

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

A Commentary on the Book of Revelation

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THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST IN THE REVELATION

PREFACE

The Revelation of Jesus Christ recorded by St. John is probably the most challenging Book of the Bible one can study. While it is written in a form common to prophetic books of the OT like Daniel and Isaiah, the Book of Revelation stands alone in the NT. The language is deeply rooted in the rest of Scripture; in direct quotes, allusions, and word associations.

One of the reasons for Jesus' revelation to His people was to show *things which must shortly come to pass* (1:1). It is therefore a foretelling of what His people should expect to face during the intervening time until His return. The difficulty is that while some of the prophecies are explained, most are veiled in language often hard to understand. This has led to widely varied interpretations and speculations, many of which do not come close to expressing what the Spirit of God really means to reveal. Some people choose to completely avoid the book, and some even believe it is not understandable.

In the last one hundred years or so, there has been increased interest in end-time prophecy, spurred mostly by new ideas and theories popularized over the pulpit and by so-called prophecy seminars. Some prophecy teachers even claim special revelation from God, for their teachings cannot be found in the Bible. The old-fashioned interpretations of the Revelation have been scorned, along with many other teachings that our contemporary churches proclaim to be out-dated and out-of-style. Prophecy interpretation must be held to the standard of God's Word, but in this day of tolerance we seem to find it hard to reject un-Biblical teachings, something the Anabaptists and early Christians did not hesitate to do, and for which they paid with their very lives many years ago.

Several reasons motivated me to write this commentary, the major one being the absence of any other in-depth study of the Book of Revelation from

an Anabaptist perspective. A second motivation is to open the Book to more general use in churches, for many avoid it simply to keep away from interpretation disagreements. This serves to make the visions even more obscure and misunderstood, which is an unfortunate development, for the Book has much to give to the Church, especially those facing hardships and trials.

The Book of Revelation inspires us to live our faith more than does any other book of the Bible. Leaving eschatology aside, where do we find a more beautiful illustration of redemption and the marvelous sacrifice of Christ than in Revelation 5? Or the great defeat of Satan in Chapter 12, the inspiring picture of heavenly bliss in Chapter 21, and the coming marriage of the Bride of Christ to the Lamb of God in Chapter 19? The Book is full of these pictures that add real emotional feeling to the Biblical expressions of mercy, grace, love, faith, and salvation. Every Christian, regardless of their personal view of eschatology should be able to appreciate these pictorial parables of Christ's Revelation. He spoke in human parables when He walked this earth, and now from heaven He shows us spiritual ones.

This book does not attempt to refute the many different ideas and teachings about the end of the world. That is a study entirely of its own. Our goal is not to present the "correct" schedule of the end of the world, or even to advance one eschatological view. The purpose of this work is to progress verse-by-verse through the only book of the Bible that promises a blessing to those who read it. We will encounter various topics as we go, and will turn often to other Scriptures for a deeper and more complete understanding. In general, we have avoided giving the views of other commentators, seeking the Spirit's intended meaning independently, not because of mistrust, but in order to keep an open mind.

I want to acknowledge and thank the many people who have helped me in writing this book. Especially I want to thank my father, William, and my brothers, who spent many evenings discussing with me the ideas presented herein. Those who agreed to pray daily for me during the 5+ years I spent studying and writing share in the success of this work. And also my grand father, Dan JB Byler, whose life and witness was a great inspiration to me, and whose writings on types and shadows and the Revelation are well known in the Mennonite Church.

The many commentaries on the Revelation and eschatology reveal that each author has his own set of premises and agendas based on his own particular theology which colors his interpretations. My own pet ideas and concerns derive from my conservative Mennonite heritage, and I do not hesitate to say that they affect my thoughts as well.

We have sincerely sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit in studying this great and last book of the Bible. In searching and comparing the Scriptures, the absolute inerrancy and agreement of the Bible with itself was profoundly revealed. Though human writers wrote the individual books over many centuries of time, the author is the all-knowing God who purposefully created heaven and earth. Over and over in the Book of Revelation phrases and words are carefully used that have previous associations and meanings which agree minutely with details being presented by the visions of John. Often the cryptic and obscure sentence becomes clear and meaningful when one discovers that it is based on previously written Scripture.

I thoroughly acknowledge that this work is not error-free. It is only a human effort. My highest goal is to give the correct interpretation, and have earnestly sought it in much study and prayer. The Holy Spirit is the giver of the warnings and prophecies in the Book, and my greatest fear is to present something that was not His intended meaning. It has made me stay as close to the Bible as possible to avoid inaccuracies. The mistakes are mine; learn from them as you grow in the understanding of this great Book.

METHODS OF STUDY

THE THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE REVELATION

Perhaps no topic has inspired more argument and opinion than the events involving the Second Coming of Christ. Volumes have been written by scholars and commentators down through the years, each championing some system of interpreting the Scriptures. We now stand some 18 centuries after the first interpretations of the Apostle John's vision, a position that allows us to evaluate and learn from men of God what the Revelation meant to them. It allows us to test the prophecy teachers, as God instructed the Israelites to do. If a prophet's message did not come to pass, he had *spoken it presumptuously* (Deut 18:22) and his words were not to be trusted. Such a test would certainly produce failing marks for many recent prophecy scholars, whose predictions must constantly change to keep up with world events. These teachers easily find almost every new world tragedy or war in prophecy, for according to their scheme, virtually all prophecy is to be fulfilled in or own time, or at least in the very near future. In our opinion it is an error to hold one's own era of time in such high value. The *last times* began with the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ (I Peter 1:20; Heb 1:2; Luke 16:16) and encompasses the entire Age of Grace. When David said *my times are in Thy hand* (Ps 9:9), did he not speak for every Christian regardless of when or where he lived?

A review of recent Revelation commentaries reveals that time has not narrowed man's ideas and interpretations. Rather, it has greatly expanded them, even to the point that a seeker may despair at the many divisions and subdivisions of the three major ways of interpreting the Book. Even within the

same view of interpretation commentators advance ideas that contradict the standard view of that interpretation, leading to a quagmire of sub-divisions that conflict and overlap indiscriminately. With all this confusion, it is not surprising that many do not even study the Revelation for themselves, but are completely content to let someone else (whom they trust) tell them how and what to believe. We do not trust men with our salvation; do not trust them with the Revelation. Study it for yourself. You will find wonderful blessings there and a deeper admiration for the precise agreement of Scripture among its many earthly writers whose pen moved at the will of the Holy Ghost. The beautiful pictures inspire us with longing for heaven and keep our eyes lifted upward to Christ, away from earthly distractions and turmoils.

The three general methods of interpreting the Revelation are called Preterism, Futurism, and Historicism. The criterion used to divide these views is determined by answering one all-important question: when are the prophecies to be fulfilled? Arguing the symbolic meanings of words, figurative or literal interpretation techniques, and even the applications of the visions to earthly events are all subordinate to the underlying premise of when one believes the prophecies will come to pass. The time-frame within which the Revelation is fulfilled is so important that it alone will determine which of the three views you will take. Certainly we form our conviction of that time-frame by the content of the Book, but once formed, it will override all other criteria of interpretation. We do not say this critically, for this commentary itself is thus influenced. Let us settle first then, the question of when the prophecies of the Revelation are to be fulfilled.

Preterism sees the Revelation fulfilled in the first few centuries following Christ, and therefore Preterists seek applications for the prophecies in the distant past. Futurism believes the entire Book will be fulfilled during the last years of world history, and their applications are accordingly found only in future (or current) events. Historicism views the prophetic scenes as events occurring throughout the Church Age, and therefore fulfillments are sought in both the past and the future. Though commentators argue their applications of the visions of the Revelation individually, the first and foremost premise of every application is subordinate to the time of fulfillment.

Generally, Futurists never consider past events as possible fulfillments of the Revelation, and Preterists do not consider future events as likely fulfillments.

PRETERISM

The Preterist view believes that the majority of the prophecy is past, and was fulfilled mostly in the destruction of Jerusalem and the decline of the Roman Empire. Preterists are usually A-millennial and non-Dispensational (we will define those terms a little later). This view requires the Book of Revelation to be written before A.D. 70 (the date of Jerusalem's destruction), an indefensible position in our opinion. The early Church writers (see Irenaeus) affirm that the Apostle John wrote the Revelation during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96).

Preterism is based upon a strict interpretation of Jesus' promise, *Behold I come quickly* (found three times in Chapter 22 alone), and the phrase *the time is at hand* (1:3, 22:10). Full Preterists believe that God would be deceitful to say Jesus was coming soon and then tarry for 2,000 years. Therefore, they believe Jesus' Second Coming took place during the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But the difficulties of Preterism are insurmountable, for although there are a few verses that could be taken to mean that Jesus' return would be soon after His ascension, there are many others implying that it would be a long time before His return (see pages 33 and 80). Peter's second epistle answers the Preterist's question about Jesus' apparent delay in returning for the faithful: *There shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation... Be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance... And account that the long suffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you (II Peter 3:3-15)*. Peter says that God counts time differently than humans do. The fact that this passage

is in the Bible strongly hints that rather than returning immediately, Christ's return would be a long time coming, by human reckoning. Peter says the day will come (and now is) that many will scoff at the promise of His coming, seeing that it was given so long ago and that He still has not returned.

Because of the failure of many of Futurism's prophetic claims, and the fact that Christ continues to tarry, Preterism is increasingly attractive to some denominations. It is hard to understand why these well-intentioned Christians can believe that Christ would return only 40 years after He ascended to His Throne. The mighty Kingdom of Christ has gathered millions and millions of souls into heaven since A.D. 70, and NT teaching is clear that the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world will culminate the earthly aspect of the Kingdom and usher in the eternal heavenly one.

Indeed, a chief reason for the three views of the Revelation is disagreement on the Biblical meaning of the *Kingdom of Christ*, also called *the Kingdom of God* and *the Kingdom of heaven*. We believe the Kingdom of Christ began with His ascension into heaven (Rev 5), and that His *Kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever* (Daniel 2:44). Every man who seeks the God of heaven presses into this *everlasting Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (II Peter 1:11; Luke 16:16). (See page 290 for a more detailed discussion of the Kingdom.)

FUTURISM

The Futurist camp believes that the Vision is entirely future, all of Chapters 4-22 taking place after the Church Age has ended. The Futurist program, also called Millennialism, believes the next prophetic event will be the Rapture, an event which removes the Church and the Holy Spirit from the earth for a period of seven years during which God will renew His previous OT Covenant with national Israel. After the seven years, Jesus will return and reign on the earth with the resurrected saints and Jews for 1,000 years, a millennium of peace during which Satan is bound. At the end of the Millennium, Satan will be loosed from his prison and will deceive the people of the Kingdom into

rebellious against Christ and joining him in the Battle of Armageddon. There Satan is finally defeated and along with his demons is confined forever in hell, while the saints go to be forever in heaven.

Futurists are divided into Pre-millennialists, who believe the Rapture takes place before the Millennial reign, and Post-millennialists, who believe it takes place after the Millennium. There are also at least three types of Pre-millennialists; Pre-tribulation, Post-tribulation, and Mid-tribulation, again based on when the Rapture is to take place. The most popular view of Futurism is Pre-tribulation Pre-millennialism.

HISTORICISM

Historicists believe much of the Vision is past, being fulfilled in church history from the Apostles to the present. They do not believe in a literal earthly Millennial reign of Christ at all, which is why they are often called A-millennialists (A is the Latin prefix for not). This is actually an inaccurate term, for A-millennialists do believe in the Millennium. However, rather than a future age of earthly peace, they see the Millennium as symbolic term for the Kingdom of the Church of God, and the spiritual blessings she receives with Christ as her King during this Age of Grace. They believe the Second Coming of Christ is one short event at the end of the world when Christ returns for His saints and judges the wicked.

Historicists are divided into literal Historicists and spiritual Historicists, with the spiritual Historical view the more popular one presently. Most of the trusted, older Bible commentators like Matthew Henry, Adam Clarke, and Albert Barnes were literal Historicists. Literal Historicists believe the Revelation contains world prophecies literally fulfilled down through history including that of the very end-time. They find events like the Reformation, the French Revolution, and the rise of the Islamic religion in the visions of the Revelation. Spiritual Historicists also believe the prophecies are fulfilled throughout the Church Age, but that the visions are largely fulfilled in the spiritual sense, presenting warning messages for the Church, illustrating God's eternal plan for man, and showing what is happening in the spirit world during the Church Age.

Some students of eschatology divide literal and spiritual Historicism into two separate views, making four primary schools of interpretation: Preterism, Futurism, Historical, and Spiritual. But the Historical and Spiritual views share all of the major premises of interpretation, and therefore should not be divided, except as sub-groups. The difference in their applications of the visions of the Revelation at times are simply specific versus general—literal Historicists will see a prophecy completely fulfilled in a single event of history, while spiritual Historicists interpret the same prophecy to be fulfilled in many, repeated events in history. Thus, spiritual Historicists believe the purpose of the Revelation is as much evangelistic as it is prophetic. They see the visions often fulfilled in the spiritual realm and in abstract concepts like mercy and grace.

This book is based upon the Historical view, largely the spiritual Historical view, though if a comparison is made to books written under the same position, (Hendriksen, Mauro, Alexander) differences will be seen. Literal and spiritual Historicists are closely related and often share identical interpretations (see Smith, Barnes, Clarke). We differentiate between the two in order to show the reason for their differences, which begins with what one believes to be the primary purpose of the Book. Literal Historicists tend to see the Book as a careful prophetic chronology of world events during the Age of Grace, from the Cross to the Second Coming of Christ. Spiritual Historicists, while not rejecting the idea that prophetic events are prominent in the Revelation, view the Book foremost as an unveiling of the spiritual realm, a “behind the scenes view” of Christ’s spiritual Kingdom on earth (John 18:36).

The veil that lies between the physical reality and the spiritual is mysterious and a little scary, being so unfathomable to the human mind. We believe a primary purpose of the Revelation is to lift that veil a little so that we can see beyond the present and into the *hereafter*, revealing what is happening in the spiritual realm and glimpsing the joys and delights of eternity with Christ. And though the human mind cannot really know or even comprehend life after physical death, we are able to grasp it by association through the graphic word-pictures and figurative language that the Holy Spirit communicated through the Apostle John. The highly figurative language and the allegorical nature of the Revelation is due to the inability of the natural man to “see” into

the spiritual realm and understand it without these literary aids, which were also used by Christ and the Apostles in the rest of Scripture.

We said earlier that the first and foremost premise of applying the Revelation is based on when one believes the time of fulfillment is to be. This is one thing the text does not directly state. I am a Historicist; first because that view best corresponds with my understanding of the content of the visions, and some of the most easily substantiated arguments for the Historical view are detailed a few pages later under the topic “Arrangement of the book.” Secondly, I am a Historicist because that view best corresponds with my understanding of the NT; that salvation is possible only through Calvary, and is available equally to Jew and Gentile. The greatest event this world will ever know was the death of God the Son to redeem sinful man. Future events are secondary and dependent upon that superlative occasion. Thirdly, I am a Historicist because the end of the world throughout Scripture is presented as a single event. The Rapture, the appearing of Jesus in the clouds, the burning up of heaven and earth, and the great white Throne Judgment cannot be separated by a thousand years without distorting the plain teaching of the Bible (page 142).

QUESTIONS

It is clear that Preterism, Futurism, and Historicism are each based on their individual premises of when the visions are to be fulfilled, and the Millennium question is obviously dependent on the same premise. Futurism and Millennialism are virtually synonymous, for both pre-suppose Revelation 20, the Millennium chapter, to be in the future. Very generally speaking then, the greatest disagreement concerning the Revelation is when the prophecies are to be fulfilled, rather than what the prophecies mean.

An additional factor could be called the Jewish question: What is God’s plan for physical Israel? Is there a future for national Israel? Dispensationalism is the term used for those who believe that God will revive the natural Jews as His chosen people sometime in the future. Dispensationalists believe God has not yet honored His promises to Israel given to Abraham and the prophets, and they propose a seven-year era immediately following the return of Christ

in which those prophecies are fulfilled. While the overwhelming majority of Futurists are Dispensationalists, virtually all Historicists and Preterists reject the tenets of Dispensationalism.

