balaam and that of the Nicolaitans. How does He look at you and your intemperance? at me and mine?

A Letter to the Church at THYATIRA

by Pastor Alan Cain

Revelation 2:18-29

As we make our way down the path through the seven churches of Revelation we come across one of the least-known cities of all, Thyatira. Yet, we find the longest letter written to this unfamiliar church and city. This lack of knowledge makes the interpretation a little more difficult, but the truths that are clearly evident are of great significance to the church today. For in this church we find not external persecution but internal decay, brought on by a desire to fit in better with the world.

Some information about the city of Thyatira is needed in order to better understand this lesson. Thyatira is a city in Asia situated between the Caicus and Hermus valleys. This city was on the road from Pergamum to Sardis and, because of its location, was a trading center. One of the important bits of background about Thyatira is that it had a great number of unions or guilds, some of which were in wool, leather, linen, bronze, dyers, potters, bakers, and slave dealers. These workers' guilds basically controlled the economy in Thyatira.

I always marvel, when reading Scripture, to see the delicate balance between judgment and grace, and this passage is no different. We find in the introductory statement to the church of Thyatira a description of Jesus that has inherent in it a warning, “. . . the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze” (Rev. 2:18b, RSV). This phrase tips us off immediately that this will be no joy ride for this church. The eyes of flaming fire are symbols of Christ's ability to see exactly what is taking place, and His ability to pierce them with their sin. The feet like bronze show that the Lord has no intention of being moved or swayed from what He is about to do. Yet, we also see that Jesus gave the opportunity to repent (v. 21).

We find, then, in verse 19 a bit of praise to the church in general about its good works. This type of praise should not be overlooked too quickly. Works of love, faith, service, and patience had increased from the time of the origin of this church. That type of growth is greatly to be desired, for too often a church will be content to stay where it started.

But the praise quickly turns to condemnation toward a particular group of people within the church—those who tolerate the teaching of one called Jezebel. I feel it is safe to assume that this woman's name is actually not

Jezebel, but is an apt title that the Lord ascribes to her because of her actions. The original Jezebel in 1 Kings 18 was the evil wife of Ahab who brought to their marriage and country the worship of Baal. Ahab's wife would have been content to have the worship of Jehovah as well as Baal until she realized that the followers of Jehovah would not allow that, and she had many of them slain.

We find the same taking place with this woman entitled Jezebel, who claimed to be in the Christian fellowship. She apparently encouraged

On the surface this church might have been appealing to a newcomer because of its general good works.

combining the worship of God with that of false Greek gods. Jezebel was beguiling the servants of Christ to do two things: 1) to practice immorality, and 2) to eat meat offered to idols. This is where our background material comes into play.

Again, because of the sparse information about this church and city, this is the best assumption that can be made about the problem of the church at Thyatira. These guilds controlled most of the possible employment in the area, so it was very difficult to find work. Hence, the means to survive without joining a guild was practically nil, and this is where the moral dilemma would begin. Part of the participation involved in these guilds was to partake of common meals. Most of the meals were held in pagan temples, and even if they weren't they all started and ended with a sacrifice to pagan gods, and the meat was then eaten. Along with false worship, these meals were also occasions for drunkenness and gross immorality, so you can see the dilemma. The question was simple: Can a Christian take part in such goings-on? If not, it meant giving up almost all opportunity for commerce.

In the midst of this situation, a woman arises proclaiming a compromise with God's standards in a desire to improve business, and commercial and financial success. This teaching was coming from inside the church and, no doubt—as in all heresy—she was telling part truths. I'm sure she seduced them by saying, "We have to be in the world, don't we? Christ's grace covers sin, doesn't it?" But the Lord's answer is plain, "I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation" (v. 22, RSV). What we have is the internal decay of some of the believers in Thyatira, because they brought into what the Lord later calls "the deep things of Satan" (v. 24, RSV).

Yet as you find in most church situations there are those who know God's Word well enough to divide truth from error, and Jesus commends those in Thyatira also. To those "who do not hold this teaching, . . . to

you I say . . . hold fast what you have, until I come. He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations" (vv. 24-26, RSV).

