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Ministry and Life in the Seven Churches

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# Ministry and Life in the Seven Churches

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The book of Revelation, the great Apocalypse of our Lord, is a record of what Jesus Christ showed His servant John, a record of "what must soon take place."<sup>1</sup> In a series of ever-expanding visions Saint John the Divine is given to see the final and complete victory of Jesus Christ and His church. Though in the ages to come the powers of hell will appear to prevail through persecutions, famines, imprisonment, death, and destruction, Jesus Christ will nonetheless emerge in complete triumph on the Day of days as King of kings and Lord of lords.<sup>2</sup> Symbolic of this ultimate victory, the revelation is given to John on the great imperial day itself, the Emperor's Day, or as we know it, the Lord's Day,<sup>3</sup> reminiscent of the great Easter triumph, the earnest of our final and ultimate victory. On this given Sunday the seven churches at worship are bidden to hear<sup>4</sup> the Gospel appointed for All Days, as it is read from the great altar before the throne of God.

The entire book of Revelation was written to seven churches in the Roman prov-

ince of Asia.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the book, however, as part of the first seven beatitudes,<sup>6</sup> John records seven distinct letters, one to each of the seven specified churches. They were not letters in the sense that they were actually sent by couriers, but rather messages individually addressed to different communities ministering to the Lord under singular and unique circumstances. The seven letters are actually a part of the total fabric of the book. They serve as a base for the heavenly steps, the visions, which lead up into the Heaven of Heaven, to the very throne of the Triune God where He is surrounded by the host of His angels.

The letters may well serve a unique purpose for us as they unfold the ministry and life of these seven churches. A hurried study portrays the different churches in their task of ministering the Word under varying circumstances and in various ways, but with each one meeting its responsibilities in a different manner.

## THE CHURCHES AND THEIR TASKS

The seven churches addressed in these letters were selected by God Himself.<sup>7</sup> They were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. We may well ask, why these, for there were also other churches in Asia, Hierapolis across the river from Laodicea,<sup>8</sup> Colos-

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<sup>1</sup> 1:1. (All references are to the Book of Revelation except where noted)

<sup>2</sup> chs. 19—22

<sup>3</sup> 1:10

<sup>4</sup> 1:3

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<sup>5</sup> 1:4

<sup>6</sup> 1:3

<sup>7</sup> 1:11

<sup>8</sup> Col. 4:13

sae and perhaps Troas<sup>9</sup> and Miletus.<sup>10</sup> The seven cities formed a somewhat irregular oblong circle, each of them on the Imperial Post Road. This may, in part, be the answer, although Hierapolis was on the same road or near enough for all practical purposes. Many explanations have been offered, but none are conclusive. There is no reason to believe that these churches alone were, or had been, under John's pastoral care, though this may well have been the case. The key to the question lies, no doubt, in the number itself, the number seven, the number of totality which occurs some 54 times in Revelation. These seven churches represent the whole of Christendom and serve as types of various ministries, circumstances, and reactions to the Gospel. Each church had its own individuality and was the church at that place. The messages fitted their respective needs but they were intended for the entire Christian church. This is seen in the close of each of the letters where all the churches are bidden to hear what the Spirit says.<sup>11</sup>

In addressing His church, the Lord Jesus reminded His members of His great redemptive work and in that reminder offered and sealed its renewing and transforming power. By His love and with His blood He freed them from their sins and made them a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.<sup>12</sup> By His resurrection He gave substance to the hope of their ultimate victory<sup>13</sup> and by His eternal Godhead offered them reassurance that they would

rule with Him forever. His divine majesty and His eternal Godhead are acclaimed in a constant refrain throughout the seven letters. They bestowed certainty to His hearers that He who died is alive again.<sup>14</sup> The introductory words of each of the letters brought home some facet of His divine majesty to fit their circumstances and needs. They depict Him as Ruler, Creator, Giver of the Spirit, the Holy One, the Judge, Son of God, and the Faithful One.<sup>15</sup>

He who freed men from sin, the power of death, and the grave<sup>16</sup> transformed them, producing the love in them which constrained them to serve their Lord and God.<sup>17</sup> By the working of His Spirit they were compelled in love to serve Him even when bearing up under pressing trials for His sake until such a time when called into the Church Triumphant.<sup>18</sup> The Lord looked for this love in the churches, searched for it, rejoiced when He saw it increase under the Spirit's power,<sup>19</sup> grieved when it cooled off,<sup>20</sup> and condemned in anger when He found it at the point of extinction.<sup>21</sup>

How does such love express itself in the churches? Or to put it another way, what is the function of the church? The Lord demonstrated what this function is with a vivid picture. The Lord is portrayed as

<sup>9</sup> Acts 16:8ff.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 20:15

<sup>11</sup> 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22

<sup>12</sup> 1:5f.

