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Excerpt from
WHAT PAUL MIGHT SAY TODAY
Critiques in the Practical Theology of 21st Century Western Christendom

Introduction

I have included this chapter among these critiques on the practical theology of 21st Century Western Christendom that we might better understand our present state, that we might better understand why we are in the pitiful condition we are in. While the condition of the Church in the last days is detailed in various Bible passages, a prophetic, synoptic view of the entire Church Age is briefly chronicled in Jesus' messages to the seven historical churches of Asia-Minor (present day Turkey): Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Other, more prominent congregations than some of these could have been addressed; certainly they had issues as well. So too, the letters could have appeared in a different sequence. But neither their choice nor the order in which they appear is random. Collectively, they depict a pre-written history of the Church dispensation from Pentecost to our future gathering to meet the Lord in the air.

Before discussing the end of the age, it is important to review its history, both as prophesied in these letters and as it subsequently unfolded through the centuries. Herein we will see what it is that led us to where we are today. In hindsight, we now understand just how precise and detailed these predictions were. We must also review the cultural environment in which each historical church resided. Only then can we fully appreciate the significance of these most telling letters. This, too, will allow us to better appreciate the passage pertaining to our current period of Church history, the last days.

Illumination

Being born anew of the Spirit of God, believers live in the light; illumination radiates about us and through us, from God and toward His Word. Here is where understanding divine communication, God's written Word, takes place. In their darkness, unbelievers can have but a limited understanding of Scripture. Therefore, although it paints a very clear picture of many topics, to the unbeliever these portraits are but blurry hues, subjective abstracts left to the viewer's interpretation. The issue for them is illumination; the unbeliever simply does not have it.

A prime example of the unbeliever's inability to appreciate scriptural portraits is the prophetic picture of the world's condition at the end of the age prior to Christ's return. It is not that they are uninformed; popular books are written about it, major motion pictures depict the foretold scenario, and preachers warn of the impending doom. Not only is society well informed on the issue, it is a widespread topic of ridicule for comedians, popular media personnel and naysayers in general. They scoff at the idea of a one-world government, its evil leader, the antichrist and his mark. Even as it unfolds right before them they dismiss, as nonsense, the ancient prophecies of the Jews' returning to establish themselves in their Holy Land, all to the consternation of the surrounding nations. They scoff at the prophetic picture that depicts a society similar to that of the antediluvians: the rise of atheists who, professing themselves wise become fools, preferring to reverence the creation rather

than the Creator, the general approval of homosexuality; a covetous malignant society with a seared conscience; proud, disobedient boasters, argumentative, murderous, haters of God; and inventors of evil things, in a world where knowledge would be increased.

Neither can the unbeliever fully comprehend the predictions concerning the condition of the Church in the last days. Although clearly articulated, to the unbeliever these prophecies are nothing but subjective abstracts. However, for the believer, the gift of illumination brings these portraits into focus, so that we, as believers in the 21st Century, can clearly see that the last days are upon us. In this chapter we review the foretold, historic journey of the Church from Pentecost to Christ's return, and the condition in which we should expect it to be in these last days.

His character & His promises

As we read these letters, take note of two specific details concerning our Lord: the characterizations by which he identifies himself and the promises he makes to the victorious. He describes himself differently and makes different promises to each church. His self-described characteristics are specifically chosen to identify with the particular, historic and prophetic environment of each church. Furthermore, there exists an interesting progression in the promises as they symbolically restore the victors, in each church, to the original intention God had in store for humanity before the fall. We will also note that of the seven, only Smyrna and Philadelphia receive praise without rebuke, while Sardis and Laodicea are almost entirely censured. Ephesus, Pergmum and Thyatira are praised for some things and condemned for others.

To the church in Ephesus

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write;

These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted.

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

But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate. 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 (Rev. 2:1-7).

To this assembly in Ephesus, who had lost their first love He is “*he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks,*” an obvious indication of his devotion to them and their security in Him, despite their lack of fervor toward him. The victorious are promised, “*to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.*” After Adam's disobedience, God placed the cherubim to guard this tree; here, symbolically, the original intention is restored.