There are a number of valuable applications for today's church.

On the surface this church might have been appealing to a newcomer because of its general good works (v. 19), although warmth and activity do not necessarily mean it is a spirit-filled place. I am sure there are churches like Thyatira that have a lot of interest because they tickle the ears of the attenders and do not emphasize obedience to Christ's teachings. What Thyatira in part was offering was a place with a Christian name, but actions like those of the world.

We also find in here an extremely valuable lesson concerning Christian ethics. If it was possible then for Christians to convince themselves that they could take part in the sins of the world in order to get financial gain, and still remain faithful, it is possible now; in fact it happens all the time. Jesus warned that one pitfall to the Christian walk was the seduction of wealth. Many Christians fool themselves into believing that they can get involved in the underhanded dealings of business and not have that affect their walk with Christ. They also end up worshipping the idols of work, money, and possessions, to the exclusion of God. Yet, Christ says that doesn't cut it.

The question to us is, Do we have enough faith in God's provision for His people to stand strong on God's standards? The second group of believers in Thyatira did, even if it seemed to mean financial ruin. Do we think God is big enough to provide for those who honor Him outside the world's system? I hope so. Even if the result was poverty and starvation, I would rather be financially impoverished and rich in Christ than to be rich in wealth and spiritually poor.

"If we endure, we shall also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:12a).

A Letter to the Church at **SARDIS**

by Pastor Jon Cheatwood

Revelation 3:1-6

At the time of the writing of this letter, the city of Sardis was a wealthy but degenerate city. William Barclay noted, "There was no life, no spirit there. The once great Sardians were soft, and twice they had lost their city because they were too lazy to watch."¹ They had once been a great, rich, and powerful city, but they fell victim to themselves.

Sardis sat on the top of a hill, about 1500 feet up. That position made the city nearly impregnable. Its people, because of their position and power, believed that they were too strong to need a guard. That belief led them to be unconcerned during a two-week-long offensive against the city, and they ended up losing their city in a night attack, because no one was standing guard. Then, centuries later, when people of Sardis had forgotten that lesson, the city was again taken over in much the same way it had been the first time. Had they been watching in either instance, rather than thinking they were so strong they didn't need to, they would not have lost their city so easily.

Sardis came back into prominence under the Roman empire. It was a center of woolen trade. The city was also known for its dyeing of woolen garments. In fact, it was claimed that the art of dyeing wool was actually discovered there. In contrast to this, Jesus promised those who overcome that they will walk with Him, dressed in *white* (Rev. 3:4, 5).² The city was known for its immorality, and most of its people practiced pagan worship. Jesus said that there were only "a few people in Sardis who [had] not soiled their clothes" (3:4, NIV).

Jesus begins the letter to Sardis with rebuke. There are no kind words to draw them into what He's saying, as there were in the letters in chapter 2. Plainly they had been dead, and He tells them that in the first verse. He immediately tells them to wake up (or watch), and to strengthen what remains. Like their ancestors, who failed to be alert and keep watch during battle, the believers in Sardis were failing to be alert to the sin around them and among them. Because they were probably former pagan worshipers themselves, they needed to watch carefully that they would not fall into their old ways. Unfortunately, they were asleep on duty, or not watching at all, and thus they were falling short of God's will. "I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God" (v. 2, NIV).

The solution for this problem was relatively simple. "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent" (v. 3, NIV). You have strayed from the path that you set out on, so get back on the path and repent. It was time for these people to learn the lesson that they should have learned centuries ago, after the first attack that caught them off guard. They needed to guard themselves against straying from the teachings they had been given. If they failed to wake up and watch, Jesus

If they failed to wake up and watch, Jesus said that He would "come like a thief."

said that He would "come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you" (v. 3, NIV).

I have to disagree here with the writers of the NIV Study Bible study notes. They say, in reference to verse 3, that it is "not a reference to the second coming of Christ, because here His coming depends on the church's refusal to repent. Elsewhere in the New Testament the clause refers to the second advent."³ Likely it is, in fact, in reference to the second coming. To me, it appears that the language in this text mirrors the language found in the texts the NIV Study Bible points to as second-coming texts.