<sup>13</sup> 1:5

<sup>14</sup> 1:18

<sup>15</sup> 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14

<sup>16</sup> 1:18

<sup>17</sup> 2:3

<sup>18</sup> 2:10; 3:11

<sup>19</sup> 2:19

<sup>20</sup> 2:4

<sup>21</sup> 3:15, 16

one like the Son of Man in the midst of seven golden lampstands,<sup>22</sup> the lampstands being the seven churches.<sup>23</sup> The function of the church therefore is to serve as a lampstand for the Light of the world. The church holds the Light and in doing so its influence reaches out, permeating the darkness, putting things in their right light, and bringing warmth, life, health, and power to the world. As the Light serves others it brings the same warmth, health, and power to the giver. This is the ministry of the Word, for the *Logos* is that Light which lightens the darkness. It is also the ministry of the word, for the word of God is God as He speaks and acts through people. Where the ministry functions well, we have the church in its full strength, as in the case of the churches at Philadelphia and Smyrna; for where the Word is kept, it is given away,<sup>24</sup> and the church is kept by God.<sup>25</sup> Where the ministry falters, as in Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira, there is grave danger, and repentance is called for.<sup>26</sup> Where the ministry is dying, as in Sardis and Laodicea, there death is threatening the church. It becomes clear from the letters that the ministry of the Word is needed not only for spiritual growth but for the survival of the church if it is to meet the onslaughts of its enemies.

The same Lord who has assigned the ministry to the church watches over it as it performs its task. He holds the churches in His grasp so that no one shall pluck

them out of His hand.<sup>27</sup> In His divine majesty and authority He remains in their midst,<sup>28</sup> guides and protects them, assuring the churches continually of His eternal power and protection. As He watches them in love or in deep concern, nothing escapes Him, neither faithfulness nor disloyalties. To each of the churches He says: "I know your works."

Though the letters are written to individual churches, they are in fact addressed to the angels of the respective churches. These angels are the heavenly spirits from the host of the Lord God of Sabaoth. They are not ordinary messengers or the pastors of the churches, as the word may well allow, but angels. This is the normal meaning in Revelation where the word is used elsewhere more than 50 times and in each case denotes a heavenly spirit. Each church, then, is pictured as having its own angel. This thought conformed with the prevalent Jewish belief in guardian angels. Accordingly Michael was the angel assigned to protect Israel.<sup>29</sup> Likewise Jews and Christians believed in guardian angels for people collectively<sup>30</sup> and individually, adults<sup>31</sup> and children<sup>32</sup> alike. So here each church was assigned an angel to guard over it and to accompany its letter. As Jesus Christ sent an angel when He gave His message to John,<sup>33</sup> so the seven angels brought the communications to the seven churches, symbolizing that all the heavenly hosts

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<sup>22</sup> 1:12

<sup>23</sup> 1:20

<sup>24</sup> 3:8

<sup>25</sup> 3:10

<sup>26</sup> 2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19

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<sup>27</sup> John 10:28

<sup>28</sup> 1:13

<sup>29</sup> Daniel 10:13, 21

<sup>30</sup> Luke 4:10

<sup>31</sup> Acts 12:15

<sup>32</sup> Matt. 18:10

<sup>33</sup> 1:1

watch and guard over all the church throughout the world in every age and land.

#### THE CHURCH MINISTERS UNDER VARYING CIRCUMSTANCES

God established His primitive church in a real world among real men, amidst sinners who were to become saints in Christ. Let no one cherish the thought that the early church was a Utopia, an Erewhon — a thought which even the most superficial reading of Revelation must dispel. God assigns to His church a difficult task, possible only because He supplies the help. For the task of ministering He supplies the community in which to minister, certain gifts, a specified amount of time, and given opportunities. Midst these varying circumstances Satan is permitted to harass the church. He seeks to harm, to inflict lasting pain or destruction. Nevertheless through such tribulation the church may be refined, strengthened, and be given additional opportunities to minister in surroundings unwelcome to the flesh.

The seven cities of Asia in which these churches were located were for the most part important cities, rich and thriving, teeming with a life that had become a by-word. Yet each of the cities had characteristics of its own. Ephesus was the first and the greatest, the de facto capital of the province, claiming for itself the proud title, The Light of Asia. Smyrna, the fabled birthplace of Homer, the crown of Asia, was the bitter rival of Ephesus. Its land-locked harbor served as an ideal trading center. Once destroyed by war, it was later rebuilt and became one of the few planned cities of the ancient world. Pergamum, the official capital of the province, was a center

of emperor worship. It had one of the largest libraries of the world and attracted many students to its medical school.