We believe the NT teaches that Israel after the flesh is no longer, nor ever again will be, the people of God. When the Son of God came to this earth, He fulfilled the OT Law and Prophets completely, and now it is spiritual Israel, *they which are of faith*—Jews and Gentiles alike—that make up the people of God. This last epoch of God’s dealing with man will continue until Christ returns for those who are trusting in Him. (See page 231 for a full discussion of Dispensationalism.)

A simple way to determine a person’s beliefs about the end of the world (eschatology) and how he understands the Book of Revelation is to answer three questions, which also form the primary points of conflict between Preterism, Futurism, and Historicism:

1. When are the prophecies to be fulfilled?
2. What is the Millennium?
3. What is in store for the Jewish people?

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

With all due respect, there can only be one correct meaning that the Spirit of God intended for the symbols and visions of John. We must obtain that meaning strictly from its Author, and not from human intellect. The Spirit searches the *deep things of God* and reveals them to those who truly seek. He speaks primarily through the Word of God; there we are sure to find the answers we seek.

This work is based on three premises that we have diligently attempted to follow, the first being: **Use Scripture to interpret the Book of Revelation.** The Book is written in highly *signified* (Rev 1:1) language, but it cannot be totally symbolic. Without at least some literal language the Book would be completely obscure. How do we know what is symbolic, and how do we know what the symbols mean? In using Scripture to interpret the Revelation, we assign spiritual meanings only to those terms that have been used figuratively elsewhere in the Bible, and then we use only those same meanings in

the Revelation. If a term is not used symbolically elsewhere in Scripture, we will not attempt to use it so in understanding the Revelation.

In order to interpret the Book correctly it is absolutely essential to discern whether the language is symbolic or literal. This is one of the most difficult parts of interpreting the Revelation, and we must make every attempt to let the Holy Spirit instruct us, for no man can rightly understand these visions by his own wisdom (II Peter 1:20). It is just as wrong to take something literally that the Holy Spirit meant to be understood figuratively as it is to take something figuratively that He meant to be understood literally. Despite the statements of literalists to the contrary, interpreting symbolically (often called "spiritualizing" in a derogatory way) does not lead to liberal views in other teachings. Just the opposite is true, as any survey of the wide range of literal commentaries will demonstrate.

We read the visions naturally and take the overall meaning of the particular theme—each seal or trumpet, for example. Then we cross-reference other Scriptures that John was quoting to help understand the message. We do not invent new meanings for symbols or ignore the general intent of the language by finding symbolism in every word. Symbolism helps us understand the meanings; it does not actually become the meaning. When symbolism is the only standard of an interpretation system, the visions become vulnerable to human speculation.

There are numerous symbols in the Revelation whose meanings are directly stated, and by these we can examine whether our approach is correct. Without exception, every symbol is used consistently and appropriately throughout the entire Scripture. For examples, study the lampstand (4:5), the Dragon (12:9), the Lamb (5:6), and the sea (17:15). A word study on any of these will show that when they are used symbolically in other contexts they carry the same meanings and connotations. One note of caution: some words have more than one figurative meaning. Fire, for example, is a symbol for the Holy Spirit (Mt 3:11; Acts 2:3; Ex 13:21; Rev 4:5), but it also is used figuratively as a weapon of punishment from God (Deut 4:24; Ps 18:12; Is 30:27; Eze 1:13; Lev 10:2; Rev 14:18). A limited glossary of figurative words is given in the back of this book.

Those meanings which are not directly stated in the Revelation can be found by studying other Biblical passages. Consider Jesus' teachings, which contain more symbolism than any OT prophet. *I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, how can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day* (John 6:51-54). We know by searching the Word what Jesus intended here, but the skeptics did not. Any sincere seeker studies Scripture by comparing passages and letting the plain ones reveal the obscure ones. Why should we do differently when studying prophecy and the Revelation?

Sometimes a phrase or sentence has a figurative meaning that is not meant to be broken up into individual words with separate meanings. Searching the Scriptures is again the key to correctly understanding the symbolic connotations of phrases. Sometimes we can tell just by its usage throughout the rest of Revelation that a phrase has its own figurative meaning. For example, the phrase *thunderings, lightnings, and voices* occurs about five times in the Revelation, and though these words may each have individual meanings, together they form their own meaning. Care must be taken not to break up a figurative phrase into pieces, or the true purpose of the vision could be lost.

Let's summarize how we will study a seal, trumpet, or vial. The first step is to visualize the overall picture and its implications. Then we will research and study the figurative meanings of its parts to add detail to the overall intent of the picture. The symbols will support the overall meaning, and will not conflict with it, or lead away from the clear intent of the particular vision. After we have a fair understanding of a passage, we apply its meaning to something: an event, warning, condition, etc. We must use the entire seal or trumpet in context with the others to determine the setting, the audience, and the intent of that particular vision. The whole interpretation must agree with the surrounding visions, and the entire Bible itself.

The second premise this study is based upon is that **prophecy will not contradict other doctrines** taught in the Bible, nor will it institute new ones.

At first glance this may seem to be an obvious statement, but to many commentators the idea that prophecy speaks about future eras brings freedom to advance theologies about the future that do not harmonize with the New Testament. We must not allow teachers to discount Bible commands about divorce and remarriage, the ordinance of the head-veiling, and feet-washing with the argument that “they were for that particular time.” Neither should we allow them to set aside NT teachings such as separation from the world, Jesus is the only way to God, and non-resistance with the argument that these will not be part of God’s requirements in a future age. Numerous NT writers affirmed that the last age began with the sacrifice of Christ (I John 2:18; Heb 1:2; I Peter 1:20), and we are told not to accept *any other gospel*, even if *an angel from heaven* would preach it (Gal 1:8). We have God’s final and permanent Word in our hands, according to it there will not be another. All prophecy is subservient and harmonious with all of Scripture (Rev 19:10).

The third premise of this study is that **prophecy is relevant for all ages**. In the OT, the prophets warned the wicked of impending judgment, and comforted the righteous with promises that God had not forsaken them. Their messages were for the people of their own era, but they are also timeless in that for centuries Christians have used them for comfort, blessing, and warning. Throughout the Bible, the chief purpose of prophecy is not simply to foretell the future, but also to warn sinners and encourage the saints by showing the big picture of God’s plan. This was the way the prophets spoke in the OT, and the way *That Prophet* spoke to His disciples. If we go far afield from this Biblical precedent, we are on dangerous ground.

SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is an in-depth verse-by-verse commentary of the Book of Revelation, and for some readers it will be difficult to read from cover to cover. For this reason, we have tried to make each part self-teaching, so that one can begin reading at any point and not miss too much. Repetition is unavoidable with this approach, but we have limited it by providing page and verse links so that readers can jump to associated passages. Many of the visions are associated with others, and it is important to study these related passages to

understand the full meaning. The best study approach is to read the book from beginning to end, or at least a section at a time. But this is a reference book, and we have tried to make it useful both in answering questions about single verses and in deeper study of the Book's overall purpose and meaning.

For easy reference, the 22 chapters of this book have been made to correspond to the 22 chapters of the Revelation, and a short outline is given at the beginning of each section. A limited glossary of symbolic words appears at the end of the book to aid additional study, and to show how the meanings of figurative words are consistently used in the Bible. Throughout the book, I use the pronoun "we" to indicate that the interpretation given fully agrees with those I have consulted. The few times the pronoun "I" appears are those in which the idea given does not have their unanimous support.

This is a commentary, which means that it contains one man's ideas of what God intended the Revelation to mean to the Church. We do not claim to have the full and infallibly correct understanding of the Revelation, though we have sought it carefully in prayer. This book does not take the place of personal study of the Scriptures—we hope that it will stimulate more study and research. Write your own thoughts and helpful verses in the margins and underline the parts that are especially meaningful. When you disagree, write the reasons why, and study those Bible passages that relate.

For group study, we recommend a structured, verse-by-verse, beginning to end approach to studying the Revelation as opposed to an open, topical approach. The first sessions should focus on determining the audience, purpose, and theme of the Book, and this should be periodically re-evaluated during group study. At the end of the study, a final discussion should be held to determine if those intentions have been met, and to examine ways the Revelation can aid the Christian's walk with God (see Epilogue).

TO WHOM IS THE REVELATION WRITTEN?

The Revelation is written to the people of the Kingdom, the Church of Christ. This statement seems simple enough, especially in light of the first four verses: *John to the seven churches which are in Asia*. The messages are not limited to only those seven churches addressed, else the majority of the

NT must be declared inapplicable on the same grounds. The seven churches represent all the churches (page 39). The churches are commanded to *hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein* (1:3). Dispensationalists teach that the Church is gone from the earth by Chapter 4, and that most of the Book tells of the future for the Jewish race. This work rejects that premise as incompatible with the content of the Revelation and unsupportable by even common logic. We are confident that this *testimony of Jesus* is deeply concerned with His Bride, the apple of His eye, those whom He has redeemed by the offering of His blood on the cross of Calvary. The great love and care Christ has for the Church are revealed frequently in this great Book; indeed, it is for this reason that the visions were given.

It is a sad fact that many pastors and churches avoid the Revelation because of Dispensationalism's claim that it was not written about or for the Church, but about and for physical Israel. But the Apostle John was not a Jewish prophet, he was a Christian prophet. Futurism's notion that from Chapter 3 onward the Revelation does not concern the Church cannot be correct. The Book begins by addressing Christians as the audience (1:4) and ends with a similar concluding statement: *I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches* (22:16). We appeal to common sense. Why would the triumphant Christ leave His own purchased possession—the Church—wondering about her earthly future, now 2,000 years old? Does it not seem probable that He would leave behind a chart of events foretelling the things which she must endure for the long interval between His comings? If the New Covenant is such an improvement upon the Old, why would 16 chapters be devoted to foretelling the return of Christ to the Old Covenant for the shockingly brief time period of seven years? Sixteen chapters for seven years, and it doesn't even affect the Church?

We believe the entire Book is for God's people throughout the Gospel Era. Its message tells us of the overwhelming power of God in working behind the scenes for the good of His people. Though Satan attacks with many wicked devices and methods, Christ is in control, and in the end He will purge humanity like a farmer threshes wheat, separating the good from the bad. The Revelation tells the Church what to expect in the Gospel Age, and is timeless in that His coming is always *at hand*. The Revelation tells the Church

to expect evil, suffering, false doctrine, persecution, imitations, signs, warnings, and even judgments. Throughout the vision, Christ is ever-present and exceedingly powerful and authoritative. No longer to ever be spat upon again, He rules the nations with a rod of iron and sword of fearful destruction. He sits on a heavenly Throne and heads a spiritual Kingdom of love and peace that has influenced the world and history like no other person or institution has even come close to rivaling.

ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOK

The Revelation is very ordered and builds upon itself to the last chapter. Often, new terms are explained later in the Book, showing a continuity of thought. There are seven distinct divisions in the Book: Christ among the Church (Chapter 1-3); The Throne and the Seven Seals (4-7); The Seven Trumpets (8-11); The Woman and the Beasts (12-14); The Seven Vials (15-16); The Judgment of Babylon (17-19); The Millennium (20-22).

Except for the first section containing Christ's letters to the seven churches, each of the divisions gives an account of the end of the world. Almost always this occurs at the very end of the section. In the Seven Seals section, the sixth seal is without doubt a description of the end. We see the stars falling from the sky, the mountains and islands moved out of their places, and the heavens departing as a scroll when it is rolled up (6:13-16). In the Seven Trumpets section, the seventh trumpet presents the end, when comes *the time of the dead, that they should be judged* (11:18). At the end of The Woman and the Beast section we see the Son of Man descending from heaven on a white cloud, reaping the earth with a sharp sickle. The Judgment of Babylon ends with another description of the final destruction of the earth, and judgment of the wicked (Chapter 19). And in the Millennium section we read of that final day in Chapter 20, followed by a beautiful description of heaven.

However, not all agree that these divisions each describe an aspect of the Church in the world to its end. In fact, right here is a key factor in determining your view of the Revelation: are the sections chronological, or parallel? That is, do they follow one another sequentially as a single story, or do they

each topically tell the story seven times? We believe the evidences that they are parallel are extremely strong. Each section is a capsule detailing a phase of God's interaction with man, ending accordingly with the final destruction of the world. Parallelism is a common literary device in the OT. Daniel's world empire vision, for instance, was given to him on three separate occasions, using different symbolic characters each time.

Interpreting the entire Book chronologically from begin to end cannot be done without contradictions that can only be explained away with complete speculation. How else can one explain the end of the world being described at the opening of the sixth seal as early as Revelation 6? Charles Ryrie, a Dispensationalist, says in his study Bible notes that the sixth seal is not a description of the end, but only that people will act like the end has come! This is from someone who professes to "interpret the text literally and plainly, regardless of the implications." Impossible. If even one literal star would fall to the earth, the world would be obliterated.

The visions dovetail perfectly with each other if viewed as seven presentations of the Gospel Age, each emphasizing its own particular theme. Within each of the seven sections symbols and characters are employed which best explain that particular theme. The sections warning the wicked emphasize the coming judgment and the terrors of Hell, while the parts describing the martyrs will show the joy of those who have overcome the world in heaven with Christ. We also see the same primary characters reappearing throughout the Book, and often the same symbols recurring in other visions. If the Revelation were chronological, we would not expect the Beast, for instance, to reappear after he had been destroyed and cast into Hell earlier in the Book.

The most convincing proof that the Revelation is written in seven parallel sections is found by carefully studying the content of the sections themselves, and understanding how they relate to each other. Again, don't take my word for it, or anyone else's. Study for yourself, compare Scripture with Scripture like the Apostle Paul said, *Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual* (I Cor 2:13). The following chart of the Revelation shows the major events of the Gospel Age, the end-time, and the eternal states within each section. Reviewing them will help reveal the divisions of the Book.

TIME PROGRESSION 

	The Gospel Call	End of the World	Heaven and Hell
Seven letters to the Church (Ch 1-3).			
Seven Seals foretell what the Church will face during the Age of Grace (Ch 4-7).	Rev 4:1-6:11	Rev 6:12-17	Rev 7:1-8:1
Seven Trumpets call for repentance and warn of coming judgment (Ch 8-11).	Rev 8:2-11:6	Rev 11:7-13	Rev 11:14-19
Analogy of woman, Manchild, and the three beasts that afflict her seed (Ch 12-14).	Rev 12:1-13:18	Rev 14:6-20	Rev 14:1-20
Seven Bowls pour out the last plagues upon an evil world (Ch 15-17).	Rev 15:1-16:16	Rev 16:17-21	Rev 16:19-21
Analogy: the wickedness of Babylon and her final destruction (Ch 18-19).	Rev 17:1-19:10	Rev 19:11-19	Rev 19:20-21
The 1,000-year reign: souls in Paradise and New Jerusalem (Ch 20-22).	Rev 20:1-5	Rev 20:6-10	Rev 20:11-22:5

Each of the seven sections foretells the end of the world. Notice that the seven sections are obvious and natural divisions of the Book. The seven messages to the churches, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls each comprise a topic of concern from Christ to His people. The analogy of the Woman and the Dragon comes between the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, and is also an obvious division. The division of the last two sections are controversial to some because of the teaching of Millennialism.

THE PURPOSE OF THE REVELATION

For the Christian, the theme of the Revelation is redemption in Christ; victory, glorious victory over sin and death; and perfect union with Him in the eternal, heavenly realm. In the writing of this book, no single thought became clearer to me than this primary purpose of the Book of Revelation. As the visions unfold we will see again and again the redeemed experiencing the beauties of heaven with Christ and the angels. Over and over they rejoice in their redemption, singing and praising the One who has made it all possible. From the sacrificial Lamb in Chapter 5 to the Bridegroom of Chapter 19, Jesus is presented in various figurative pictures illustrating His works and attributes.