Let's look at the verse in question again: "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you" (NIV). It speaks here of keeping in mind the message you've heard and obeying it. It equates that with waking up, or watching. Matthew 24, clearly a "Day of the Lord" text, uses similar language. "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (42-44). The idea is the same: we must watch and be alert, or the Day of the Lord will catch us off guard, just as a thief catches a sleeping man off guard. He is merely stating again that if you do not stand guard, keeping yourself in line with God, then you will not be ready for Christ's return. In that way, in the sense of our own readiness, we can cause His coming to be like that of a thief in the night.

Even though the outlook for this church wasn't too good, Jesus did say that there were actually a few people in Sardis who had not yet soiled their garments. Those people would get to walk with Him, dressed in white, as will those who overcome. This is an often-used picture of salvation in

Revelation. Those who come out of the tribulation in Revelation 7:9-17 (NIV) were said to have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Revelation 22:14 (NIV) gives a similar image: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.”

Of course, we would all do well to follow the commands in this letter. Times being as they are, the warning to stay awake is important. We must guard ourselves against falling into the sins that are so rampant all around us, especially those sins to which we may have been slaves before we came to know Jesus Christ. We’ve got to avoid picking up the sins of our society: racism, for instance, which was quite evident here in Southern California in 1992. I feel it is our responsibility to remind Christians that Jesus taught us to love our neighbor and to love our enemies, which I often preach. It would be very easy to take a few bad experiences with someone of another race and decide that all people of that race are bad. Unfortunately, many in the Church of God have fallen into that trap. Of all people, though, Christians should be able to see people as individuals, and as such they should love them unconditionally. Sure, that can be incredibly hard at times, but isn’t the road to salvation said to be small and narrow, and only a few will find it? (Matt. 7:14, NIV.) Why? Because following the example of Jesus is not at all easy.

Another sin that is easy for us all to fall into is the sin of being complacent—just plain being nothing. Part of the problem at the church in Sardis was that they were going nowhere. One commentator (Barclay) said that at least a heresy in the church would have been a sign that they were very much alive. The people in Sardis were evidently too lazy to even think. If they were doing ANY good, there would probably have been some sort of attack from outside the church, some persecution or slander. The fact of the matter was, though, that they had ceased to matter. “It was so lifeless that it was not worth attacking.”⁴

Pray that you and your church do not end up in such a position. Pray also for those churches that are already in that position, so that they may each catch fire. We must keep ourselves alive and alert spiritually so that the Second Coming will not catch us spiritually sleeping.

“You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled” (1 Thes. 5:5, 6). Watch and pray!

¹*The Revelation of John*, volume 1, William Barclay. p. 145.

²*A Survey of the New Testament*, Robert H. Gundry. p. 371.

³*The NIV Study Bible*, Kenneth Barker, general editor, pp. 1929, 30.

⁴*The Revelation of John*, volume 1, William Barclay, p. 148.

A Letter to the Church at **PHILADELPHIA**

by Pastor Hollis Partlowe

Revelation 3:7-13

The city of Philadelphia was located 30 miles southeast of Sardis. It was built by Attalus Philadelphus (159-138 B.C.) and named after him.

This city in Asia Minor (now Turkey) was a busy marketplace but never grew very much because of frequent earthquakes in the area. Philadelphia was on the main line of communication between Rome and Central Asia Minor. Its strategic location enabled it to open or close these lines of communication. The Lord reveals Himself as the one who opens and no man shuts. The church located in this city could well be called "the church with the open door."

The Greek word for Philadelphia is found six other times in the New Testament. Here is the seventh and final time. It is used only here of the city bearing this name.

The word "Philadelphia" means "brotherly love" (Heb. 13:1). The name "Christadelphian" (referring to our good Christian friends in that group) means "Brother in Christ."