Thyatira, perhaps the least important of the seven, was nevertheless noted for its trade and its prosperous dyeing and weaving guilds. Though Sardis dwelt in the dead past when Croesus ruled the city, it was still one of the richest cities in the province. Philadelphia was situated at the edge of a volcanic plain and enjoyed fertile soil for a thriving grapes and wine industry. But the many volcanos which still plagued the region kept this area from enjoying the normal prosperity of the other cities. Laodicea on the Lycus was a banking and financial center as well as a medical center, and was renowned for its manufacture of luxurious woolens. Because of its vulnerable position it needed peace for prosperity.

Many Jews had flocked to these urban centers and enjoyed the prosperity of the marketplaces, the banks, and the many avenues of commerce and trade.

As each city had a character of its own, so also the churches located there. They were given various opportunities and gifts for their task of ministering the Word. As the churches differed from one another, so also the individual Christians within the fellowship. Yet within these churches, different as they were, God scattered His sevenfold gifts of the Spirit. These gifts together with the individual circumstances in which the churches found themselves provided the setting for their ministry. One church might be rich,<sup>34</sup> another might be poor.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> 3:17

<sup>35</sup> 2:9

Sardis had the reputation of vitality, of strenuous activity;<sup>36</sup> Philadelphia was a one-talent church with little power.<sup>37</sup> The Ephesian church, absorbing the vigorous life of the community into its own bloodstream, had an energetic fellowship.<sup>38</sup> Most of the churches suffered violent opposition. In some instances they were harassed by false teachers<sup>39</sup> who crept into their ranks, deceiving the weak with heresies and gross sins.<sup>40</sup> With varying degrees of severity God permitted His own to be persecuted, to be imprisoned,<sup>41</sup> and even to suffer death.<sup>42</sup> Though these persecutions continued to grow in intensity, they became for many an opportunity and an occasion to minister under circumstances for which none would have volunteered.

But God knew His churches. He held them in His hands. He did not let prosperity or poverty weaken their spiritual life without a stern but loving warning. Nor did He let the opposition heap burdens which the churches could not bear.<sup>43</sup> Even the days of persecution were numbered,<sup>44</sup> indicating that within God's purposes and plans there was a limit to what Satan was permitted to do.

John was no stranger to the varying circumstances which served as a setting for ministering the Word. As he beheld this

very revelation he was on the isle of Patmos, exiled "on account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus."<sup>45</sup> He was no longer permitted to minister to his churches as a bishop or a pastor. Yet he was able to serve the churches of Asia in God's chosen way, sharing with them in Jesus "the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance."<sup>46</sup>

#### THE CHURCH MINISTERS IN VARIOUS WAYS

This was the world in which the Christians of Asia were called to serve their ministry of the word. A world of culture and politics, of bitter rivalry and cunning trade. A world swarming with a multiplicity of religions practiced in renowned temples of exquisite beauty, expressed in sophisticated Hellenistic philosophy through flourishing healing cults or through the crassest pagan superstition of the basest form. Here were religions that catered to the wise and the rich, to the illiterate and the poor, to the free and the slaves; religions that appealed to the highest creative level of natural man with their art and architecture, their music and literature, or which appealed to man on his lowest level by perverting his inner drives and bringing him down to the plane of the beast.

The church's ministry here, as elsewhere, took on various forms as people were confronted by people, ministries of the word and of life and death. Yet in essence they were of one kind, the bearing of the witness to the Logos and His redemption.

The seven churches, all of them, whether praised, admonished, or rebuked, minis-

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<sup>36</sup> 3:1

<sup>37</sup> 3:8

<sup>38</sup> 2:2

<sup>39</sup> 2:2

<sup>40</sup> 2:6, 14f., 24

<sup>41</sup> 2:10

<sup>42</sup> 2:13

<sup>43</sup> 2:24

<sup>44</sup> 2:10

<sup>45</sup> 1:9

<sup>46</sup> 1:9

tered in varying degrees through the teaching word. They bore witness to the brother irrespective of his person. In that witness they comforted, strengthened, admonished one another as they experienced the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of their loving Father. The absence of any reference to deacons, pastors, teachers, or anyone in the office of the ministry is significant and suggests that the entire fellowship shared in the ministry of the Word.

In their ministry they were concerned, too, with keeping the testimony pure as they had received it from their Lord Jesus Christ, lest, by weakening it, they render the Word less effective. Theirs was also a testing ministry to determine whether those who would minister to them as apostles were indeed sent by God.<sup>47</sup> It was furthermore, at times, a polemical ministry, when they were forced to withstand the gainsayer, not for strife's sake, but for truth's sake. Where sin or error was defended, their ministry took an even more severe turn by public rebuke;<sup>48</sup> and when the brother could not be won for Christ, he was rejected from the communion that he might be won again.