Consider the very title: *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (1:1). *Revelation* in the Greek is an unveiling, a revealing of something previously not known. We are told about Jesus in the NT in detail, but the Revelation reveals Him in a different way: *The Unveiling of Jesus Christ*. We cannot, of course, literally see Jesus. But the Revelation lifts the veil between life and death, and with our spiritual eyes we can “see” into the spiritual realm. We see Jesus seated on His heavenly Throne, reigning gloriously on high. We see the souls of those who have passed that veil rejoicing on the sea of glass with harps and song. We see the defeat of Satan and his banishment from heaven, and we see the terrors of Hell for those who have rejected the Gospel message. It is then that prophetic fulfillments in the physical realm seem weak and insignificant; they are simply passing events of small importance in the grand, eternal plan of God. In the Revelation, Christ is exalted for His deeds of greatness, while man and his accomplishments fade in an instant into nothing.

The scope of the Revelation encompasses the whole plan of God for His creation: man, earth, and heavens. The ongoing spiritual conflict between God and Satan is described, and the lines between good and evil are clearly drawn. Satan’s goal is to corrupt everything that God has created, and his special target since his defeat on the Cross is the Christian. God has limited Satan’s powers, but he is still a terrible adversary of man’s soul, and he wants to deceive and corrupt as many unwary Christians as possible in the short time he has left. The Revelation warns us about this in some of the darkest,

fearful pictures imaginable. How sad that many will not detect his snares and will fall eternally into his clutches.

The purpose of the Revelation is to reveal Jesus Christ and His spiritual Kingdom on earth and in heaven. Accordingly, earthly events are foretold in the visions, but only those of greatest significance for His people. We believe the Revelation is given to exalt Christ and His eternal plan—to aid Kingdom saints in their earthly journey—rather than to convince people of the Bible’s authenticity because of fulfilled prophecy. Our study will show that the primary purpose of the Revelation is not to explain exactly how the Lord will return for His people—though that event is described—it is to warn His people of the difficulties and trials to come and to encourage them to endure faithful to the end. How natural that the last book of Bible is for and about that dearest of possessions to Christ—the blood-bought Church, *the Bride, the Lamb’s wife* (Rev 21:9).

THE LANGUAGE OF THE REVELATION

The language of the Revelation can be difficult to understand with just surface reading. Is it written to be understood literally, or figuratively? Though many are quick to argue the merits of reading either literally or figuratively, looking honestly at the actual interpretations we think this issue is only a smokescreen. In fact, everyone takes much of it figuratively. Many of the symbols are defined within the text, and others are so well known that all accept them (the Lamb, the Dragon, the candlesticks, etc). Some of the text is not so easy, and generally it is simply the commentator that determines whether the language is literal or figurative based on agreement with his interpretation of that text, and whether it corresponds with the rest of his view. We have read commentators that speak long and eloquently on the benefits of reading simply and literally, no matter how difficult it may be, later confidently explain a text as expressive language not meant to be taken as having actually occurred. Other commentators invoke symbolic language on passages that to me seem very difficult to defend as such. I have made every attempt to let other Scriptures guide this difficult discernment, as discussed earlier in my first premise.

The literal/figurative argument has continued for 150 years now, and is probably here to stay. But keep in mind the following facts. All agree that much of the Bible outside of the book of Revelation is written in highly figurative language. Writers of poetry and prose have for millennia used figures of speech to help readers draw mental pictures of what they are describing, and to play on their emotions. In today's literature many of the literary devices like personification, synecdoche, apostrophe, metonymy, hyperbole, etc are no longer used. Even metaphor, simile, allusion, and allegory are rare. The Bible uses these and other techniques to an astonishing degree. The beauty and grace of the King James Version is mostly due to its faithful translation of these emotional pictures. *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want* (Ps 23:1); *Behold, the Lamb of God* (John 1:29). So much can be conveyed by a few words with carefully chosen figurative meanings!

The Revelation has hundreds of metaphors and similes, which we will begin to see immediately upon opening the first chapter and reading John's description of Christ. Nothing about that vision can be taken literally, every part of it is said to be *like* or *as* something else. Even the personage of Christ is *one like unto the Son of Man* (1:13). But there is perfect agreement among all prophecy students on this picture!

Figurative language is especially suited to describing things outside the natural realm. Spiritual leaders, spiritual wars, and spiritual influences are real, and they greatly affect the Church. God, Christ, and Satan are described in some of the most figurative language of the entire Bible. The advantage is that such language can describe attributes and character, illustrating abstracts much more clearly than is otherwise possible.

Supposedly, Historicists read the text figuratively and Futurists read literally. This is an utter myth. In my opinion it is more correctly stated the other way around! Literal Historicists find exact fulfillments of the Revelation in historical events, with very little use of figurative language. For example, Chapter 8 describes Islam and Chapter 13 Catholicism, and in both the details are taken to be literally fulfilled. On the other hand, Futurists, the "plain and literal" crowd, are able to find nuclear bombs, tanks, helicopters, and television in language with only horses, swords, and crowns. Moreover, nobody takes the star falling from heaven in 8:1 as a literal star, and nobody

believes the beasts of Chapter 13 are literal beasts. Why? Because they do things that stars and beasts cannot do—they speak, they act like men, they oppress righteousness. It is time to give up this argument of literal/figurative language as an overall method of interpretation, for neither side practices what they preach! True, there are many pictures in the Revelation that we argue about whether they should be understood literally or figuratively, but these should be studied individually to determine the correct intent of the passage.

The error of Catholic transubstantiation, the Anabaptist tragedy at Munster, and the Preterist teaching that Christ has already returned in A.D. 70, are examples of a hyper-literal interpretation of the text. There are dangers in over-spiritualizing as well. The key to correctly dividing the Word of Truth is to study the passage in its context and within the intent of the rest of Scripture. Obscure passages must not be interpreted in a manner that contradicts or circumvents those passages that are clear and explained in the Scripture. My experience has been that the most vitriolic defenders of a “plain and literal” approach to understanding the Book of Revelation are also the most likely to explain away commands and doctrines of the Bible so that they are not required to do them. This illustrates again that too often the real criteria used to interpret the Word is finding there what one wants to find, as opposed to sincerely seeking with an open heart what the Holy Spirit has written for us. My honest hope and prayer is that this work would be as close and faithful to all of Scripture as much as my limited knowledge of it will allow. We do not want to *stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God* (I Cor 2:5).

SECTION ONE

CHAPTERS 1–3

THE RISEN, EXALTED CHRIST REIGNS IN HIS CHURCH



○ U T L I N E

1:1-9 Introduction to the Book

1:10-20 Christ holds the seven churches in His right hand

2:1-3:22 The seven messages to the Church

Ephesus—the church of conscientious works, but low in love for God.

Smyrna—the church suffering persecution, yet faithful and true to Christ.

Pergamos—the church that is not separated from the world.

Thyatira—the deceived church, led astray by sin and false teachers.

Sardis—the lazy, uncaring church.

Philadelphia—the pure church in a world of temptation and wickedness.

Laodicea—the proud, worldly church with no fruits of righteousness.

REVELATION CHAPTER ONE



- 1. The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John.*
- 2. Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw.*
- 3. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.*

THE REVELATION: UNVEILING THE FUTURE

The Book of Revelation begins with an introduction that presents its basic purpose, and which also provides several foundational points that must underlie our study. First, the revelation is *of Jesus Christ*. It isn't John's revelation, the Church's revelation, or the end-time revelation—it is Jesus'

revelation. The Book begins with a powerful and grand portrayal of Christ in His risen, exalted estate, and it builds on that theme to the very end. Over and over the Revelation shows Christ now in heaven as the Victor, the Worthy One, the Faithful and True. He is reigning *at the right hand of God* (Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Heb 10:12) over earth and heaven for the good of His people. As we study the parts and characters of the Revelation, this thought and theme is primary, because the message intimately concerns the work and triumph of Christ. It is about Him and from Him—He is the theme and first purpose of the Book.

Second, Jesus is giving this revelation *to shew unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass*. The Gospels detail the life of Christ on earth and proclaim Him to be the promised Messiah. The Epistles explain man's appropriate response to Christ, and outline the ministry of the NT Church. The Revelation completes the NT theme of Christ and salvation by telling the Church what to expect during her earthly journey, and describing the glories to come for those who overcome the beasts of Satan. Thus, much of the Revelation is prophetic, informing the people of the spiritual Kingdom about their earthly pilgrimage and mission, and warning them of the Devil's attempts to corrupt and destroy not only their witness but also their very souls.

The word Revelation (Gk-*apokalupsis*) means an “unveiling, disclosure, or revealing of something previously hidden.” The word is also used several times in the Bible in referring to the Second Coming. *That the trial of your faith...might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing [apokalupsis] of Jesus Christ* (I Peter 1:7). *And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed [apokalupsis] from heaven with His mighty angels* (II Thes 1:7). The Revelation of Jesus Christ is an unveiling of Himself and His mysterious purpose for the Church and mankind. The pictures are sometimes difficult, for God has hid them from the world.

These things *must shortly come to pass*. This does not mean that every detail would be fulfilled in, say, 100 years from the time John received the vision, but that the prophecies would begin to take place immediately. The Greek word for *shortly* is *tachos*, and studying its meaning elsewhere in the Bible (see Acts 24:4; Rom 16:20; Luke 16:6, 18:8) confirms that the intent is to

convey that these things would take place soon, though the exact time is purposely omitted. The phrase is repeated at the end of the Book: *must shortly be done* (22:6), and the Greek is identical both times: *dei genesthai en tachei*.

Verse 3 contains a similar warning: *for the time is at hand*, and it too is repeated verbatim at the end of the Book, *Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand* (22:10). It follows then that the prophecies do not concern only distant events like the Second Coming, but *things which must shortly come to pass* as well. Jesus used similar language at the Last Supper, when He foretold His coming death: *My time is at hand* (Mt 26:18). The Greek words *kairos* (time), and *eggus* (near), are identical in both passages. One cannot escape the idea that the time of fulfillment for Jesus' revelation was to be very soon after it was given.

That the prophesied events must take time to fulfill is also obvious, and it is impossible to squeeze the entire prophecy into a short time and remain true to the text. The thousand year reign of Christ in Chapter 20, for instance, requires a long period of time, no matter how one interprets it. *Shortly come to pass, the time is short, a short work will the Lord make upon the earth*—these relative phrases warn every person in every era of history that Christ could return at any time, but they are also indefinite, allowing for a long (in man's opinion) Age of Grace.

There are also several NT passages that imply Jesus' return would not be anytime soon after His departure. Paul reprimanded those who were teaching *that the day of Christ is at hand*, and reminded them that Jesus would not return until after the great *falling away* and revealing of the *man of sin* (II Thes 2:2). The parables of the talents (Mt 25:14), the ten virgins (Mt 25:1), and the ten pounds (Luke 19:12) all picture the King tarrying so long that many of His constituents were not ready when He did return.

We have on one side passages emphasizing Christ's unexpected and imminent return, while on the other side passages warning that He would be gone so long that many would question if He ever would return (II Peter 3:3-4). Christ has completely finished His part in the salvation of man, and therefore His return is imminent, there is nothing left undone and He could come in the clouds of heaven at any moment. *For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and*

to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping (Mark 13:34-36).

The Age of Grace began at the Cross and will end at the Second Coming of Christ. It is the last of the three major dispensations (Pre-flood, Israelite Covenant, and Second Covenant) that the world will experience in the plan of God. The NT writers refer to the entire Gospel Age as the *last days* or the *last time* even back at the beginning of the Age. When John wrote his epistle he said, *it is the last time* (lit. *hour*), meaning that he and his readers were in the last age or era of history. *Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation* (II Cor 6:2, I John 2:18). The Book of Hebrews begins with a similar statement: *God... hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son* (Heb 1:1-2). The *last days* refer to the time in which the Apostles lived down to the time in which we live—it is the last age of the world. This definition makes sense with Hebrews 9:26, *In the end of the [ages] hath [Jesus] appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*. (See also Acts 1:7; I Peter 1:20; Php 4:5; I Tim 4:1).

Therefore, we conclude that *the time is at hand* means that the Book of Revelation applies to us living under the Second Covenant of the Kingdom of Christ (Heb 8), and not to some future era with different worship requirements and principles of conduct. It means that the message is for Christians living the *everlasting gospel* (14:6) in the Age of Grace, and that they must heed the warnings or they will share in the judgments and plagues of the wicked (18:4; 22:18). The Church Age will be a *short work upon the earth* (Rom 9:28), and though that work has now stretched out into 2,000 years, it is still a *short work* in God's timescale.

Notice that the Book involves the use of signs. He *signified it*, (*Gk-semaino*) which means to give a sign, to signify, to make known (see John 12:33). It is translated often in its noun form as *miracles* (John 6:26), *signs* (Mt 24:24), and *wonders* (Rev 13:13). As we discussed in the introduction, disagreement often develops over what and how much should be read literally, and what should be understood in signs. There have been various methods devised for this determination: some read literally (or physically) whenever possible,

some symbolically (or figuratively). We believe the first step in deciding if a verse is literal or figurative should involve researching if and how a term has been used elsewhere in Scripture.

Verse 2 says that John *bare record*, or testified of Him. A testimony in the early Church was quite different from one we might hear today. The Greek word is *marturia*, from where we get our word for martyr. In John's day, one's testimony was his life-work and words, his message and creed, and it is easy to see why *marturia* eventually came to define those who gave their lives for the cause of Christ, dying at the hands of wicked men as their Master had done before them (Mark 13:9; Rev 6:9; 12:11).

According to Revelation 19:10, *The testimony [marturia] of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*. Jesus' entire purpose and mission for man is contained in His testimony. This is *the spirit of prophecy*. Our guiding principles for interpreting prophecy should be based on the *testimony of Jesus*. We must let this loftiest of ideals dictate and color every verse of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Man's accomplishments and wisdom are so inferior to God's that they are counted less than the dust on a set of scales (Is 40:15).

If Jesus' *testimony* is the *spirit of prophecy*, then within that testimony we should look for keys to interpreting His Revelation. We should let His words, from both the Old and New Testaments, develop and interpret the pictures of the Revelation. If He has interpreted an OT passage figuratively, or used specific words in a symbolic way in His earthly ministry, then we have reason to believe that these same words may be used symbolically in the Revelation. Not that they must be understood figuratively, but that they may be. On the other hand, if a word or phrase has never been used in a figurative sense elsewhere we have reason to doubt that it will be used figuratively in the Revelation. We will not interpret a passage figuratively that cannot be positively identified as a symbol elsewhere in the Scriptures. This will ensure that we do not "spiritualize" a passage that was meant to be taken literally; an error equal with literalizing a passage the Holy Spirit meant to be understood symbolically.

This is the application of our first premise explained earlier (see page 16). It is a most conservative (and safe) approach to interpreting the Revelation. The Old Testament especially abounds with types, prophecy by symbols, and

illustrations using highly figurative writing. We will let the Biblical symbols explain themselves as much as possible. For example, in Chapter 11 we read about *two olive trees, and two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth*. Is this phrase to be taken literally, or symbolically? We would be just guessing unless we search the Scriptures for previous usages. Research and study reveals a closely related passage in Zechariah 3 that is definitely symbolical and which will help us understand the meanings of these symbols.

The modern, scholarly method of Biblical exegesis says that one must understand the passage based on the writer's original intentions. This premise sounds good up front, but is fatally flawed. For instance, it means that OT passages cannot have hidden meanings or prophetic implications which the human writer never intended or understood. There are however, many such passages—most Messianic prophecies, in fact—that were not understood or were misunderstood by readers and writers until Christ came and explained them to His followers. *The prophets have enquired and searched diligently... what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ*. These things even *the angels* were not permitted to know before the time (I Peter 1:10-12). So the writers of the OT themselves did not understand the meaning of the signs that the Holy Spirit had moved them to write, and this was even admitted by Daniel at the end of his Book (Dan 12:8; also I Cor 2:8-10).

Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy (v3). Probably the Revelation was read aloud in the early churches, and thus the blessing to those who *hear* it. But notice that one must also *keep those things written therein* in order to receive the blessing. This is the first of seven *blesseds* in the Revelation. Here the blessing shows that the Book is written to comfort and encourage Christians in times of trouble and trial. Since its beginning in Acts the Church has been persecuted, reviled, scorned, deceived, and rejected. And yet, while outwardly things may appear to be in turmoil and disarray with Satan winning, things are happening behind the scenes of which we are not aware. Let us not be distracted by the outward armies of the foe like Elisha's servant was, for the hidden armies of Christ ensure that *they that be with us are more than they that be with them* (II Kings 6:16). One of the great themes of the Revelation is herein expressed: to encourage the faithful

and remind them that God's perfect plan will be accomplished. Especially in times of persecution the visions help to put into perspective the sacrifices the Christian must make to remain approved of God.

For the time is at hand (v3). Some, disregarding the simplicity of the phrase, say this refers to the *time of the end* that Daniel writes about (Dan 11:35; 12:4), and that the entire Book concerns prophecy of the end-time only. This interpretation can in no way be supported by either the Greek text or the natural reading of the sentence. The verse simply says that the Revelation concerns events that would immediately begin to take place. Every translation we have read supports this meaning.

4. *John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne;*
5. *And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,*
6. *And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*
7. *Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen.*
8. *I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.*

SYMBOLIC NUMBERS IN THE REVELATION

All early church writers identify the author of the Book of Revelation as the Apostle John. Some modern day scholars disagree. Their newly formulated methods of "textual criticism" discredit the Book's grammar, authorship, and even its authenticity. On the other hand, the older scholars emphatically believe that the Apostle John was the author, and have carefully supported

that belief with many undeniable proofs (see Adam Clarke on Rev 1:1). The simple facts plainly point to John as the inspired intermediary of this heavenly vision. The Book is deeply rooted in Old Testament terms, yet it is minutely accurate to New Testament theology. It was definitely written by the Holy Ghost, and He is the One that gives the wisdom required to understand it. *Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost* (II Peter 1:20-21). If the Holy Spirit wrote the prophecy, He alone knows its true meaning, and upon Him we rely to understand it (I Cor 2:10).

Verse 4 contains the first occurrence of the word seven in the Revelation. It will occur again more than 50 times. Probably no other book of the Bible is more dependent on numbers than the Revelation, and no number appears more often than seven. We will see seven churches, seven candlesticks, seven stars, seven seals, seven thunders, seven vials, etc. There is virtually universal agreement that the number seven has a symbolic meaning in the Revelation, and to understand it we must search the Scriptures. We find seven days of the week, seven sprinkles of blood on the altar, seven days of purification for uncleanness, seven Jewish feasts, seven priests with seven horns marching around Jericho for seven days, seven washings in the Jordan by Naaman, and the righteous man falling seven times and rising again (Pro 24:16). Seven is a number used often by God in expressing Himself to man. It is an earthly number with a heavenly significance, and implies fullness or totality; the complete, perfect, God-ordained program of events. The seven Jewish feasts, for instance, form a complete, step-by-step picture of man's way to God, from confession to eternal heavenly rest (see page 340). The Church as a whole is represented by seven churches, which together form a complete representation of the Kingdom of Christ during the Age of Grace.

There are other numbers with symbolic meanings in the Revelation. How will we know when to understand them literally or symbolically? The answer is not always evident, but throughout the Bible events happen around numbers that have symbolic meaning. The number forty connotes testing, or trial. The children of Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted forty days, it rained forty days and nights during the flood, Goliath

taunted the Israelites for forty days, etc. In all of these examples, the number forty still means forty; but it is not coincidence that these events lasted forty days or years. The Holy Spirit has provided these as wonderful proofs of the unity and veracity of the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, written over a 1,500 year time period, we see God using numbers consistently with the same symbolic meaning. The importance of numbers is underscored by the case of Moses, who was not allowed to enter the Promised Land because he struck the rock on two occasions instead of just once as he had been told to do (read Ex 17, Num 20, I Cor 10:4). The rock was a type of Jesus Christ, and He was to be smitten but once. Obviously, God's hand carefully guides the circumstances of these events, and He molds them to fit His will and program.

There are instances of numbers used in the Bible that are never meant to be taken literally. Are we to stop forgiving a brother who sins against us after 70x7 times? Obviously not, for the Lord's Prayer, *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*, would then say God will not forgive us after our 490th sin. How about Psalms 50:10, where God claims *the cattle upon a thousand hills*. Does this mean that the others are not His? Of course not. The number is used here representatively of all the cattle on all the hills of the earth.

In our study of the Revelation, we must use great discretion in determining when to interpret numbers symbolically. We will attempt to determine what the Holy Spirit is indicating by using Scripture as our guide. As with all other words, if we encounter a number in the Revelation with no symbolic meaning elsewhere in Scripture, we will interpret it literally.

CHRIST AND HIS KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending (v8). The phrase is repeated in verse 11 and also at the end of the Book (21:6, 22:13). *Alpha* and *Omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. In English, we could paraphrase the sentence, "I am A to Z: from beginning to end, I am." The statement implies immutability and omnipotence; God is the originator of all things, the all in all from beginning to end.

The phrase *which is, and which was, and which is to come* occurs three times in the Revelation, and always refers to the triune God. It is similar to Jesus

saying in John 8:58, *before Abraham was, I am*. God told Moses *I am that I am* (Ex 3:14), and Isaiah, *Yea, before the day was, I am He* (Is 43:13). The fact that God has always been and always will be cannot be comprehended. Almighty God is the creator of time itself, and must therefore exist independent of time. Someday Christians will receive glorified bodies that also are unaffected by time.

The Trinity is the author of the Book (v4-5). The visions come *from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come* [God the Father]; *and from the seven Spirits which are before His Throne* [God the Holy Spirit]; *and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness* [God the Son]. The seven Spirits of God are mentioned again in 3:1, 4:5, and 5:6. They are described as lamps of fire burning before the Throne, and are sent out into all the earth. We will study this in Chapter 4. Notice here that all three members of the Trinity are saluting the churches.

Christ is the first to be truly resurrected from the dead—He is *the first begotten of the dead*. Christ is *the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead* (Col 1:18). He is also said to be the *prince of the kings of the earth* (v5), meaning that He is head and authority over all earthly rulers. Some choose to interpret this futuristically, but the grammar indicates otherwise. Christ is now ruling this earth from His Throne in the heavenlies, and even more, *He has made us to be a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father* (1:6 NASB).

Here is power for the Christian of any era. No longer must one go through the priest to reach God. We are *a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people* (I Peter 2:9). Christ is our High Priest (Heb 4:14), having paid the penalty for our sins with His own blood. We are *priests* in the Kingdom of Christ.

The OT Jewish priest, or Levite, is a type of the NT Christian. The priests were given charge of the tabernacle and its furnishings, and were not to be numbered among the rest of the Israelites. They were never to go to war, and were not given an inheritance in the land of Canaan with the other tribes. God said, *Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn...therefore the Levites shall be Mine* (Num 3:12). This special calling reminds us of our own. We are strangers and pilgrims on

this earth, having *no continuing city*, but serving in the Church of God, not presenting sacrifices for others as the Levites did, but presenting our own *bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God* (Rom 12:1). Entrance into this Kingdom of priests is only through *Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood* (v5).

Behold, He cometh with clouds (v7). The event to which Christians down through the centuries have been waiting for is thus proclaimed. While His first coming was quiet, obscure, and unheralded, His Second Coming will be trumpeted from the heavens; all will see Him, even those who pierced Him. It will be a time of wailing for those who are not ready, whose garments have been soiled by the sins of the flesh. As Matthew 24:30 says, *then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn*. This is the same word translated *wail* in verse 7, and the Greek word is *kopto*—to cut, smite, to beat one's breast for grief. If Daniel was unable to retain strength when he met God (Dan 10:8), and Isaiah said he was ruined (Is 6:5), how will the sinner feel when he stands in the presence of the Almighty?

9. *I John, who also am your brother, and your companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.*

10. *I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet,*

11. *Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.*

JOHN, THE BELOVED

John was well acquainted with tribulation and persecution. He dealt daily with animosity from his own countrymen and from Roman persecutors. After a long and eventful life he was confined to the island of Patmos,

banished there by the emperor Domitian about A.D. 95 because of his faith in Christ. Patmos is small, remote, treeless, and inhospitable. John was about 90 years old when he was sent to Patmos, and Domitian probably felt sure that this would be the end of John, the last Apostle still living. But tradition says that John survived, even outliving Domitian and returning to Ephesus before his death.

John may have wondered why God had removed him from the work of the Church, but he did not have to wait long. Worshipping *in the spirit on the Lord's Day*, the one called John the Beloved, was visited once again by his Master and Friend. In a series of spectacular visions, Christ revealed Himself to John in the last written message of His Word. John probably did not understand the full meaning of what he saw and recorded, but he faithfully wrote exactly what the Spirit dictated. Daniel and the prophets did not fully understand their visions either, but sought diligently and inquired of what they wrote (see page 36). It was not until after Christ came and perfectly fulfilled their prophecies that men understood what the Spirit had written through the prophets of old.

Being *in the spirit* probably means that John was in a trance, maybe like the Apostle Paul when he was caught up to the third heaven (II Cor 12:2), or Stephen when he saw into heaven (Acts 7:55f). Several times in the Revelation, John says that he was *in the spirit* (4:2, 17:3, 21:10), and a couple times that he was *carried...away in the spirit*. Here at the beginning however, John was not transported to another place or time, but was simply *in the spirit* when the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

In an attempt to place the fulfillment of the Revelation entirely at the end of the world, some have tried to make *the Lord's Day* read *the Day of the Lord*. This is an erroneous association. Every time we read *the Day of the Lord* (I Cor 5:5, II Cor 1:14, I Thes 5:2, II Peter 3:10) the wording is the same. In Revelation 1:10, *the Lord's Day* indicates Sunday, the day that the early Church met for worship in honor of Jesus' resurrection on Sunday. *The Day of the Lord* is a term used in both the Old and New Testaments to refer to an unusual judgment intervention by God into human events. In many cases it occurs in connection with a description of the end of the world.

John hears behind him *a great voice, as of a trumpet* (v10). How can a voice sound like a trumpet? Trumpets are loud, but cannot really be made to sound like speech. We see sentences like this often in the Revelation, pictures that are not meant to be visualized but that evoke a Bible mind-picture. The special language is deeply rooted in Bible terms that often describe abstract themes like grace, mercy, peace, and love. The descriptions are filled with similes and metaphors that John didn't just invent, but that the Holy Spirit told him exactly how to use.

Read the visions as an overall picture, with the details adding meaning and strength to the intent of the overall theme. If one tries to read the visions as narrative descriptions, they will only confuse and obscure the intent. On the other hand, figurative language is able to express things emotionally that literal language cannot. In the process little oddities like the scene of Christ laying a hand upon John (v17) when it already held seven stars (v16) are not to be considered strange. Such is the nature of figurative language. Several times John is instructed to write, sometimes a sentence, sometimes a picture (1:19, 10:4, 14:13, 19:9, 21:5). This strongly indicates that John did not record these visions as if he had seen them with his eyes, but that he was told exactly what to write.

Trumpets were used in the OT to announce something. Read Numbers 10:1-10 for their special use by the priests. When Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, God announced Himself by a trumpet: *And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice* (Ex 19:16-19). These verses form a background for the description of Christ given in verses 13-16, and remind us of God's fearful power and greatness. The trumpet-like voice is sounding the alarm, calling the faithful to gather and hear the word of the Lord. As at Sinai, the

Revelation is for the people of God—to confirm their faith, to encourage them in trial, and to inspire them to earnestly desire the heavenly reward of meeting Christ face-to-face.

12. And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;

13. And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.

14. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire;

15. And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters.

16. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.

THE POWER AND AUTHORITY OF THE RISEN CHRIST

John turns to see the trumpet-like voice, and sees *One like unto the Son of man*, standing *in the midst of seven golden candlesticks*. The description that follows is clearly of Christ, for He alone *was dead*; but now is *alive forevermore* (v18). Christ holds *seven stars* in His right hand, and His appearance is both fearful and awe-inspiring. The *seven golden candlesticks* represent the seven churches, and the *seven stars* are the *angels of the seven churches* (v20). This is the brief, overall picture of the passage.

There is a two-fold purpose to the vision of Christ among the candlesticks. First, we see the tremendous power and authority of the risen Christ. Every feature of *His countenance* command total respect and obedience. He is all-powerful and all-wise, the Great I Am, who needs no counsel or assistance in the execution of His immutable purpose. Second, we see Christ *in the midst* of the seven churches. He knows them intimately, and He holds them in His *right hand*. He cares for them and loves them. They are His very own.

Now that the overall meaning of the passage is established, we can go into the details that more intricately contribute to that meaning. First though, we should draw attention to the simile in verse 13. John sees *One like unto the Son of man*. We should not expect Christ to appear physically as described, for human minds cannot comprehend Him in His spiritual form. The figurative language of the Revelation is a necessity because of this fact. Man cannot see the spiritual realm, nor can he fully understand it. Analogies and figures of speech we can understand, and these help us appreciate the unseen spiritual realm. Jesus used the same approach during His earthly ministry, speaking in parables and symbolism to illustrate the spiritual nature of His Kingdom.

The word-picture of Christ does not describe His physical characteristics, but His very consistency, His attributes. It is a deeply symbolic picture that demonstrates His character and personality. These are portrayed in some of the most evocative words in the language of man, yet they still cannot begin to show His essence. The whole scene agrees closely with Daniel's visions of *the Ancient of Days*. *His garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: His Throne was like the fiery flame, and His wheels as burning fire* (Dan 7:9). *Then I lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and behold a certain Man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold of Uphaz: His body also was like the beryl, and His face as the appearance of lightning, and His eyes as lamps of fire, and His arms and His feet like in color to polished brass, and the voice of His words like the voice of a multitude* (Dan 10:5-6). Daniel's description of God and John's description of Christ are very similar, but there are a few differences. The most notable difference is that John saw Christ with a *sharp twoedged sword* and *seven stars* in His right hand. These are NT features that had not taken place yet in Daniel's time, as we shall see.

If any should doubt that the description is indeed a figurative one we offer the following points as evidence. First, almost all of Christ's features are expressed with similes—seven in all—that require a symbolic interpretation. His feet were *like* brass, His hair white *as* snow, His eyes *as* a flame of fire, etc. Remove the similes and you have nothing. Second, all of the comparative figures of speech in this passage have already been used in the Bible, and we have only to research these to develop their meanings. Third, spiritual subjects require the use of physical analogies so that the human mind can understand.

As we have already pointed out, human eyes cannot see the spiritual, neither can human feet go there. However, the mind can understand the spiritual—in a limited way—with the use of figurative expressions and comparisons.

THE DETAILS OF CHRIST'S APPEARANCE

John's first observation of Christ concerns His vesture: He is *clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle* (v13). Later we will see Christ *clothed with a cloud* (10:1) and *with a vesture dipped in blood* (19:13). The garments describe different attributes of His character. Revelation 10:1 is a picture of Christ's return for His Church, and 19:13 is a scene of Christ destroying His enemies in righteous wrath. Here in 1:13, Christ appears in the midst of the churches, and His clothing is appropriate for that occasion. The full-length, single-piece garment with a girdle about the breast is similar to what the High Priest wore (see Ex 28-29), and speaks of Christ being the *High Priest of our profession* (Heb 3:1). The Book of Hebrews demonstrates from the OT that the priesthood of Christ is far superior to the Aaronic Priesthood, which was but a shadow and type of the true (Heb 9:24). Christ is called a High Priest twelve times in the Book of Hebrews.