One of the distinguishing marks of genuine Christians is love. Our Lord said: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). One of the constant evidences of a healthy Christian life is the way Christian brethren get along with one another. Where there is no love between believers you won't find a welcome for Christ. If we are to have and enjoy Christ, we must love and live the truth. Of the seven letters to the seven churches, only the one to Philadelphia contains no word of rebuke. Apparently these first-century Christians had learned to apply Christian truth to everyday life. Here was a humble, faithful church in a pagan and corrupt society reflecting the love of Christ. It was the only one of the seven that received an unqualified commendation from the Lord of the church. The letter to Philadelphia is all praise and no condemnation. In it there is a word about Christ, the church, and the individual Christian. We would do well to pattern our churches after it. Members of Jesus' family will bear His resemblance. If brotherly love is missing, we have not yet found Philadelphia.

The Lord, the head of the church, introduces Himself in a threefold way:

1. He that is holy and true.

2. He that has the key to David. That's another way of saying that Jesus Christ has the right to rule and reign over this planet from David's throne in Jerusalem (Luke 1:31-33; Isa. 9:6, 7). Some day He will exert His authority. Make no mistake about it.

3. He that opens and no man shuts.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the central subject of all Scripture. If you want to see man as God wants to see him, look at Jesus Christ. He is perfect man. He is man as God expects man to be.

The congregation at Philadelphia had patience, Christ to keep them from temptation, a little strength, and had not denied Christ's name—a good track record. Jesus did not demand repentance of them.

An Open Door (vv. 7, 8)

This may mean various things. Jesus is the open door to God (John 10:1, 10). The church will be built and not even death can hinder it (Matt. 16:18). Christ will win converts and none can hinder Him. The Lord Himself opens doors for those He sends forth. (Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9.) He has the power and authority to open doors which no man can shut. Jesus is the door of salvation. If you wish to enter, no one can stop you except yourself. When the door of salvation is closed, the Lord will close it (not man) as was the case in the days of Noah (Gen. 7:16). See also Matthew 25:10.

"I know you well" (v. 8, Living Bible), Jesus says to the Philadelphians. Although few in number, you have kept the faith. This world's system usually measures strength in numbers, but not God. This little minority had remained faithful against considerable odds. True Philadelphians are all too hard to find. Right doctrine and right living go together.

The Lord specializes in opening doors (2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). I trust that your church in these last days will know the open doors. An open door means opportunity, a call to action. Doors to former communist countries are not only open to the gospel, they are off the hinges. I praise God that Tracy Savage of the Pine Grove Bible Church (Minneapolis) is in Russia sharing Christ.

Israel stood on the edge of the Promised Land but refused to go to Canaan. The door was closed until 38 years later. That generation died without fulfilling its God-given purpose. The next generation came on the scene and went in and took the land from the enemies of Israel.

Christ has opened many doors in our time. Let's use them to share the Good News.

Key to David

This is probably a reference to Isaiah 22:22, 23 where the key to the

house of David was given to Eliakim who then had access to all the wealth of King Hezekiah. Jesus had already announced that He had the key to death and the grave (Rev. 1:18). In fact, He had already received all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). Being the Son of God and a descendant of David, He could rightly claim the key of David. No church has that authority. Christ is truth in contrast to all that is false.

They Say They Are Jews and Are Not (v. 9)

The ones in view are probably Judaizers who opposed the apostles at every turn in the road. Jesus said they are liars and are of "the synagogue of Satan." Jesus issued a stern warning against them because they opposed the work of the gospel and persecuted the early believers. (See 1 Thes. 2:15, 16.) God will deal with them in His own good time. This same problem is seen in the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:9). Equating New Testament Church believers with Jews is forbidden, although many groups through the centuries have made that claim.

Kept From the Hour (v. 10)

Perhaps this is the most controversial phrase found in the seven letters. Good students differ on the interpretation of it. Does this phrase apply to the church in general? Does it mean that the church will be kept through the period of trials in view or kept from that time period?