The ministry of the word reached out to those who had not as yet heard the witness of the Son of Man — to the pagan and the Jew. Where they found the door open, they sought to enter that Christ might enter with them.

The presence of a large number of Jews in Asia was a unique opportunity and channel of service for their ministry. The difficult relationship between Jew and Christian was normally not a racial problem, for many of the Christians themselves

were of Jewish birth. Rather, a religious issue of the deepest kind was involved. The Jews naturally looked upon the Christian witness as either the fulfillment of their Messianic hopes or a perversion and distortion of all that was sacred and dear to them and their ancient traditions. From the point of view of the Jew, there could be no compromise or peaceful coexistence with Christianity. For this reason some of the most violent opposition came from the Jews. Yet Christians recognized that they were debtors to the Jews, as we still are, and the love of Christ compelled them to seek out the Jews to witness and to win them.

The ministry of the word was undergirded by the churches with a ministry of life. This was not simply a refraining from sin, from a soiling of their garments,<sup>49</sup> but the positive acts of service in Christian love. Theirs was a ministry of burning and yearning love,<sup>50</sup> of enduring patience,<sup>51</sup> of suffering,<sup>52</sup> and of imprisonment.<sup>53</sup> A ministry that reached out in serving the needy, the sick, the suffering, the hungry, the imprisoned, the orphaned, and the widowed.<sup>54</sup> It was also a ministry of death or the threat of death.<sup>55</sup> The Holy Spirit singled out one person, Antipas by name, who gave his witness in blood.<sup>56</sup> His death is called a witness to remind us that no child of God who dies for his faith,

<sup>47</sup> 2:2

<sup>48</sup> 2:6, 9

<sup>49</sup> 3:4

<sup>50</sup> 2:4, 19

<sup>51</sup> 2:2, 19

<sup>52</sup> 2:9

<sup>53</sup> 2:10

<sup>54</sup> 2:19

<sup>55</sup> 2:10

<sup>56</sup> 2:13

dies in vain. He and the saints who shared in his witness continued to bear their testimony long after their death. They reminded the church that though they had sealed their life with the blood of martyrs, the fullness of their life had now begun in death. They continue to witness to the church today that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God."<sup>57</sup> Perhaps even some of those responsible for their death were forced to question their own principles and actions, to reexamine their values, and in this to become a recipient of their ministry.

#### THE CHURCH MEETS ITS RESPONSIBILITIES IN SEVERAL WAYS

As with the called in Christ of every age, the Christians in the seven churches did not respond to their assigned ministries in the same manner. The seven churches ran the entire range of the sanctified life from the full firm faith to the careless and the indifferent, and even to a ministry and life that had become paralyzed, whose faith was barely discernible to the all-seeing God. The churches at Laodicea and Sardis fell into the latter category; the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira had serious flaws in their ministries. Only the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia were without reservation praised for their loyalty and faithful endurance.

#### *Laodicea*

In the midst of the thriving commercial city of Laodicea a church had been founded as a sister congregation to the church in nearby Colossae. We recall that when Paul wrote to Colossae, he indicated that he had

also written to Laodicea and bade the Colossians to exchange letters with them.<sup>58</sup> The letter to the Laodiceans has been lost, but the Epistle to the Colossians has become a part of the New Testament.

Like the city, the Laodicean church enjoyed peace and prosperity.<sup>59</sup> No reference is made to persecutions, false teachers, or grievous sins. They appeared to have been singularly absent. But the physical and spiritual blessings given them by God proved to be too much for them. They were unable to rise to the occasion to use them in love and service for the Lord and His church. Instead, the Laodiceans took the gifts for granted, almost as their natural right, and became completely apathetic. They are known as the complacent church.

"I know thy works," the Lord says to them, "you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth."<sup>60</sup> Neither hot nor cold; just lukewarm. Would that you were hot as you once were hot with the desire to serve me, fervent, bubbling up in the Spirit. Would even that you were cold, still untouched by the power of My grace. Would that the great miracle of the Gospel had not touched you for then I could still perform My wonder. Cold: from these God recruits His saints. Hot: these are the saints He can use. Lukewarm: they nauseate the Holy One.

What had happened to the Laodiceans that they had grown so complacent? The

<sup>57</sup> Matt. 4:4

<sup>58</sup> Col. 4:16

<sup>59</sup> 3:17

<sup>60</sup> 3:15



basic difficulty was that they had made a wrong analysis of themselves. By their false appraisal they were led to believe that they were rich and in need of nothing. Whether the members of this congregation shared in the general prosperity of the city is uncertain, but they did interpret their blessings, both spiritual and material, as an assurance that "all was right in the world." They assumed that conditions could not be this good if they were not the children of God, children of wisdom gifted with special insights who had need of nothing. So they became smug, self-complacent, and supinely indifferent in their ministry and life.