While Christ's vesture in Revelation 1 is much like that of the OT High Priest, there are some curious omissions in the description. In the OT, the *girdle* was a harness that bore the most holy part of the High Priest's dress—the ephod and breastplate. Most priests wore girdles about the waist, but the High Priest wore a chest girdle *upon his heart as a memorial before the Lord continually* (Ex 28:29). It was not a *golden girdle* but was made of *fine-twined linen* in four colors (Ex 28:8). Gold is a type of holiness, in this case, divine holiness. The long robe and *golden girdle* speak of royalty, divinity, and of work—gloriously completed. Isaiah said of the Messiah that *righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of His reins* (Is 11:5), and David says God is *clothed with honour and majesty* (Ps 104:1). The seven angels before the Throne of God are dressed similarly to Christ, *having their breasts girded with golden girdles* (15:6). A *girdle* did have material use—as a purse, a means to keep warm, and to carry things, but they were worn about the waist. Royal girdles were elaborate and expensive (Is 22:21; Zec 3:1-7).

The garments of the High Priest were specially designed by God as a figure looking forward to Christ and His coming as King-Priest after the order of Melchisedek. The ephod, breastplate, and the Urim and Thummim are all OT articles with typological meanings that were fulfilled in Christ, and therefore they do not appear in John's vision. Christ, *the High Priest of our profession*, needs not to offer sacrifice or oblation, for He is the sacrifice, and His work is finished (Heb 7:27; 10:12).

His head and His hairs were white like wool, as white as snow (v14). White is a color symbolizing purity, righteousness, and holiness—all of these are attributes of Christ. He is without blemish, unpolluted and unstained by any sin. *Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool* (Is 1:18). White *hairs* indicate old age, and represent the eternity of God, an attribute unique to Him alone.

His eyes were as a flame of fire (v14). This describes the all-seeing, all-knowing, and righteous judgment of Christ in ruling His Church, for remember, this message was to be given to the churches. *The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth* (II Chr 16:9), *beholding the evil and the good* (Pro 15:3). *His eyes try the children of men* (Ps 11:4) and nothing is hidden from His sight; *all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do* (Heb 4:13). The Church of God must appreciate this depiction of Christ as an all-wise, all-knowing Ruler who is also righteous and just. *Mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity* for the hypocrite and the one in secret sin (Eze 9:10).

The message of Christ's love must be balanced with the fact that He is a *jealous God*, and requires complete obedience from His Church. We approach Him in fear and trembling, for *it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God* (Heb 10:31). Christ is preparing His purchased possession—His Bride—testing her and purifying her so that she will be worthy to stand on the last, great day. *The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God?* (I Peter 4:17). Eyes like *a flame of fire* is a common Biblical figure of the Holy Spirit. The seven lamps of fire burning before God's Throne are the seven *Spirits* of God (4:5). The Holy Spirit was seen as cloven tongues of fire in Acts 2:3 (see glossary).

His feet like unto fine brass (v15). Brass is often used as a symbol of judgment and punishment in the Bible. Leviticus 26:19 is an example: *I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass.* (See also Micah 4:13 and Zec 6:1.) In a terrible picture of the coming wrath and judgment upon evil men, Christ is seen *treading the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God* (Rev 19:15, 14:19; Is 63:3). Once, long ago, His feet were pierced with long spikes by evil men, now they are instruments of power, glowing *as if they burned in a furnace* (v15). The Greek word for *furnace* (**kaminos**), occurs twice outside of the Revelation, and both times it is used to describe eternal Hell (Mt 13:42, 50; see also Rev 9:2). The picture portrays the awfulness and severity of the punishments of the wicked.

This description of Christ immediately precedes the messages to the churches, and they must heed the warnings even more sincerely than the heathen who never knew God or heard His written Word preached. The truly heathen will be beaten with few stripes, but those that *know to do good and do it not* (James 4:17) will be beaten with many stripes (Luke 12:48). A *furnace* is also used to symbolize the trials and tribulations a Christian must endure, and which purify His faith. The children of men are *refined...in the furnace of affliction* (Is 48:10). *The fining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold: but the Lord trieth the hearts* (Pro 17:3, also Pro 27:21; Eze 22:22).

The Greek word for *fine brass* in verse 15 is truly unique—**chalkolibanon**. It is found nowhere else in the Bible, nor does it exist in any secular Greek writings. Evidently John coined the word as a compound from two other words, **chalkos**, meaning brass, and **libanos**, which is translated *frankincense* in Matthew 2:11 and Revelation 18:13. There may be a symbolic meaning to this “frankincense brass” that could be revealed with deeper study.

His voice [is] as the sound of many waters (v15). If you have ever stood at the base of a waterfall or dam overflow you can appreciate the figure of speech. A continuous roar like thunder rumbles out as the water crashes down on the rocks below. The tremendous power displayed makes one feel insignificant and helpless. *The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, yea than the mighty waves of the sea* (Ps 93:4). No wonder John falls at His feet as though dead, like Daniel did in his heavenly vision (Dan 10:8; Eze 43:2; Rev 14:2). Again the symbolism is fearful rather than kind. There are many

pictures of Christ in the Revelation that demonstrate His lovingkindness, mercy, and forgiveness, but we must acknowledge and bow to God's supremacy and sovereignty before we can experience His love and kindness.

Out of His mouth went a sharp twoedged sword (v16). The two-edged sword (Gk—*rhomphaia*) was a long, heavy weapon of war wielded with two hands. We encounter the same word in 19:15, where Christ is seen riding at the head of the armies of heaven at His return to earth. There are other Greek words that John could have used for a sword, the *machaira*, for instance, which he used in 6:4 and 13:10. The *machaira* was used for personal protection (Luke 22:36-38), the *rhomphaia* was used in war. The sword of Christ's mouth is used to fight His enemies (2:16; 19:21), and demonstrates His total authority over the nations (19:15).

He does not wield this sword with the arm. If at His spoken word nature was stilled, how much more is He able to still the human mobs of unrighteousness? He needs no assistance (Is 63:5); He only speaks the word and it is done. *For the Word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit* (Heb 4:12). In the OT His word sent the enemies of Israel into flight, and in the NT the Christian has *the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God* (Eph 6:17). A powerful weapon it is when handled by a true man of God (Is 49:2).

His countenance [Gk—*opsis*; face, appearance] *was as the sun* shining in its strength (v16). The symbolism is that of exceeding brightness, as when one looks directly into the unclouded noonday sun. In a similar manner Jesus appeared to Saul on his way to Damascus: *I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun* (Acts 26:13). The sun often symbolizes God's justice and righteousness, especially as they relate to His interventions in the affairs of men (see glossary). In His infinite wisdom and fore-knowledge, God both blesses and rebukes man by *the light of His countenance*. *Blessed is the people that...walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance* (Ps 89:15). The wicked, however, shall *perish at the rebuke of Thy countenance* (Ps 80:16). Many Psalms entreat the Lord to cause His face to shine upon His people (Ps 4:6, 67:1, 90:8; Mt 17:2; 28:3). The sun is the natural, sustaining source of life on earth, without it all life would cease. It is unchanging as it shines, but substances react differently to its rays—butter melts and clay hardens. God's

actions make man decide his own destiny. *But unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings* (Mal 4:2). God is the sustainer of His people.

17. *And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:*

18. *I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive forevermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.*

19. *Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter;*

20. *The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.*

CHRIST AMONG THE CHURCHES

Seven stars are in Christ's right hand, a *mystery* explained in verse 20. The seven stars symbolize the *angels of the seven churches*, and the candlesticks symbolize the seven churches. The beautiful picture of Christ among the candlesticks, holding the seven stars in His right hand, is a source of peace and joy. He is in the midst of His Church, and He holds them in His hand. His fearsome attributes are a comfort to the upright, for they are His, and He has promised that He will never leave them (Heb 13:5). *The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry* (Ps 34:15). David wrote: *The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength* (Ps 18:2). What a powerful source of inspiration and encouragement for every Christian! He promises not that His Church will be delivered physically from every trial and persecution, but that He will be there in the midst of her through each tribulation and woe. *Where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst of them* (Mt 18:20).

In verse 20 the divine messenger explains *the mystery of the seven stars* in the Saviour's hand, but a question remains. Each letter is addressed to *the angel* of the particular church. Are these *angels* spiritual beings or human leaders? The Greek word here translated *angel* is **aggelos**, and almost always refers to angelic beings. On a few occasions it is translated *messenger*, as in Luke 7:24, where **aggelos** is used for John's disciples. In this case, the best points of proof are on the side of the *angels* being earthly ministers of the Church. First, John was told to write to the *angel* of each church, hinting that the recipient of the letter was human. It would seem odd indeed for Christ to instruct a man to write a letter to an angel. Second, the stars are in Christ's hand, indicating that they are in His particular protection and care. This points toward a human rather than angelic fulfillment. Men need His protection, and the angels were created as His agents for that purpose. Third, the content of the letter is specific to the people of the Church. The warnings to beware of personal neglect and apostasy are uniquely human tendencies. Fourth, the Scriptural basis for the idea that each church has an angel is thin. There are many more angels than churches (5:11) and when we read about angels in the Bible, we usually find them in the plural.

The one point we must acknowledge is that by far the most common translation of **aggelos** in the Bible is *angels*. It is interesting, however, that on rare occasions both the Greek and Hebrew word for *angel* is used by writers of the Bible in referring to human messengers (Hag 1:13; Mal 2:7). Most of the reliable commentators like Matthew Henry, Adam Clarke, and Albert Barnes, also believe that **aggelos** as here used refers to the leading pastor of the individual church. John could have called them **diakonos**—ministers, **apostolos**—apostles, **presbuteros**—elders, **episkopos**—bishops, or even **poimen**—shepherds. Instead, he called them **aggelos**, spiritual leaders of the flock of Christ, worthy of respect and honor. Angels were uniquely created by God to be servants and messengers of His will. They work under His authority, and unfaithfully do as they are instructed. Their wisdom and power is God-given, and limited to their individual work (I Peter 1:12). To call the pastors of the churches *angels* is therefore not that extraordinary. They are to serve the Church with all diligence and humility, as *ministering spirits*

(Heb 1:14). The *angels of the churches* are still susceptible to error, as several of the letters will bear out, but those that serve honorably will receive a greater reward. The greatest responsibility of an *angel* is to be a servant in the Kingdom of Christ, and this is true for a pastor as well.

Stars and candlesticks are symbols divinely interpreted within the passage. This offers us an early opportunity to test the rules we set forth in the introduction for understanding the Revelation. Do *candlesticks* represent *churches* elsewhere in Scripture? Do *stars* represent *angels*? A search of the Scripture directs us to answer in the affirmative.

Stars are found representing angelic beings several times in both the Old and New Testaments, and for both good and evil angels. The angelic heavenly host are called *stars* (Dan 8:10), and in Job 38:7 the angels are referred to as *morning stars*. Satan *drew the third part of the stars* (angels) with him in his fall from heaven (Rev 12:4, also Num 24:17; II Chr 18:18; Job 25:5; Is 14:13; Mt 2:2; Rev 8:10, 9:1). On one occasion stars symbolize humans, but it is within the larger motif of sun, moon, and stars, which Joseph dreamed were bowing down to him (Gen 37). The sun, moon, and stars represented Joseph's father, mother, and eleven brothers. When used together they form a different symbol and meaning which we will first encounter in Rev 6:12. (See glossary to compare the meanings of the two symbols.)

Seven *candlesticks* (*luchnia*) surround Christ, and represent the individual churches we will study in Chapters 2-3. The English *candlestick* does not do justice to the Greek meaning. A candlestick is a stick of wax; *luchnia* is a stand upon which a portable oil-burning lamp (*luchnos*) was placed (see *Vine's Dictionary*). "Lampstand" is a better English word choice for *luchnia*. Jesus used the same words figuratively in a parable concerning the Church: *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle [luchnos], and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick [luchnia]; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house* (Mt 5:14). The Church is a light-bearer, not a light-giver. She holds forth the Word of God to the world, bearing the light of Christ for all to see (page 99).

Virtually the only other occurrence of *luchnia* in the NT is in Heb 9:2, which explains the symbolism of the temple, wherein stood the *candlestick of pure gold*. It too was not truly a candlestick; there were no candles involved.

Exodus 25 describes it as a lampstand with bowls, tubes, and branches. God gave one person the wisdom to build this masterpiece (Ex 31:2-6), and even today experts argue about how it could have been beaten from a single, solid chunk of gold (Ex 25:31, 37:17). Its seven lamps burned a fuel of specially formulated olive oil, and the lamps were tended by the priests so that the fire might burn continuously before the Lord (II Chr 13:11). Students of types and shadows of the OT believe that the lampstand represents the Church, and the oil is a type of the Holy Spirit, producing the light of the Gospel. (Read this fully explained in The Shadow of the Cross by Dan JB Byler.)

The symbolism of a lampstand reappears in Revelation 11:4, where two *candlesticks* represent the Church. In a way the *stars* and *candlesticks* are one, for while each letter is addressed to the star of the church, the entire church body was to hear and obey the message. The same is true for the symbolic lampstand of 11:4, where *two olive trees, and two candlesticks [were standing] before the God of the earth*. The olive trees represent her leaders and the lampstands her general community (see page 248).

The significance of God holding the *seven stars* in His *right hand* should not be missed. The right hand denotes a special place of honor, and is also used to show power. *Sit thou at My right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool* (Ps 110:1). *I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness*, God says in Is 41:10. (See also Ps 18:35, 60:5; Mt 20:23, 26:64; Acts 7:55; Col 3:1; I Peter 3:22.) One of the manifest themes recurring throughout the Revelation is the high value that God places on the Church. It is His prized possession, His spotless Bride, and He holds her in His right hand. *No man is able to pluck them out of My Father's hand* (John 10:29).

Too many Christians today have minimized the value of the Church, criticizing her authority, ridiculing her doctrines, and disregarding her call (22:17). Some of this is due to the failure of individual churches to keep themselves pure and holy before the Lord. Others criticize because they are unwilling to submit to the local church body, and to share in the responsibilities and duties it requires of them.

The seven churches represent the Kingdom of Christ on earth, and the message is relevant for the entire Church Age. Notice that the letters are addressed to individual churches, but are a part of the full Book. Each church

undoubtedly heard the message of the other six churches along with the rest of the Revelation. The number seven has already been shown to represent fullness or completeness. Seven sprinkles of blood from an OT sacrifice meant the whole was purified, and seven representative churches form the whole Church of Christ. Moreover, each of the messages contains the warning: *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches* (plural). The Greek is in the present tense: *hear what the Spirit is saying*. It is timeless, and applies to all people.

Many commentators (from all interpretation camps) have arranged the seven churches in a historical time line, beginning with Ephesus as the late-Apostolic Church and ending with Laodicea as the Church of the end-time. The concept is interesting, but at times the application seems a little forced. Our belief is that every message is for the Church in any age. There are churches in every place and time that need the message of the letter to *Ephesus*, while others have progressed to the likeness of *Pergamos*, *Thyatira*, *Sardis*, and *Laodicea*. True and holy *Philadelphia* churches have existed in every century, as well as persecuted *Smyrna* churches. Every individual church can identify with one of these seven churches. They are experiencing the same problems, pressures, and sins. We can even go a step farther and say that the same is true for each person's relationship to God. Some are Ephesian Christians, others are Laodicean. We must know what our besetting sin is before we can lay it aside (Heb 12:1), and the letters to the seven churches give us an opportunity to stand back and evaluate ourselves in the light of God's Word.

To summarize, the entire picture of Chapter 1 shows Christ in His exalted, rightful place of authority in heaven, having accomplished all that He had planned to do on this earth. He is now standing among His Church, and His awesome presence is both a source of comfort to His own and a cause for fear to those who are disobedient. The picture shows Him in complete control of every realm of authority, He is *far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named* (Eph 1:21). He holds the keys to *hell [Hades] and Death* (v18). The fearful and omnipotent God of the Universe protects and cares for His Church. No-one else can say, *I am He that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive forevermore! Amen.*

REVELATION CHAPTER TWO



- 1. 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;*
- 2. 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:*
- 3. And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.*
- 4. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.*
- 5. 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.*

6. *But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

7. *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.*

EPHESUS, THE CHURCH LACKING IN LOVE

The individual letters to the seven churches contain a wealth of concise warnings, commendations and promises. Why the Holy Spirit selected these particular churches of Asia out of the many other choices available is unknown, though He may have chosen them based on the message He wanted to give to the timeless Church of the Gospel Age. Christianity had spread widely throughout the Roman world and beyond by the time of John's writing. The seven churches form a rather ragged geographical circle, with Ephesus being the closest to John on the Isle of Patmos. It is a sad fact that today none of these churches exist any longer, though some of the cities remain inhabited in modern-day Turkey.