A. J. Pollack wrote: "It is remarkable that out of over 890 times the preposition *ek* is found in the New Testament, only once, Galatians iii.8, is it translated *through* and there the sense is evidently *by*. 'God would justify the heathen *through* or by faith. . . .' The word is translated dozens and dozens of times by the word *by*, and many times by the two words *out of*. But to be '*kept from*,' is not being '*safe in*.'"—quoted by Gerald B. Stanton (p. 49), *Kept From the Hour*.

"Kept through" as a translation of *ek* seems highly unlikely. One out of 890 is very convincing. Then, too, observe that the deliverance is not from the trials (testing), but from the time period or hour of trials which shall come on all the earth-dwellers. Perhaps if it were intended to teach that they would be kept through the time of trouble, it would be proper to use another preposition (Greek, *dia*), meaning *through*. I have 12 translations in my study and all of them read "*kept from*," including *The Emphatic Diaglott*. It is clear that this time of God's wrath and judgment will come upon all the earth-dwellers to try or test them (Rev. 6:10; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:8).

Paul D. Feinberg "argues from classical literature, the Septuagint and the New Testament that 'the Greek preposition *ek* indicates a position outside its object,' and that the combination *tareo ek* promises 'a preservation outside of a time period. . ..'"—quoted by Gerald B. Stanton

in *Kept From the Hour* (p. 357). Certainly, this issue will continue to be debated by good students on both sides of the issue.

Earlier, in His Olivet Discourse, Jesus said: "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36).

It is not my purpose here to debate who is in or out of the tribulation period. Good scholars differ widely on this issue. The important thing is that Jesus is coming again. "Behold, I come quickly" (3:11). This statement is found three times later in the book (22:7, 12, 20). The idea is not that Jesus will come soon after the book was completed but when events in the book started happening, they would move in swift

Here was a humble, faithful church in a pagan and corrupt society reflecting Christ's love.

succession. Therefore, "Hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown" (v. 11, NASB). This is good admonition for Christians in the twentieth century.

Four times in verse 12 Jesus calls God "my God," which is in beautiful harmony with the whole revelation of Scripture. Our Heavenly Father is the God of Jesus Christ.

Then Jesus issues a promise to overcomers which He does several times in this book. Overcomers will be pillars in "the temple of my God." This is a figure of speech in which the entire city of Jerusalem is considered a temple. In keeping with this symbolism the Philadelphian Christians will be permanent like the pillars in a temple. They will stand when all else has fallen. This would have special meaning to them because of their experience with earthquakes which had ruined their buildings and left only the pillars standing.

What the Spirit Says (v. 13)

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." This admonition is given to each of the seven churches. This is equal to what Christ says to the churches inasmuch as Christ does all of His work through the Spirit. Sometimes in Scripture "spirit" refers to the whole personality (Dan. 7:15; Phil. 4:23, NASB; 1 Cor. 15:45; 1 John 4:1).

Threefold Assurance

Jesus gave the Philadelphians a threefold assurance that they would be identified with God because:

1. They will have the name of God.

The name is a mark of citizenship and ownership. Followers of the beast are tagged with the mark of their master (Rev. 13:16-18); so are followers of Christ. One is true, the other counterfeit.

2. They will have the city of God—New Jerusalem.

This is a reference to the future eternal city described in Revelation 21;

22. This city is just as literal as the new heavens and new earth, although all that is involved in this verse is beyond our finite comprehension.

3. They will have a new name—"my new name" (NASB).

The Church of God will ever bear the name of God. These Philadelphians portray what is good and desirable in a church. They were humble and faithful, exemplified the life of Christ, loved God's Word and kept it, and won converts. We'd do well to look at Philadelphia. Nothing can hinder such a church.

A Letter to the Church at **LAODICEA**

(Entrepreneurs Among Us)

by Pastor David Wilsterman

Revelation 3:14-22

They were an exceptional people. All they had and everything they were was the result of their ingenuity and hard work. They were noble beings born of common stock—noble because their common origins were never an excuse for not excelling in the business of life. The world's citizenry looked to them as examples of success, for they took whatever was handed them, even the bad and the bitter, and made of it something estimable. They were not just survivors content with eking out a modest existence in a hostile environment, rather they were model achievers who were determined at every life-juncture to build a dream. They were bright. They were determined. They were strong. They were proud. They were entrepreneurs in the truest and purest sense. They were Laodiceans.