Besides being unable to meet the challenge of her blessings, what other reason may there have been for the plight in which Laodicea found herself? Was it an inefficient ministry? The *Apostolic Constitutions*<sup>61</sup> state that Archippus was the first bishop of Laodicea. If this is the case, we might have a clue, for Paul added this cryptic note to the conclusion of his letter to Colossae, "And say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfill the ministry which you have received in the Lord.'"<sup>62</sup> Was this an expression of Paul's concern that the leadership was failing then already, 30 years before John's letter?

God therefore tore off their masquerade and laid bare their wretchedness, misery, poverty, blindness, and nakedness.<sup>63</sup> The stern judgment of the Amen, the faithful and true witness,<sup>64</sup> exposed the Laodiceans' indifference and self-satisfac-

tion for what it truly was. Their willingness to compromise, to live and to let live, their spirit of accommodation was not the spirit of love but the spirit of apathy to all that was true.

Yet this terrible indictment, this soul-searching appraisal was not final. Even now the loving and gracious God was at work. "I am about to spew thee out," but not yet. There is hope. There is still life there. There is still a church here, though a dying one. So He says to them, "Take my advice. Buy from Me, do business with Me for the gold that is pure and tested. Buy from Me the white robe of righteousness to clothe yourselves and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen. Buy from Me the eye salve to bring you true insight and the wisdom of God."<sup>65</sup> Leave your riches, your costly black woollens, your healing salves and buy from Me. You have been squeezed into the mold of your own world, be transformed again by the renewal of your mind into the mold of Christ.<sup>66</sup>

What kind of business is this for the Lord to ask the wretched, the pitiable, the poor, the blind, and the naked? But this is the strange business in which our God deals. Never have the markets and the business pools of the world heard of this. "Come ye, buy, and eat; . . . without money and without price."<sup>67</sup> Buy for nothing. With the invitation He gives them the credit power with which to buy. It is free — not your faith, your humility, your contrition, your repentance can purchase this. "I give it to you for nothing."

<sup>61</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions* 8:46

<sup>62</sup> Col. 4:17

<sup>63</sup> 3:17

<sup>64</sup> 3:14

<sup>65</sup> 3:18

<sup>66</sup> Rom. 12:2

<sup>67</sup> Is. 55:1

He who wants to sell is at the door. He wants to bring in His gifts. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." He says, "I want to be your guest. Accept me as a guest and I will be your Host."<sup>68</sup> What a topsy-turvy business is this! As He stands and knocks and calls, the power goes out to rekindle the lukewarm so that they may be renewed in their ministry and life.

Did Laodicea hear? Did she heed the warning and regain her fervent spirit? We like to believe that she did, for in the fourth century a provincial council is supposed to have been held there, to which an important series of canons has been attributed. This may indicate that Laodicea's ministry and life had revived.

#### *Sardis*

Sardis was another church on the verge of extinction, but apparently for different reasons than Laodicea. Sardis had become a secular church, even though appearances pointed to the contrary. If you had been standing on the street corner along the main thoroughfare of Sardis on a given Sunday, your eyes might have met a welcome sight, a sight gratifying to every Christian. It might appear that all the city was coming to worship. A little inquiry would further have given you the information that this was truly a live-wire congregation with lots of activity. It was a great influence in the community, with a pastor who knew what the people wanted and what the town expected.

"You have the name of being alive," our Lord tells Sardis, "and you are dead."<sup>69</sup>

What a startling statement! A church that had every appearance of being alive and active is called dead by the Lord who stands in the midst of the churches!

Like Laodicea, Sardis has deceived herself as well as others by her appearance. Sardis was not a run-down church. She gave every appearance of being a success. Her organization was all that could be hoped for. She was getting results, as one could see by her influence in town and by her continued growth. If we were to superimpose our way of life on this church, we might see her calendar crowded with social events, her business meetings concerned with a constant parade of trivialities, spending hours on her fixtures and furnishings to be sure that they were in accord with the best traditions.

As we study this letter and compare it with the others, we find one significant omission. Nothing is said about endurance, persecution, suffering, enduring patience, martyrdom. The kind of gospel preached there provoked no opposition. Evidently the gospel according to Sardis was not an issue in a sinful world. She avoided her ministry of the word and so eluded difficulties. Her saltiness was gone; her lights had all but gone out. Her pastor may well have been eloquent as he preached and counseled about prayer and how God took care of things; that things turn out well in life if you obeyed God; how the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man brought honesty, decency, righteousness, and of course prosperity and happiness; but nothing was said about sin and grace, about forgiveness and salvation, about the full submission to the living God who in His Son, Jesus Christ, had redeemed them freely by His grace, and how this merciful

<sup>68</sup> 3:20f.