A general format can be seen in each letter, with slight variations: the declaration, the commendation, the condemnation, the warning, and the promise. In each case, the declaration is taken from Chapter 1, mostly from the figurative picture of Christ. In the letter to Ephesus the declaration is, *He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks* (v1). The intended thought mirrors that of Chapter 1: Christ knows those who are His, He loves them, cares for them, upholds them with His right hand. He knows those who have fallen, or are close to falling, and in love He is warning them, wanting them to return to Him. He knows every particular of His Church, and what He desires most is her unfeigned love and devotion.

Ephesus was a significant coastal trade city in John's day. The Ephesians worshipped Diana, a fertility god also called Artemis (Acts 19:24). The Apostle Paul found there *a great door and effectual opened*, but also encountered *many adversaries* (I Cor 16:9). The church of Ephesus flourished for many years. Paul wrote the Epistle of Ephesians to correct some false teachings there,

and also to encourage the Jews and Gentiles to accept each other in Christ. Evidently by the time of the writing of the Revelation, the church at Ephesus was faltering, prompting this warning message. It is believed to have survived until the fifth century, when the Roman apostasy and worldly influence snuffed out the light of the Gospel, and the candlestick was removed. Today Ephesus lies in ruins, and the false gods of the city have been entirely forgotten except by archaeologists and historians. Christianity has found more fertile hearts in other regions of the world, and Ephesus remains only a sad reminder to the church of God that the first and greatest commandment is to *love the Lord thy God* (Mark 12:30).

I know thy works (v2). This word of warning is repeated near the beginning of every letter. Despite the efforts of many to downplay the importance of *works*, it is clear that God does not overlook them. They are in fact, essential. No Christian will gain heaven without Godly works (20:11-13). Martin Luther notwithstanding, faith and works are co-laborers in man's reconciliation with God. At salvation, the first step is by faith, and the next step is in works because of that faith. The true walk of the man of God follows this pattern; a step of faith, then one of works until the goal is reached.

What are works? We will discuss this more fully on page 517, but notice that love is called *the first works* (v5). Works in the most basic of definitions is a decision. It is a denial of self and a commitment to build up the body of Christ. It is an act of rational choice, and one that we must make daily, even hourly. It is both offensive and defensive, meaning that some works are outgoing acts of love, while others are overcoming the temptations of the flesh and the world. *Pure religion and undefiled...is this, to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world* (James 1:27).

The fact that Christ says He knows our works suggests two things. First, we have the thought that God sees and credits those who do His commands; He knows those who have forsaken all for Him. Some may begin to grow *wearily in well-doing*, but we are here comforted with the promise that the most important One is watching, and He will reward us in due season, *if we faint not* (Gal 6:9). Second, there is the implied warning that God knows if our works are lacking. We fool only ourselves if we think God doesn't

notice our complacency and laziness. Christ wants a personal relationship of love and faith unfeigned, but that does not make obedience to His Word an optional course. No, works are mandatory. It is easy for churches to either overemphasize obedience to Christ, or stress only the praise and worship that He is due. Christ's critique of the seven churches affords abundant proof that both are essential. Evidence of our love for Christ is shown by our obedience to His commandments (Rev 22:14; John 13:35; II John 1:6).

Ephesus was a church that excelled in *works, labour, and patience*. The Greek word for *patience* means steadfastness, constancy, and endurance. The Ephesians knew the doctrines well, and did not let false prophets deceive them. Evil was noted and spoken against. The Nicolaitans' false teachings were uncovered and rejected. Outwardly the church was flourishing, a picture of correctness and uniformity. But Christ looks on the heart, and what He saw there was not perfect. As the Ephesians directed their attention to studying doctrine, theology, and false teachings, true love and appreciation for Christ alone was beginning to wane. Their first love (*chief love*), which should have been for Christ, was gradually being replaced by a formal, knowledge based worship. Both love and obedience are necessary to please God.

Ephesus was a robot church, doing all the right things but indifferent to the time and tremendous cost that Jesus had invested in them. Ephesian churches are comfortable ones, with little need for personal sacrifice. They find it easy to forget that they were purged from their old sins (II Peter 1:9), and that Christ desires a love-relationship with each one. However, Christ does not immediately remove the candlestick. He knows that they are in desperate need of revival, and in mercy and love He calls them to do the *first works* again, to remember from whence they had come, and to return to Him. He asks that they would remember again His great love, and how He died for them while they were dead in sin. Works of righteousness will never buy salvation, and Jesus calls them to return to the first works of thankfulness, devotion, and love.

What were the Nicolaitans' false teachings? Irenaeus (ca A.D. 200) writes that they were followers of Nicolaus, the proselyte of Acts 6:5. According to Irenaeus, the Nicolaitans attempted a compromise between Christianity and the pagan society in which they lived. They believed that the human body

was intrinsically evil, and that only the spirit could be good. Thus, one could live anyway he pleased, for God was concerned only with the spirit of man. This led to a very immoral lifestyle that differed not at all from the pagans. This sect did not last very long, but many years later, a new teaching based on the same premise was first taught: the doctrine of Calvinism. Calvinists also believe that it matters not what a man does in the body, for man is so utterly depraved that he cannot choose good by himself, and therefore he is not accountable for his actions. God saves those He chooses, and once chosen, man has no option but to be “eternally secure.” Calvinists teach that it is impossible for man to fall away from God because obedience is not a requirement for salvation. How this doctrine can be held in the face of the letters of Revelation is a mystery. The candlestick most definitely can be removed after salvation. Man can and does choose righteous actions, with God’s help. Animals glorify God instinctively; man intellectually and voluntarily, after God has called him.

The promise Christ gives to the faithful in Ephesus is appropriate, and presents man’s action in salvation. *He that overcometh will I give to eat of the Tree of Life which is in the midst of the paradise of God.* The Tree of Life is a reference to that tree of the same title in the Garden of Eden (see Chapter 22). It is a symbol of the Cross, which gives eternal life to those who by it overcome Satan, self, and the world. There were two trees in the Garden of Eden: the *Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil* and the *Tree of Life* (Gen 2:9). The former was forbidden for food, but the latter was not forbidden until after man sinned. God placed man in the Garden without sin, not even knowing good and evil. Man had a brain and could communicate, but he was innocent, entirely without corruption or fear. He was in perfect harmony with God and in constant fellowship with Him until the day that Satan beguiled him into the sin of disobedience. Man knew fear for the first time (Gen 3:9) and spiritually died, thus becoming a mortal being. The Tree of Life was the solution God had planned for the sin of man, for by Jesus Christ’s death on the Tree, spiritual life came to all who would believe on Him.

God, in His foreknowledge, knew even before He made man that he would sin. He knew that Jesus would have to become a man, live a lowly life, and experience a humiliating death. Why then did He proceed with His plan

to create mankind? The answer must be that God wanted companionship with a free moral agent. He wanted someone who loved and worshipped Him because he chose to. Not as the angels, or the animals, or nature, or the universe; these praise God without volition. The incredible effort God has invested in man from the creation of the universe to the gift of His Son was for the purpose of glorifying Himself, and basic to that purpose was bestowing on man the unique gift of being able to reason and choose to believe and obey Him. His great love calls man to recognize Him and to fellowship with Him.

Therefore let us *walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called* (Eph 4:1), which brings us back to verse 4: *thou hast left thy first love*. God created man in His own image and for His own glory. He can ask man who He has created to do whatever best pleases Him. So let's give Him what He really wants and asks for: our love.

8. *And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;*

9. *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.*

10. *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.*

11. *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.*

SMYRNA, THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

The church at Smyrna has a beautiful and steadfast testimony. Christ has no words of warning at all for this "tribulation church." They would soon be giving their very lives for His sake, and He encourages them in their suffering. To those in Smyrna He identifies Himself as *the first and the last, which was dead and is alive*. It's another way of saying, "The Eternal One, the

Resurrected One.” To a person facing execution and torture these words contain the exact promise needed to encourage the soul to remain faithful unto death. Resurrection and eternal life are rewards that are worth the cost of life. The persecuted Church can take refuge in this fact, and in the example of the church of Smyrna.

Smyrna was a city of economic importance in the Roman Empire, and also had a major temple for Caesar-worship. In spite of that, there was a sizable Christian church there. We do not know who evangelized the city, but Paul spent considerable time in the region, and his influence in Smyrna is almost without a doubt. Ignatius, writing about 10 years after the Revelation was written, mentions Smyrna several times and even wrote them a letter that survives today. The notable Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna around this time, and we have his moving testimony in The Martyrdom of Polycarp. Today, Smyrna is called Izmir, a city in Moslem Turkey that has no visible Christian witness.

Smyrna suffered severe persecution, especially during the reign of Domitian, who was one of the most ruthless and cruel rulers of all time. Thousands of Christians were slaughtered throughout the Roman Empire under Domitian, and while the tremendous effects of this tribulation cannot be understated, the Church itself continued to grow. The testimony of Christians martyred at the stake and thrown to the wild animals of the Coliseum inspired even more to embrace a saving faith in Christ.

Smyrna did not have the problems that Ephesus, the no-love church had, or the worldly churches of Pergamos and Laodicea. Persecution and torture unto death will purge the dross from God’s people, and only those that are faithful will overcome and receive the *crown of life*. Martyr of the Catacombs is an excellent little book written anonymously many years ago that gives a sad and yet inspiring picture of the persecuted Church during its first government ordered persecution.

I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan (v9). The other pure church, Philadelphia, received the same message (3:9). The early Church endured a lot of persecution at the hand of the Jews, but Christ says that they really are not Jews at all. *For he is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision, which is outward*

in the flesh; But he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart in the spirit (Rom 2:28). The true *Israel of God* is the Church, for in Christ there is no difference between Jew and Greek (Rom 10:12; I Cor 1:24; Col 3:11; Gal 3:28). The OT promised much to Abraham's descendants but Galatians 2-4 makes it abundantly clear that blood Jews are not the children of Abraham, but they that are of faith (Gal 3:7). *And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise* (Gal 3:29). The true Jew is not a physical one, but a spiritual person in Christ (page 233).

Why John didn't simply write "Christians" instead of "Jews" we don't really know, but consistently throughout the Book he does this. He could have written "angels" but he wrote "stars." He could have written "church" but he wrote "candlestick." The Book is filled with symbolic language that requires identification by association and study.

Smyrna would receive persecution *ten days*, but Domitian's persecution of the Church lasted about 15 years (A.D. 81-96). The *ten days* are obviously a symbolic time period that varies in actual length with each persecuted church. Some persecutions have lasted for centuries, while others are measured in months. The letter to Smyrna is for all the persecuted churches of the world in every age, and their individual trials do not last the same length of time. Christ comforts them by limiting the time period: ten days, no more. The symbolic number ten carries the meaning of completeness, a pre-determined time. Daniel and his friends were proved for *ten days* after they refused to eat the king's food (Dan 1:14).

He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death (v11). Everyone dies once, but only the unbeliever will experience the second death—being cast into the eternal Lake of Fire. Chapter 20 explains in detail the *second death*, and its terrors that nobody wants to experience.

12. *And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;*

13. *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.*

14. *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.*
15. *So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.*
16. *Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*
17. *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.*

PERGAMOS, THE CHURCH NOT SEPARATED FROM THE WORLD

Pergamos—"the city where Satan dwells, where he sits enthroned." This church was trying to survive in a worldly and satanic culture. Persecution was also harsh there, and with it came extreme pressures to compromise with the idolatrous worshippers of the city, thereby avoiding increased antagonism. Pergamos was just 15 miles or so north of Smyrna, and was the seat of Roman rule in that province. There were several false religions in the city, the most prominent being the immense temple to Zeus that has been excavated in recent years. These pagan religions were based on evil spirits, and were very immoral and violent. *Antipas* was a faithful martyr in this city, though history has not remembered him outside of this favorable mention. How many untold thousands of long-forgotten names could be added to his?

The pressure to compromise in Pergamos was great. John calls this the *doctrine of Balaam*. Balaam was a non-Jewish prophet of God who counseled the Canaanite king Balak to corrupt the Israelites by getting them to marry Moabite women as the Jews were journeying to the Promised Land from Egypt (Num 31:16). Balaam knew that these strange women would also bring their gods with them, and thus add the sin of idolatry. God had warned the

Israelites not to take foreign wives, but to remain separate from the nations, but many did not obey the command. A sore plague came upon the children of Israel for their sinful behavior. (Read the whole story in Numbers 22.)

Evidently the church at Pergamos was facing a similar situation, and Christ is warning them to reject the false teachers who wanted to be more like the people around them. *Come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you* (II Cor 6:17). Today many churches in Satan-oriented cultures can identify with the message to Pergamos. Eating food *sacrificed unto idols* (idolatry and unclean, sinful behavior) and *commit[ting] fornication* (immorality) draws many away from Christ. He warns those who follow these false doctrines that He will come and fight against them with the sword of His mouth. It only takes a word from the Almighty to strike down these imposters who counsel the Church to compromise with the world and its value system.

Probably there was a “Balaam” in the church at Pergamos, or as the Apostle Paul wrote: beware of *grievous wolves* creeping in *not sparing the flock* (Acts 20:29). These false prophets teach *damnable heresies...and many shall follow their pernicious ways...and through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you* (II Peter 2:1-3). The first wrong step Balaam made was to beg God to allow him to do something He had already told Balaam not to do (see Ezekiel 20:25). How sad when we see people today begging God to make exceptions to what He has already said in His Word. It is only a matter of time before they will deceive themselves into believing that the Holy Spirit has revealed to them that certain Bible-teachings are not necessary. Holiness, separation, the prayer-veiling, remarriage after a divorce, and many other Scriptural teachings are declared unnecessary and even detrimental. These false teachers have in mind personal gain, *speaking great swelling words, having men’s persons in admiration because of advantage* (Jude 1:16). Balaam eventually was killed by the Israelites (Num 31:8), but not before many fell into sin because of him.

The *hidden manna* is a symbolic term for Christ Himself, who proclaimed He was the true bread which came down from heaven (see John 6). It is not the physical manna which the Jews ate *in the wilderness, and are dead* (John 6:49), but the inner source of nourishment that gives the Christian strength

to stand firm in the face of temptation, trial, torture, and even death. Jesus said He had meat the disciples did not know about (John 4:34), and we too have power available for *the hidden man of the heart* (I Peter 3:4). The Israelites could not gather more manna than they were able to eat in one day, and we too must *eat* Christ daily (John 6:53). David the Psalm-writer is a good example of someone who lived according to this truth, and he says, *Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee* (Ps 119:11). This simple verse contains the key to victorious living. *Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword* cannot take away that supply of hidden manna deep in the heart of a Christian. The Christian's *life is hid with Christ in God* (Col 3:3), and *hidden manna* is the secret to life, joy, peace, and finally, heaven.

A *white stone* is given to those who overcome, and on it is a name written which nobody else knows. The Greek word here for stone is *psephos*, used in only one other occasion in the Bible (Acts 26:10), where it is rendered *voice* in the KJV, and *vote* in the NASB. The exact basis for the symbolism may be a little obscure, but the meaning is plain. Christ gives those who overcome the beasts of this world a token with a password written on it—a name—that ensures its holder entrance into eternal life. That name is surely the all-powerful name of the Saviour, known only by the redeemed. Later, in 14:3, we will see these redeemed ones standing before the Throne, singing a new song which nobody else can learn. The Christian receives the *earnest of the Spirit* as a pledge that he will receive eternal life after death (II Cor 5:5). We must follow His quiet voice through this dark world to reach that heavenly place.