Their community had been established in the third century B.C. in the fertile valley of a tributary of the Maeander River by Seleucid Antiochus II. He named the settlement after his wife, Laodice. The population applied themselves to building a top-ten city (you know, one of those places in which you'd like to raise a family or start a business). And their efforts in hard work paid off big for them. They became a commercial hub famous for developing such fashionable products as shiny, black-dyed wool. Their medical research capabilities were renowned after their advancements in the treatment of diseases of the eye led to the formulation of a wondrous ophthalmological salve. Others believed in them and invested in their labors, making Laodicea a tremendous financial capital as well. In fact, so great did the wealth of their city become that, after an earthquake leveled Laodicea in 60 A.D., the populace rebuilt entirely by themselves. They never solicited Rome for imperial aid. Whatever had to be done for them, Laodiceans felt confident that they could do it themselves. After all, they had once been weak, but now were powerful; had once been illiterate, but now were lettered; and, had once been poor, but now were rich. And they had done it all themselves!

History suggests that the gospel came to these seemingly self-sufficient people early in Paul's career as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Although he apparently never journeyed there himself, it is felt that a close associate of Paul's—probably Epaphras—traveled to Laodicea during the apostle's

stay in nearby Ephesus. The “letter from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16) is thought by some to be our Ephesian epistle, and if this assessment is accurate, then we know that the Laodiceans were familiar with such Christian distinctive teachings as God’s gracious provision for us in Christ, and sufficiency for eternity in Jesus alone. If they read what we read, then they knew that one could be rich, and brilliant, and strong, and successful in God’s estimation only when he abandoned his own wherewithal and became utterly dependent on the Lord as the sole resource for living. Laodicean Christians

Whatever had to be done, Laodiceans felt they could do it themselves.

knew that God had chosen them to populate a perfect city which He Himself was building, that He had blessed them with spiritual riches beyond their wildest dreams, and that He had equipped them by His power to negotiate the most hazardous life circumstance. But they chose to believe what others believed about them—that they could excel by themselves, achieve by themselves, overcome by themselves. In the end, they successfully factored Jesus out of their church equation, leaving Him on the outside looking in (Rev. 3:20).

That’s where we find Him in His letter to the church at Laodicea (vv. 14-22), picturing Himself on the outside banging on the door for admittance. Whether interpreted historically or eschatologically, literally or figuratively, the interpretation is pretty much the same: hard-working church people have excluded the risen Christ from His church, and believe that their contributions to the church’s development are both significant in God’s estimation, and appreciated by Jesus. They believed that achievement was achievement, an end secured by any means. They believed that that end—success—even in the work of Christ on earth, justified any means. After all, wouldn’t Jesus want a sophisticated, powerful, wealthy church? Wouldn’t He be pleased that His followers would apply themselves to the task of church-building and not trouble the Savior with the mundane? Wouldn’t He be proud that His followers had organized themselves so as to become successful in all to which they invested themselves and were the envy of all the world? No! He wouldn’t be proud—not then; not now. That’s the whole point of His letter to the Laodicean church recorded in the third chapter of Revelation. Whether an ancient or future body, Christ counsels that without His presence among us, inside us, the church is nothing but pitiful, poor, and wretched. He advises that the Laodiceans forget whatever their own entrepreneurial genius has gotten them and get from Him all that they need, because, no matter how all that might look to them, from Jesus’ perspective they are genuinely impoverished.