<sup>69</sup> 3:1

and loving God had a total claim on them by His Gospel. "You are dead, O Sardis, you have lost your intimacy with God. Your works are not full; they are empty. A shell." The Church of the Holy Dry Rot!

God is intolerant when our ministry is unreal, when we preach a gospel that is not the Gospel. He is compassionate to the doubting — only believe; to the failing He gives assurance that He will not quench the smoking flax; to the burdened He will give rest; and to the fearful He says, "Be not afraid." But to the unreal, who teach a gospel other than He has given, He says, "You are dead." On his tombstone is written, "An enemy has done this."<sup>70</sup>

And yet God was patient. Even to these He uttered His warning, "Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death. Death does not have the last word. Don't just sit there! Remember what you have received and heard."<sup>71</sup> Keep that, and I will keep you!

Even in the spiritual cemetery of Sardis there were a few who had not defiled their garments. To these and all others who repent the Lord simply said, "Don't become defiled." It is significant that no special instructions were given to the few who were faithful in Sardis. But He did promise them that they would be clad in white garments; that He would not blot out their name in the Book of Life, but confess them before His Father and before His angels.<sup>72</sup>

#### *Ephesus*

While Laodicea and Sardis were almost of one kind, churches paralyzed and dying,

<sup>70</sup> Matt. 13:28

<sup>71</sup> 3:2f.

<sup>72</sup> 3:5

the next three churches have strange mixtures of strengths and weaknesses. The Ephesian church was the first of three addressed by the Lord in this category. The record of her ministry of the word was remarkable in many ways. God Himself bore testimony of her impressive record: "I know your works."<sup>73</sup> Not just the ordinary works that all Christians are called upon to do, but work associated with tribulation, with the full share of trials, and all the sweat and tears and hardships that go along with them. Her patient endurance and loyalty continued even in the face of persecution. The Ephesians knew from hard experience the enmity of the pagan revilers, the worshipers of Artemis. And they had grown firm, if not hard.

The same diligence which they showed against the enemy from without they manifested against those within their ranks. "You cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false."<sup>74</sup> They were alert, our Savior says, and He says it with approval. They were ready to squelch false teaching at the first sign. "You have labored and not grown weary." They did not count the hours; they did not ask how difficult a job was. If it was for the name of the Lord, if it was for His sake, they did it and they did it effectively.

All this was truly a tribute to a church at work. Here we see indeed the evidence of the Spirit of God. These were disciples of great teachers, Paul, Timothy, and John. We could understand if the Ephesians said among themselves, "Can anything really serious happen to us, who have been so loyal, so patient, so alert, so enduring?"

<sup>73</sup> 2:2

<sup>74</sup> 2:2

This letter must have been read with a shock when John suddenly wrote, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first."<sup>75</sup> Your love once full of heat and passion has grown cold and sterile. Analyze yourself, Ephesus, from what you have fallen. Look at your works! Has your zeal become important in its own right? Has your labor been done out of a sense of duty, of sacrifice, rather than from a living love? Has your Christianity become a series of work schedules so that you no longer operate in the spirit of love but by stern duty? Has Christianity become a business, a contention for the faith, an intellectual exercise? Have you been confusing the sinner with the sin? Are you using the spirit of the inquisition and fighting with the devil's tools of self-righteousness, suspicion, and distrust? Are your contentions for the faith an orthodoxy of disputatiousness?

The Lord brushed aside the entire catalog of virtues which He had listed and says, "Repent and love as you did at first, and do it quickly, for the time is short, lest I remove My Spirit out of this place." With the call to repentance the Lord, as always, supplied the power to overcome the loveless life, to minister lovingly with word and life, to become conquerors who will "eat of the tree of Life which is in the paradise of God."<sup>76</sup>

### *Pergamum*

The Christians at Pergamum had kept the lines well drawn against the enemies of the cross. They held firmly to the name of the Lord against opposition instigated

by the devotees of the pagan cults and such as led the resistance movement of Satan. Loyalty to Christ in the face of persecution as found here at Pergamum dare never be taken for granted by those whose greatest discomfort for Christ is sitting in a hot church. Such loyalty as found at Pergamum was a gift of the Spirit. It came from a love and faith that absorbed the shock, the blows, the shame, and even death. It was in this city that Antipas met a martyr's death by adding his witness in blood, receiving for it the Lord's accolade — "My witness, My faithful one."<sup>77</sup>