In the time of John, a popular tradition involved the use of a *psephos*. Distance separated people much more effectively than it does today, and often friendships were difficult to remember or pass on to children, since there were no pictures either. So the two men would break a small stone in half, and inscribe a word on both pieces. Each would keep their half of the stone, and if either would travel by the other's home, the stones could be taken out and matched. Death did not always end the friendship agreement, as the stones could be given to sons (see Adam Clarke). The *psephos* a Christian receives is the Holy Spirit, whom we must have in us in order to inherit

eternal life. The white stone is our ticket into heaven, just as the Holy Spirit is the receipt God gives us showing that we belong to Him. *And he that keepeth His commandments dwelleth in Him, and He in him. And hereby we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit which He hath given us* (I John 3:24). Physical death leads each person to stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and if the Holy Spirit lives within us, there is no reason to fear that day.

18. *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;*

19. *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.*

20. *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.*

21. *And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.*

22. *Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.*

23. *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.*

24. *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.*

25. *But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.*

26. *And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:*

27. *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.*

28. *And I will give him the morning star.*

29. *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*

THYATIRA, THE DECEIVED CHURCH

Thyatira was a city about 40 miles south of Pergamos. Lydia, the seller of purple in Acts 16:14, was from Thyatira. She was converted in Philippi under the preaching of Paul, and could have been the reason the church at Thyatira began. The city was known for its many trade guilds which strictly regulated the business community. Christians did not participate in these guilds because of their unethical practices, and this made life very difficult for them. The description of the *Son of God* in verse 18 is taken from 1:14-15, and comforts the faithful and upright whose stand for integrity comes with a steep material price. God sees the righteous, and He will act on their behalf. He also sees the unjust, and He will punish them for their wickedness.

Jesus begins His message to Thyatira with praise for their untiring faith and works. He commends their *charity* (Gk-*agape*), or love for God. They are fervent in *service* (Gk-*diakonia*) or ministries, as the word is translated elsewhere. *Faith and patience* also characterize the church at Thyatira, and their works and love are even more than they were at the first. Such a glowing commendation would be the envy of any church! But then comes the reprimand: *notwithstanding, I have a few things against thee*. These words draw our attention so much that the words of praise are almost forgotten. So also does a little sin detract from the witness of a congregation. It is like a ring of gold in a pig's snout (Pro 11:22), the value of the message is lost in the actions of the bearer of it.

There seems to have been two factions in Thyatira, as there often is in many churches today. On the one side were the followers of Jezebel, a false teacher that enjoyed a following inside the church. On the other were the faithful, fervent Christians, who may have been so busy doing good that they neglected to discipline those in the church who did not uphold the true doctrines of God. Jesus reproves the righteous for allowing *that woman Jezebel, to teach and seduce my servants*. Then He pronounces a judgment on Jezebel,

and those of her followers who do not repent. They will be *cast into a bed*, afflicted with tribulation, sickness, and misfortune. Her children will be killed with *death*, either the *second death* of 20:14 or death by pestilence (disease), an alternate translation of the Greek word (see 6:8).

Exactly what Jezebel taught we are not told, but it was from *the depths of Satan*. It is very unlikely that Jezebel was her real name, but the people of this church knew exactly who she was. Possibly the harsh name Christ calls her came as a shock to them. Some early Greek manuscripts of the Revelation, including the Majority Text but not the Textus Receptus, read that Jezebel was actually the pastor's wife.¹ This Jezebel was leading the church in Thyatira astray, and Christ's warning is intended to be heard by those on both sides of the issue: *I am He which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works* (v23).

Much of the imagery of Jezebel in Thyatira is drawn from the OT account of infamous Jezebel, and her influence on God's people. Ahab was the king of Israel at that time, but his wicked wife Jezebel really ran the show. To this day Jezebel is a symbol of evil, blasphemous wickedness. She killed the prophets of God and built groves and altars of sacrifice to false gods which caused most of Israel to worship Baal. She used King Ahab's name and seal to plot against and kill Naboth to get what she wanted. Because of her, I Kings 16:33 records that *Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him*. Jezebel was eventually put to death by Jehu, and her body was eaten by dogs according to the prophecy of Elisha. All of her sons were killed so that the house of Ahab would be completely wiped out—only the lesson of their wickedness survives. Though God gave Jezebel space to repent (she outlived Ahab and the next two kings of Israel), she was defiant to the end. False teachers often seem to prosper and escape punishment and we wonder why, but God is not overlooking their deception and wickedness. He is simply giving them a little more time, either to repent, or fill up their iniquity. He takes *no pleasure in the death of the wicked* (Eze 33:11).

To those who have not followed Jezebel's wickedness, Christ gives no other burden. *Unto you*, meaning the leader of Thyatira, Christ speaks directly: *hold*

¹ See Adam Clarke for Revelation 2:20 and also our comments on page 179.

fast till I come. Hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end (Heb 3:6), *hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus* (II Tim 1:13). Historical writings do not inform us what happened to the church in Thyatira, and we can only speculate as to how well they acted on this letter of warning.

The overcomers that *keepeth My works* are promised *power over the nations*, and the opportunity to *rule them with a rod of iron*, breaking them *to shivers...as the vessels of a potter* (v26-27). These verses are deeply rooted in other Scriptures, beginning with the Messianic Psalm 2: *Ask of Me [God], and I shall give Thee [Jesus] the heathen [nations] for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.* In Psalms 2 it is Jesus who rules the nations and dashes them to pieces, but in the NT He has extended that power to His followers, and what an unfathomable position that is—*joint-heirs with Christ* (Rom 8:17), for *if we suffer, we shall also reign with Him* (II Tim 2:12). To the Apostles He said, *I appoint unto you a Kingdom, as My Father hath appointed unto Me; that ye may eat and drink at My table in My Kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel* (Luke 22:29, Mt 19:28). Jesus reigns on high now, and He says: *him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My Throne* (3:21). This promise complements Chapter 5, where the saints who have died are seen in heaven, praising and worshipping the Lamb.

Millennarians may use these verses to support the idea of a future earthly reign of Christ, but notable objections are evident. First, the promise is to be fulfilled in heaven, not on earth. Each of the seven letters ends with the phrase *to him that overcometh*, followed by a particular heavenly promise. The Ephesians are given access *to eat of the Tree of Life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God* (2:7); those in Smyrna *shall not be hurt of the second death* (2:11); the faithful in Pergamos will receive *a white stone with a new name written* (2:17); the Sardians will be *clothed in white raiment* and have their names confessed before the Father (3:5); the Philadelphians will be made pillars in the Temple of God and possess the new name of Christ (3:12); even the Laodiceans that overcome are granted the right to sit on Christ's Throne in heaven (3:21). These promises do not fit Futurism's earthly

Millennial reign, and it is inconsistent to apply only one of the seven promises to that proposed event.

Secondly, the verses in question are quoted from a prophetic passage about Jesus, and other Scriptures apply the *rod of iron* to Him (see Rev 12:5, 19:15). We have already seen that Jesus is reigning over His Kingdom now in the heavens (see 1:6), and this verse agrees with that fact.

Finally, there is no direct Scriptural support for the idea that living Christians will have authority over the earthly nations in the future. A handful of passages have been mustered in an attempt to indirectly sustain the idea, and these will be studied in depth later in Chapter 20. We believe the saints who have died in Christ are reigning in heaven now (4:4; 20:4), and that is the promise of these verses.

The Greek word for *power* in verse 26 is *exousia*, which is better rendered *authority*; compare *dunamis*, which is also rendered *power*, but which corresponds closer to *strength*, or *might*. The Greek word for *rule* (*poimaino*) in verse 27 is even more interesting. It means to shepherd, and is never elsewhere used of a king or ruler. (See pages 161 and 283 for more about this word.)

The phrase *keepeth My works* (v26) is a departure from the standard idea of keeping Christ's words (3:8; 12:17; 22:9). The works of those who are following Christ in the church of Thyatira stand in contrast to the *works* of the followers of Jezebel (v23). The fruits of the Spirit and full obedience to the commandments of Christ constitute doing *the work of God* (John 6:29).

Like the *hidden manna* of 2:17, *the Morning Star* will be given to those who conquer sin and the world. This is another symbolic reference to Christ, as we see from 22:16: *I Jesus...am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star*. A star led the wisemen to baby Jesus, and for many years stars helped explorers and travelers find their way. *We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the Day Star arise in your hearts* (II Peter 1:19). As we progress into this Book, we will find that stars often symbolize spiritual beings (see glossary).

REVELATION CHAPTER THREE



- 1. 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.*
- 2. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.*
- 3. 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.*
- 4. 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.*

5. *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.*
6. *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*

SARDIS, THE LAZY CHURCH

Sardis was a capital city of Lydia, located about 100 miles east of Ephesus. Situated in a well-watered plain at the base of Mount Tmolus along the Pactolus River, the city had an illustrious history. Croesus, one of the richest kings who has ever lived, once ruled the surrounding region from Sardis. Cyrus the Persian overthrew him about 500 B.C., but did not destroy the city. The wealth of Sardis affected its culture, which was luxurious, soft, and lazy. The ancient temple of Cybele provided one of the pagan religions in the city, and Caesar worship was prominent as well. Under the Romans the city's importance declined, and eventually it was demolished by the Turks. Today only a heap of ruins hints at the vibrant society that once flourished there. How Christianity came to Sardis we do not know, and there is no mention of it in the rest of Scripture.

The declaration calls attention to *He that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars*. Nothing can be hid from the all-knowing, all-seeing Holy Spirit. This is especially relevant for those in Sardis, for outwardly she appears to be alive, but on the inside she is nearly dead. More can be learned about the seven Spirits of God in 5:6, where the Lamb is described as *having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth*. Christ and the Holy Spirit work together for the good of the Church of God. He holds the Church and her leaders in His hand, caring for them and leading them into truth. The *seven Spirits* should not be understood literally, but symbolically of the complete and perfect Holy Spirit of God, just as the seven churches represent the complete Church of Christ.

Sardis could be called the dead church, but she did have a candlestick. Though sadly characterized by deficiency, there are some within her ranks who have not defiled themselves, and they will walk in white with Christ.

We are not told specifically in what Sardis had fallen away, but evidently they were neglecting to apply the Gospel message to their personal lives. Maybe this letter came as a shock, for they had a reputation for being alive. But what man sees on the outside does not always reflect what God sees on the inside. The church was on the verge of death, in desperate need of revival, but did they realize it? It appears that they did not. Steeped in apathy, they no longer did the works that Christ required. In one word, their sin was laziness.

Laziness affects a church in every aspect of its witness. Spiritual complacency and lack of zeal comes when people become more interested in selfish desires and pleasures than in the things of God. This kind of thinking usually arises in affluent societies that do not physically persecute the Church but tolerate it, though they demean her message at every opportunity. As laziness persists in a church, new teachings follow which attempt to justify the lack of real and zealous works and obedience. The itching ears of many people in churches today are a product of the influence of the culture of our day. Keeping His commandments becomes “legalistic” while just praising God on Sunday is sufficient to secure a place in heaven.

Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead (v1). Sardis had a reputation for being a lively church, but was in fact dead. Maybe they were an emotional, charismatic church with lively services and glowing testimonies for Christ, uncaring that their inner life was spiritually dead and corrupted with sin.

While the other churches that Christ reprimands have at least some works that He commends, Sardis and Laodicea do not. He comes, and finding them not watching, warns them that He will next come upon them as a thief, suddenly, and when they are unprepared. There is no indication that persecution or great temptation were present in Sardis, and there is no excuse for her condition. The worldly culture of Sardis seems to be the church's chief enemy, defiling their hearts and dimming their vision of Christ.

It becomes evident early in the Revelation that much of it is written in imagery of the spiritual rather than the natural. Notice the many words and phrases in the seven letters that can only be understood spiritually. He calls them *dead*, as the Apostle Paul, *and you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins* (Eph 2:1). Those who *have not defiled their garments*; that is, the *garments of salvation* (Is 61:10), shall *walk with Me in*

white (4:4, 6:11, 7:9). The priests of Israel were to wear *holy garments* (Lev 16:4) that were never to be defiled by uncleanness or even worn by anyone else. Their various rites were carried out under strict rules of service. Numerous types corresponding to NT truths can be seen in the individual garments and their use, but note especially that those who join Christ's Kingdom become a *royal priesthood, priests unto God and His Father* (I Peter 2:9, Rev 1:6). Thus, the *wedding garment* (Mt 22:11) of praise and salvation (Is 61:3) must be kept undefiled if we are to be rewarded with *white robes* (7:9) in heaven.

One lesson from the letter to Sardis is that Christ expects more of us than simply gaining our own salvation. As the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 illustrates, the servant who is unwilling to use the gifts God has given him will lose his own soul as well. We have heard and read of Christians reaching the twilight of their life and lamenting with the songwriter, "Must I go, and empty-handed? Must I meet my Saviour so? Not one soul with which to greet Him, must I empty-handed go?" Some may think their lives have not been that useful for Christ, not knowing all they have done for Him, even as this song has inspired many who have sang it through the years. What one person does for God may not be evident in this life, while another's work may not be as effective as it seems. If every Christian does not bring at least one child or adult to salvation then Christianity is dying, unable to sustain itself to the next century. Jesus promises that *every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first* (Mt 19:29-30).

The few *worthy* ones in Sardis will not have their names blotted out of the *book of life* (v5). This is speaking of that heavenly roll call at the end of the age where *whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the Lake of Fire* (13:8, 17:8, 20:12,15; 21:27; 22:19). The *book* was first mentioned by Moses as he interceded for the disobedient children of Israel. *Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of Thy book which thou hast written* (Ex 32:32). It appears that *the book of life* was written before the *foundation of the world* (17:8), according to the foreknowledge of God, and the soul that sins, *him will I blot out of My book* (Ex 32:33). The plain and simple teaching of these verses does not support a "once saved, always saved"

theology. Does God have an eraser? *Add iniquity unto their iniquity...let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous* (Ps 69:27-28). Christ knew before the world began who would be saved, but that does not interfere with man's choice to either accept salvation or reject it.

Christ promises the overcomer that He will *confess his name before My Father, and before His angels* (v5). To receive this promise, we must not be ashamed to identify with Christ (Luke 9:26) and to suffer with Him. *Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God* (Luke 12:8). This will take place at the end of the world, when *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad* (II Cor 5:10). To be known and approved by Jesus is the ultimate goal of every Christian.

7. *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;*
8. *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.*
9. *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.*
10. *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.*
11. *Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.*
12. *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.

13. *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*

PHILADELPHIA, THE CHURCH OF BROTHERLY LOVE

Philadelphia and Smyrna are the only churches to receive no rebuke from Christ. While Smyrna was a persecuted church in an alien setting, Philadelphia does not appear to be under physical persecution. The church was, however, surrounded by false religions and dangerous worldly influences. Located about 28 miles southeast of Sardis, the city of Philadelphia was nearly destroyed by an earthquake in the time of Christ. Little is known about the early church there, though a letter written to them by Ignatius around A.D. 100 indicates that they were a small, faithful group. Ignatius gives high praise to the bishop and leaders of the church in Philadelphia. The city still exists today, though few if any Christians remain.

In the declaration, Jesus provides specific attributes of Himself as an example of what the church should aspire to be like. *He that is holy, He that is true* (v7). Holiness commends us to God (Heb 12:14) and serves as a continuing, unspoken witness to those outside who are watching and looking for the Way. Allegiance to truth is what keeps the world and false teachings out of the Church, and truth is the foundation of all Christianity through the written and revealed Word of God. Honesty is a scarce commodity in the world, and holiness and truthfulness are two qualities our churches desperate need in order to stop the attack of society and the world upon our Biblical values.

He that hath the key of David (v7). This expression is taken from Isaiah 22:22, *And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.* This Messianic prophecy is hidden in a passage about Eliakim, a prominent leader of the Israelites during the time of Hezekiah. Eliakim distinguished himself as a humble, wise counselor who influenced King Hezekiah and the Jews to obey Isaiah's word from God rather than that of sinister Rabshekah of Assyria, who argued that the Jews should give up the city of Jerusalem to the Assyrians.