I thank my God that we, living in the last decade of the last century of the second millennium A.D., do not bring to the church of Jesus Christ our own agendas for where His church ought to be going or how it ought to get there. I thank my God that we do not believe, as did the ancient Laodiceans, that the church is just like any other enterprise which, when our entrepreneurial skills are applied, will prosper under our own manipulations. I thank my God that we do not ever suppose ourselves to be in control of the business of the church to the extent that we prescribe this world's formula for success in doing Christ's work of peace-making and bridge-building. "Those who believe that unbelievers can only respond to God by a gift of His grace will not act as though it all depended on clever marketing techniques." (Bill Hill, *Power Religion*, Moody Bible Institute, 1992). And, I thank my God that if, God forbid, we should ever find ourselves in any such circumstance as described above, Jesus is always faithful and will keep on knocking at the door, seeking the invitation of just one believer for Him to enter and save us from ourselves.

But these kinds of things happen whenever we view the church as something which is ours, not something we are. It happens every time we imagine that we are responsible for the success or failure of ministry. It happens whenever we bring to the task of reconciling the world to God through Christ the notion that we can do it without Christ, or in spite of Him. We fall into the Laodicean trap every time we bring the tried and true techniques of entrepreneurs to our mission for God-with-Christ; whenever we suppose that, because achievers use such ploys in the world productively, we may do the same in Christ's church with His approval and to His delight. (I declare if I hear such phrases as, "But, this is the real world!" or, "But, it works!" just one more time relative to using the techniques of modern-marketing strategists, I'll be pushed to the point of being a small toy short of a Happy Meal!) In fact, Bill Hull writes in *Power Religion* that "church growth should not be a primer for building effective churches; it has a sociological base, it is data driven, and it worships at the altar of pragmatism. It esteems that which works above all and defines success in worldly and short-sighted terms. It offers models that cannot be reproduced and leaders who cannot be imitated."

There is no room in the church for entrepreneurs, in the popular sense. But sometimes we find ourselves among them. Sometimes we find ourselves working alongside them. Sometimes we find ourselves following their lead as our pastor, or teacher, or elder. Sometimes we discover that we're applauded for strategic brilliance, or our business sense, or our knowledge and logic, when all the while it is apparent to Jesus that we're just entrepreneurs bringing to the task of building His church our innate abilities, but doing that work without Him. Many

encourage this by telling church leaders that theirs can be “bigger” and “better” churches when they attend growth seminars and marketing retreats and acquire those skills commensurate to developing successful, profitable enterprises. (Those who hesitate to buy in to such notions are usually labeled “lazy” by the “go-getters.”)

We generally do this, become Laodicean entrepreneurs, because we do not trust Christ; we let ourselves “be paralyzed by fear, fashioned by our environment, petrified by routine, sterilized by conformity,” as Paul Tournier writes in his book *Guilt & Grace* (Harper & Row, 1962). And for this, the author goes on to observe, we will be self-condemned by guilt, knowing that God would have us do otherwise.

For our rebellion, albeit for every right and noble reason, Jesus writes of His disgust, that He would spit us from His mouth. (Another reference to Laodicea, for, their water supply was poor and they had to have fresh, but warm, water piped to their city from some distance.)

It must be repulsive to the Savior to have us consider doing the work of His church without Him, as to give a thirsty person on the desert warm water to drink. Long ago God spoke through Jeremiah of His dissatisfaction with our attempts to do what He has not given us to do—in fact, what is His alone to accomplish. “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jer. 2:13, NIV). It must grieve Jesus, as it grieved God in Jeremiah’s day, to realize that we know His ways are not our ways, and yet have us determined to do the work of His ministry our way. It must pain Him to be on the outside of His church looking in, pleading to be admitted, as we involve ourselves with the business of His church as true Laodicean entrepreneurs.

“Lord, deliver us from the mistaken notion that we are responsible for the survival of Your church, its success or its failure. Let us hear Your Son’s knocking at its door, and with hands dedicated to doing His bidding, open it to Him. May we never presume to apply the sciences of this world to the business of Your church. Grant us relief from the guilt which drives us to make disciples as Laodicean entrepreneurs. Help us to trust in the reality of Christ’s being, in the competency of your equipping, and in the truth of His soon appearing. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

This series of articles first appeared in *The Restitution Herald* (October/November, 1992). It is being published in booklet form by popular request. This booklet could be useful for midweek Bible study or for an elective Sunday School Class, etc.