But nonetheless with all this loyal endurance a strange thing was happening among the Christians at Pergamum. While they were faithful in their ministry of the word midst suffering and death, they were permitting sin to dwell in their own midst without rebuke. They were allowing a group of destroyers to flourish who were seducing many within the body of Christ. The two most prevalent sins toward which the faithful had grown indulgent were perhaps natural in a Hellenistic setting, idolatry and fornication. These sins were part of the everyday life of the pagan world, where religion and morality were not necessarily associated. We might well call them climate sins since they were part of the structure of everyday life. Such sins are a particular threat to the church in every age. While many of the Christians in Pergamum were perhaps second-generation Christians, they still had friends and relatives who were part of the old way of life. Life in the marketplace, in the fields, and in the guilds was part of the climate, and here the Christians earned

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<sup>75</sup> 2:4

<sup>76</sup> 2:7

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<sup>77</sup> 2:13

their living or served their masters. Thus the climate of the world easily permeated the thinking and the standards of many of the Christians. The thought is not that the congregation as such was characterized by these sins, but simply that they permitted them to grow. Their love had become indulgent. It was only a matter of time when many more would fall into the trap of accepted and acceptable sins. So the letter calls the church at Pergamum to repent and warns them that if they would not repent, the Lord would have to judge them with His Word. But to those who conquered and ministered effectively He would give the white stone with the name of their new life inscribed on it to assure each one that he had been freed by the Judge who had the sharp, two-edged sword.<sup>78</sup>

#### *Thyatira*

The most enigmatic of the seven churches was Thyatira, the church of amazing contrasts. In one breath the Lord lists many ways in which they had faithfully served their ministry of the word. "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first."<sup>79</sup> In contrast to the Ephesians, their love and faith had increased as they gave themselves over to serving the Lord. Surely an enviable record! It is therefore the more startling to hear our Lord say in the next breath that in this church, with such a service record, there had arisen a certain teacher who was beguiling some of the Christians to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> 2:12, 17

<sup>79</sup> 2:19

<sup>80</sup> 2:20

As far as one can tell, there seemed to be no active opposition to her teaching either on the part of the pastor or the laity. We may well ask, how can this be? But we need only be reminded that Satan does not introduce his heresies full bloom, nor does he speak his lies as blatant falsehoods. Often in the early stages of his deception it is difficult to distinguish the tare from the wheat, truth from falsehood. Satan tries to keep his deception away from the pitiless glare of God's truth. He prefers to have them first seen in the soft glow of the world's amber light. This always happens when the church uses the world's way of fostering its ministry. Aaron was deceived with "Make us gods which shall go before us," for we don't know what happened to your brother; Jeroboam tried to use religion to solidify the break between Judah and Israel; and the first Jezebel used the power of the state to introduce the worship of idols and made this new form of worship palatable with the licentiousness of the heathen. The church always becomes a spiritual child of the world when it deploys the world's way to foster the Gospel. And many of the saints at Pergamum believed the gospel of the big lie.

God's reaction to the leaders of this gospel was a quick, final judgment, for they had used up their days of grace.<sup>81</sup> To the rest in the church the call came again to repent and the admonition to hold fast to what they had until the Lord came. With that advent<sup>82</sup> they would realize the promise of victory over all of the Lord's enemies and they would be rulers as morning stars.

<sup>81</sup> 2:22

<sup>82</sup> 2:24-28

*Smyrna*

What sustains Christians in bloody trials — Christians in China, East Germany, Russia, Haiti, children of God in black ghettos of American cities? There is an answer to that question in the way the church at Smyrna, the church of enduring love, met the responsibilities of her ministry.

From the letter to Smyrna we learn that the Christians there were sustained in their ministry by two facts. First, God knew of their tribulations. They were not forgotten people. God knew how their faithfulness to the Word deeply affected their personal lives; how poverty, continual suffering, and slander were bearing down on them. In fact, God knew not only of their past and present but also of their future, and He shared this knowledge with them. There was no Pollyanna talk; no "beautiful church in the valley" stuff, on the part of God. He told them clearly that conditions were going to be worse. The sporadic persecutions which they had already endured would in the future receive official status. They would be imprisoned and some would become blood witnesses of the Lord. They could expect to be tortured and to be separated from their loved ones, and for many life would become better only in death.