The One who has *the key of David* conferred on Peter the *keys of the Kingdom of heaven* (Mt 16:19), a statement that has been greatly misinterpreted by the Catholic Church. Jesus has the *keys of [Hades] and of death* (1:18), and also *the key of the bottomless pit* (20:1). He gives them to whomsoever He wills. It was Peter who received the heavenly vision of the unclean beasts, and who then opened the doors of the Kingdom to the Gentiles. Two thousand years later we cannot easily appreciate the tremendous difficulties there must have been in the tradition-rich Jewish Apostles extending the Gospel to the age-old historical enemies of God's chosen people. Jesus did not tell His disciples these things, but the Holy Spirit through Peter did. The *key of David* is in the hand of Christ; He opens and shuts according to His own will.

To the Philadelphians Christ says, *I have set before thee an open door and no man can shut it* (v8). This is the *door of faith* (Acts 14:27), which is open to all (I Cor 16:9; Col 4:3). An *open door* speaks of invitation, potential, promise, and opportunity. The good church at Philadelphia was fervent in spirit and in truth, pointing out the door that leads onto the straight and narrow way. Every church begins with a clean slate and new opportunities. God wants to work in His people, to prosper them and to shower His graces upon them. The door is opened by God, and though no man is able to shut it, many churches do not enter therein—it stands unused and is eventually forgotten.

For thou hast a little strength (Gk—*micros dunamis*). This may refer to the size of the church, and the fact that Philadelphia never attained the prominence of the other seven churches. Or it may mean that their members were from the lower class, with little influence in the worldly city. Christ does not hold their *little strength* against them. Instead, He uses it to motivate them, “Take courage, you do have a little strength.” And it requires only that much faith to realize with Paul that *I can do all things through Christ which strengthen me* (Php 4:13).

They have kept My word, and hast not denied My name (v8). Every church should jealously desire such praise from their Saviour and King, but many are not willing to give Him what is required to earn such praise. Five of the seven churches were spiritually lacking to varying degrees. Philadelphia provides the peace-time churches of history an excellent example to follow.

Is there significance in the name *Philadelphia*, which means city of brotherly love? No doubt this church did excel in love for one another, for it is impossible to be successful and receive God's blessing without true concern and love for the body of Christ, and each member in particular. For *by this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another* (John 13:35). Herein may lie the real unspoken reason for the great success of the Gospel in Philadelphia, for *with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel* (Php 1:27) the church there attacked the forces of evil and defended the truth of the Word of God. *Little strength* is not a disadvantage with sincere goals such as these, for God does not need human numbers to accomplish His purpose, just a few good ones willing to follow Him in heart and action. Those who are willing to identify with Christ in this life He will remember in the next, and those who deny His name on earth He will deny in heaven (Mt 10:32-33). The Philadelphians gloried in living every part of life for Christ only.

The Jewish community apparently was very active in opposing the church in Philadelphia, and the Book of Acts illustrates that the Apostles too faced much Jewish opposition. Smyrna, the other pure church of the seven, faced persecution from the same source (see page 61). According to a letter written by Ignatius, the Jews in Philadelphia were attempting to discredit the leaders of the church there, and persuade the Jews who had become Christians to return to Judaism.

Remember that the whole early church was made up of Jews—thousands and thousands of them. This true remnant of Israel, though foretold by the prophets of the OT, was viewed as heretical and apostate by physical Jews. Christ though, is very strong in His indictment of these Jews *of the flesh* (Rom 9:8), calling them the *synagogue of Satan*. The statement that the Jews would someday *come and worship before thy feet and to know that I have loved thee* indicates that they would come to realize that God's love and favor had left national Israel and now embraced the true *Israel of God* (Gal 6:16). The figurative language comes from passages like Isaiah 49:23 and 60:14, where it is prophesied that kings and queens, and *them that afflict you* shall bow down and serve those in Zion. History bears out that it is rare for a Jew to accept Jesus as the Messiah, but on the Judgment Day they will realize His identity, and acknowledge His love for the Gentiles of the world (see page 240).

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 (v10). There is a play on words in Christ's promise: "You *kept* My word patiently; I too will *keep* you in the day of trial." Christians are not assured peace and prosperity on earth just because they obey God; rather, *all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution* (II Tim 3:12). Some are persecuted physically, while others must overcome the great persecutor of the Christian's soul (Ps 7:5). The seed sown on stony ground endures *but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the Word's sake, immediately they are offended* (Mark 4:17). The church of Philadelphia will be kept through that hour of testing and tribulation and the promise applies to every faithful church down through time which has kept the commands of Christ. *The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations* (II Peter 2:9); *He will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it* (I Cor 10:13).

Smyrna was also warned of coming tribulation, but her persecution was physical in nature, and thus Christ's special message to her was to remain *faithful unto death* (2:10). Philadelphia provides a great example for the churches of America and other free countries, where persecution is a spiritual testing of temptation, worldliness, and deception. History reveals that the Devil has found this insidious form of persecution to be more effective than torture to the death. Warning against deception and worldly temptation is an important subject in the Book of Revelation. The Beast and the False Prophet we will meet in the last half of the Book are inventions of the great deceiver in his attempt to corrupt and damn the weak and sickly in the churches.

The key to escape spiritual persecution is given in verse 11, *hold that fast which thou has*. The same admonition was given to the church of Thyatira (2:25). *Hold fast the form of sound words* (II Tim 1:13); *Prove [verify] all things, hold fast that which is good* (I Thes 5:21); *hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering* (Heb 10:23). Knowing the genuine and holding it firmly in hand will keep the Christian from being deceived. *Buy the truth and sell it not* (Pro 23:23). The Word of God is an anchor against the storms of deception that the Devil will try to use to shipwreck the churches of the Kingdom.

That no man take thy crown (Gk–*stephanos*). Not that it can be wrested from us by force, but that it can be stolen by deceit. Nothing can separate us from God except our own choice to deny Him in word or action. False teachers and evil men will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived, therefore, *hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown*. Temptations and trials will come, false teachers and deceptions will come, selfish desires and earthly pleasures will come; so *watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong* (I Cor 16:13). A *crown of righteousness* is waiting in heaven for all those who prevail against the earthly beasts that lay in wait to devour the souls of men (II Tim 4:8). Christ warns, “Let no man deceive you and steal away your own crown. Hold fast to it, guard it, and entrust it to no man.” Deception is much more likely in Philadelphia than in Smyrna. Let the churches of America take warning.

Behold I come quickly (v11). That Christ will come *quickly* is proclaimed at least six times in Revelation. It is now almost 2,000 years later, so what does *quickly* mean? Some read “suddenly” instead of *quickly*. While this is a possible translation, the Greek word *tachu* is usually translated “quickly, speedily, or soon.” The NT teaches that Jesus could return at any time, a doctrine called the imminent return of Christ. Essentially this means that Christ has completed His work and there is nothing left unfinished. The way of salvation has been accomplished, and the next event in the plan of God is the harvest of souls at the return of Christ. That is why the Apostles called their day *the last times* and *the last days* (I Peter 1:20; I John 2:18; Heb 1:2).

Some people believe that the Apostles misunderstood the time of the Lord’s return, and that their statements that He would *come quickly* are incorrect. For instance, when Peter wrote, *the end of all things is at hand* (I Peter 4:7), he appears to imply that the end of the world is near. However, the Apostles also called for patience in waiting for the Lord’s return. Paul cautioned that the *Day of Christ* would not come until after the great apostasy of the *man of sin* (II Thes 2:2-3). And Peter himself foretold that the last days would bring scoffers who say, *where is the promise of His coming? All things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation*. We are told to understand that *the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, but is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish*.

If one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, *quickly* could mean several days, meaning several thousand years (II Peter 3:3-8). Peter's words actually anticipate the long centuries of time that Christ would tarry. It would take many years before scoffers would begin to say, "Christ said He would come quickly, but it is now 2,000 years since He left and nothing has changed." Peter, by the Holy Ghost, predicted precisely what the "intellectual" scoffers of our day are now saying.

Other Scriptures indicate that there will be an extended time-period of grace between Christ's comings. The parable of the talents in Matthew 25 stretches over *a long time*, and the ten virgins waited so long that their lamps ran out of oil. There are far more passages implying a lengthy Age of Grace than a short one, especially when you exclude those passages in the Gospels that actually apply to the inauguration of His spiritual Kingdom.

How do we reconcile the Revelation Scriptures that say Christ will *come quickly* with other NT Scriptures that imply He will wait to return until the full number of saved are reached? First we should note that Christ does not only come at the end of the world, He also comes in judgment, justice, and encouragement. Ephesus and Pergamos, for example, were both warned that if they did not repent He would *come quickly* and fight against them and remove their candlesticks. He tells Sardis that He will *come as a thief*; to Laodicea He promises to *come and sup* with those who open the door to Him. Christ comes often to the people of the earth, sometimes in anger and judgment, sometimes in comfort, conviction, forgiveness, and saving grace.

Behold, I come quickly in verse 11 is almost certainly a reference to His Second Coming at the end of the age, and the way it is written warns every generation to watch and wait faithfully for His return. We believe it carries the thought of coming as soon as possible. It is like a father telling his child to wait for him while he goes on an errand: "I'll come get you as soon as I'm done." *Behold, I come quickly*, says our heavenly Father, "Just wait until I'm finished with My plan for every one of you."

It is also possible that *quickly* simply describes the way in which He will return, and would agree well with Matthew 24:27: *For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.* Jesus will return in the twinkling of an eye, and the warning is that

there will be no chance for repentance when He is seen coming in the clouds of heaven. (See page 32 for more about Jesus coming *quickly*.)

The overcomer is promised wonderful blessings in the *new Jerusalem*, a symbolic reference to the eternal state of the redeemed with Christ (see Rev 21). The overcomer will be made a *pillar*, a strong, immovable part of the *Temple of God*. Moreover, he will be marked with the *name of God, and of the city of God* (v12). Surely this language is intended to convey the love and care that God has for His elect, and that He knows and seals them forever (Rev 14). Jeremiah was made *a defenced city, and an iron pillar* against the enemies of God; *they shall fight against thee but they shall not prevail* (Jer 1:18-19). Both the tabernacle and the temple were supported by pillars. Though costly and ornamental, they served a specific purpose. The two huge pillars of Solomon's temple were called *Jachin* and *Boaz*—strength and stability (I Kings 7:21).

14. *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;*

15. *I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.*

16. *So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.*

17. *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:*

18. *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.*

19. *As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.*

20. *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.*

21. *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.*

22. *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*

LAODICEA, THE WORLDLY CHURCH

Laodicea has probably received more attention by ministers of the Word than all the other churches put together. Many sermons have been given using her sad illustration. Laodicea's message is very similar to that of Sardis, but whereas Sardis is given time to repent, Laodicea has already used up her time. Christ introduces Himself as *the faithful and true witness*, which contrasts sharply with those within the church who were living a life of hypocrisy. The Laodiceans had deceived themselves into thinking that they were doing the work of Christ when in actuality they were spiritually destitute, sickly, and naked.

Laodicea was a prominent city both in the Roman world and in the growing Christian faith community of John's day. It is mentioned several times in Paul's Epistle to the Colossians. In A.D. 361, a Roman Catholic Church council was held in Laodicea, after which she virtually disappears from church history. The city was noted for its banking and commerce, and also was home to a medical school. This made the citizens wealthy, and cultivated in them a proud and selfish attitude.

As usual, Christ begins His message with *I know thy works*. For Laodicea this is a negative comment, for their works were tepid. It appears that the church members of Laodicea had become so taken with the culture and lifestyle around them that Christ was no longer their first priority. They were wealthy by worldly standards, *increased with goods*; but measured in heavenly values they were in abject poverty, being *wretched and naked*. The leaders of the church are especially included in the sharp admonition, and they may even have been a major reason for the church's condition. Most significantly, these people did not realize their precarious condition. Like Ephesus, they had gradually left their first love until suddenly they found themselves alone,

holding only *a form of godliness*. The strong words of rebuke may have sparked some repentance in the church, for early writings show a Christian presence there several hundred years later.

The seven messages can be applied to individual Christians almost as well as individual churches. There may be Philadelphia Christians in a Laodicean church; or Sardian ones in Philadelphia. The lesson to all is: *he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith*. Jesus' message varies as to the need in the life of each individual, and He says, *as many as I love, I rebuke and chasten*. The first step to coming back to God is to listen to reproof and acknowledge our deficiency; then repentance and growth can follow. The Greek word used for "love" in verse 19 is *phileo*, which is used to show the affection between close friends or brothers. God has *agape* love for all, but for those He chastens He has *phileo* love.

After stating the problem, Jesus counsels how the Laodiceans can return to Him. They should *buy of Me gold tried in the fire*. This figure of speech draws upon the purification process of gold, and is a familiar Biblical picture. *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ* (I Peter 1:7). Gold is a symbol for the purity and holiness which comes from dedication, self-denial and sacrifice. Gold is rare and very valuable; so too is the cost of our salvation and the price that we must pay for true holiness and purity. Christ offers this treasure to those who love and follow Him: *Come, buy...without money and without price* (Is 55:1). The *Bride of Christ* in the *holy Jerusalem* is pure gold (21:18), meaning she is rare, precious, pure, and holy (see glossary).

As with Sardis, the sin-spotted Laodiceans desperately needed *white raiment*, representing the wedding garments of salvation (see pages 74 and 449) which would hide the shame of their nakedness. They needed *eyesalve*, for they were unable to see themselves as God saw them—a sad and dangerous situation. Like the story of the emperor who was deceived into not wearing clothes, the Laodiceans were entirely oblivious to their spiritual nakedness. The lesson we should learn from Christ's letter to Laodicea is that we must constantly appraise ourselves with the mirror of God's Word *being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work* (James 1:25). It is a sad state indeed to

think that you are saved and doing God's work when the opposite is true. Many deceived people are in this category, and yet how exceedingly hard it is for them to recognize it.

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 (v20). What a beautiful picture Jesus gives to this mostly backslidden church. Though their faith has been less than desirable, He has not left them yet. He stands at each heart's door and knocks, hoping that they will yet respond to His call. He does not force entrance, but in longsuffering He waits for the sinner to open and invite Him in. The longer a person hears *His voice* but does not open the door, the fainter the call becomes, until eventually He cannot be heard at all. Jesus never stops calling, but if a sinner continues to ignore His gentle knocking, noises from the Devil distract until the heart's door is so thick with calluses His voice grows fainter and fainter. For these people, only special intervention will ever cause them to hear and respond to Christ. Prayers of intercession may prompt God to bring circumstances that can make the sinner hate the noises of the world, and then the patient voice of Christ can be heard.

Those who open the door and allow Christ to enter will begin a friendship with Him that will last for eternity. Fellowship was the reason God made man in the first place. He created man to be different from the rest of His creation, giving him the ability to interact and to comprehend God. To *sup* with Him is to fellowship with Him and commune with Him. It is not a master-servant relationship, but a Father-son bond of complete trust and openness. *If a man love Me, he will keep My words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him* (John 14:23). The tests of faith and obedience will determine who will share in this eternal fellowship.

In closing this letter Christ again gives a promise to the overcomers of the world. They will *sit with Me in My Throne*, which is to share in the joys of victory and accomplishment. The language is based on Luke 22:29, and has already been discussed in the letter to Thyatira.

In summary, the letters to the seven individual churches are messages given to God's collective Church down through the ages. Every church can find itself in one of the messages, and should give ear to what the Spirit is

saying to them in particular. Let each peace-time church strive to attain unto Philadelphia, the church of brotherly love, and let each persecuted church be a Smyrna church, *faithful unto death*.

Ephesus The Church of conscientious works, but lacking sincere love for God.

Smyrna The Church suffering persecution, yet faithful and true to Christ.

Pergamos The Church that is not separated from the world.

Thyatira The deceived Church, led astray by sin and false teachers.

Sardis The lazy, uncaring Church.

Philadelphia The pure, loving Church living in a world of temptation and wickedness.

Laodicea The proud, worldly Church with no fruits of righteousness.