God knew, too, who the real enemy was and what his purpose was. The persecutors were but the tools of Satan himself. He sought to destroy their faith, root out their hope, and sear their lives with hatred and vengeance. Since it was Satan, the stakes were high, for the devil is always out for keeps, whether he tries to smother us with good or attempts to destroy us with evil. Saints at Smyrna, "Do not cry out in the silence of the night, 'Does God know? Is

God dead?' God is both alive and He does know. He knows how to deal with the enemy because He Himself is the Conqueror who was dead and was made alive again." He has set the limits. "For ten days you will have tribulation."<sup>83</sup> Satan can only rant and rage within God's circumscribed range. God is still God; He controls the universe with the power of His might.

The Christians at Smyrna were sustained by more than the assurance of His omniscience and omnipotence. They knew furthermore that with it all they would be sustained in their faith by God Himself. When God says "Do not fear," this is more than a word of encouragement. When God bids us lose our fears He reminds us that He is in control and will, with the situation, give us a way of escape, escape not necessarily in a freedom from trial, a freedom from death, but the freedom for all eternity.

"Look," the Lord says, "you are already rich. Satan meant to destroy your faith but with the help of My Spirit your trials have been a cleansing process. Be and become faithful, for in these tribulations you will have opportunities to testify where you never would have been able to minister before." And with this assurance the Lord promises the faithful at Smyrna and the church everywhere that they will walk off the field with the crown of laurels, the victor's crown of Life.

*Philadelphia*

The seventh and last of the churches was Philadelphia, the other of the two churches which received unqualified commendation

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<sup>83</sup> 2:10

from the Lord for the way in which they met their responsibilities in ministering the word. While Smyrna remained faithful under severe trials and bloody persecutions, Philadelphia was a good one-talent church that gave an aggressive witness in the face of strong opposition. Both churches were poor in the eyes of the world, but both were rich where riches counted.

Philadelphia was the mission church. She kept the Word. From the context this meant that she kept it pure and hallowed it with her life. But she went a step farther in keeping it. She gave it away. The faithful in Philadelphia believed that having the Word was a privilege, an evidence of God's mercy and grace; but with this privilege she knew she had a responsibility, for the Word was the only power that brought men to salvation and kept them therein. She had the responsibility to share the Word. And she took a third step. She sought opportunities to extend the royal rule of Christ. In short, she ministered with the Word. With each opportunity seized, God multiplied her opportunities. "Behold," the Lord said, "I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut."<sup>84</sup> This open door must not be conceived to mean that unusual numbers of people would suddenly be flocking to the church at Philadelphia. True, Philadelphia was on one of the main trade routes, but so were the other six cities. In contrast to the others, Philadelphia was still in an aftermath of a long series of earthquakes, a situation which normally does not attract increases in population. Many of the people had moved to temporary quarters out-

side the city, and, as usual, such quarters had a way of becoming permanent. The economic weakness of the city seemed to be reflected in John's statement, "You have but little power."<sup>85</sup> Instead of referring to some population explosion or population shift, the doors which God opened to them were the normal multiplication of opportunities which every Christian had. The saints at Philadelphia witnessed where they were, under the circumstances as they found them, even in the presence of opposition. The Philadelphians were not dependent on mass organizations, on summit meetings to get them stirred up. They formed many one-man mission societies and became their own directors of field work activities. The cobbler spoke to his customer; the farmer witnessed in the marketplace as he waited to sell his goods; the potter and the merchant in the bazaar, the soldier in the garrison, the wife to her pagan husband, the householder to his servants, the slave to his master—all of them ministered with word and life. They did not depend on eloquence or a mission program administered from the isle of Patmos. With childlike naiveté they trusted in the power of the word and Word, and God blessed them. Among the opponents who came to blaspheme, some left to praise; some who came to curse left to bless; some who reviled worshiped with them and acknowledged that God loved them.

Because the Christians at Philadelphia kept His Word, He promised to keep them in the hour of trial. So it is ever. When we minister with the Word to others, we minister to ourselves. Like the oil in the

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<sup>84</sup> 3:8

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<sup>85</sup> 3:8

widow's cruse, the Word multiplies for us and others as we minister it.

Nothing in this letter to the Philadelphians says that they turned many to righteousness. In the final analysis that is God's work. What we are told is that they were faithful in the Word and did not deny that the Lord had bought them. And the future? The Lord told them, "I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown." He who conquers will bear the name of God on Him, the name of the New Jerusalem, and under it, Christ's own name.<sup>86</sup>

The seven letters to Asia are limitless sources of power for the Christian life. Only a few facets of their brilliance have

been viewed. A continual study will be rewarded with many new facets to strengthen, encourage, and warn the faithful. Christians in every stage of their sanctification, in every age of life, and in every period of the world's history can heed the invitation of these letters, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." In hearing the Spirit speak, we will receive the power and the will to minister with word and life in the place and at the time in which we live until "we all attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Eph. 4:13

St. Louis, Mo.

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<sup>87</sup> 3:11