Ephesus, the historic city

Just as numbers are important to biblical interpretation, so too are names. This is especially true when the name is chosen or singled out by God, such as Abraham, Sarah, John the Baptist and, of course, Jesus himself (*e.g. Gen. 17:5, 15; Lk. 1:13; Mt. 1:25*). Each was chosen for a specific meaning, a specific connotation it set forth. Ephesus means “the Desirable One.” At the time of The Revelation, Ephesus was the wealthiest and greatest city in the province. Often referred to as the Light of Asia, it was a flourishing commercial seaport, the home of famed annual gaming events, and the geographical center of the Roman Empire.

The famous geographer Strabo, referred to Ephesus as the Market of Asia. Although Pergamum was the official seat of government for the province, Ephesus was the unofficial capital. Located on the banks of the Cayster River along the Aegean Sea, Roman governors often held court at Ephesus and, by statute, a new proconsul had to enter his new domain through this, the Gateway to Asia. As such, Ephesus held the political distinction of being a self-governing, free city, thereby excused from the usual oppressive garrison of troops. For all travelers, Ephesus was the highway to Rome. Years later, when Christians were being taken from Asia to serve as lion fodder in the coliseums, Ignatius called Ephesus the Highway of the Martyrs.

Ephesus was also the center for magic arts and the worship of Artemis, or Diana.¹ Although it was home to several famous temples, erected in honor of various Roman Emperors, the Temple of Diana was its pride. Nearly 10,000 square feet, with 120 elaborate columns climbing 60 feet to the ceiling, it was one of the most sacred shrines of the ancient world and considered

¹ Artemis is the Greek name and Diana the Roman name for the same deity.

one of its seven wonders. Curiously, this goddess of the moon, fertility, life, and the outdoors (who they believed had fallen from heaven), was represented by an unattractive, squat, black, many-breasted figure that, nevertheless, was revered, and held precious throughout this stronghold of pagan superstition. This pagan religion played a vital part in the local economy. Travelers came from all over the world to buy Ephesian letters, amulets, and charms, which they believed could cure sickness, make fruitless wombs give birth, and generally bring success to any venture.

It was this economy that Paul had disrupted with his preaching (*Acts 19:23-41*).² He had so many converts that local merchants, sellers of religious trinkets, realized they might be in danger of losing considerable income. Thus, a ruckus erupted.

Similar to the cities of refuge for accused or guilty Israelites, the Temple of Diana was considered a safe haven for all criminals. Once a criminal reached the temple compound he could claim the right of asylum. Also housed within the temple were hundreds of prostitutes, considered sacred temple priestesses. As one can imagine, being the center of this pagan cult, as well as a haven for criminals and prostitutes, Ephesus was a notoriously evil place known for its crime and immorality. Later generations would think of Ephesus as the Vanity Fair of the ancient world.

Many have pointed out that Ephesus was a most unpromising soil for sowing the seed of Christianity. Yet it was here that Christianity had some of its greatest triumphs. Paul had founded the local church. Aquila, Priscilla and Apollos had labored here (*Acts 18:19, 24, 26; 19*);

² Although the city no longer exists, archaeologists have discovered the ruins of the great theater that housed the riot in Acts 19.

Timothy had served as a bishop, and later, even John himself, after returning from exile, spent the last years of his life as its bishop. Ephesus had become a popular center of Christianity, as well as Diana worship.

An old ploy of Satan is to infiltrate and seduce. He tried it time and again with Israel and has continued to utilize this strategy with the Church. This tactic was exercised in Ephesus as well. However, doubtless due to their strong theological foundation, the church remained unscathed. Thus, Jesus commends them for having *“tested those calling themselves apostles, but they are not and you found them liars.”*

Paul had warned these same Ephesians that after he departed grievous wolves would enter among them, not sparing the flock (*Ac.20:29*). Centuries later, Tertullian and Jerome spoke of a work, written by a presbyter of Ephesus, which claimed to be a canonical history of the acts of Paul. John had condemned this work and accused its author of heresy. Other wolves came as well, and in various sorts. Some were envoys of the Jews who had followed Paul about, hoping to entangle Christians in the Law. Some taught that Christians could turn their liberty into a license for licentious behavior. Some were professional beggars, taking advantage of Christian charity. Located in the center of crime and immorality, the Church at Ephesus was especially prone to such deceivers.

Jesus praised them for their discernment and condemnation of the Nicolaitans: *“But this you have, that you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”* Some believe the Nicolaitans³ were followers of Nichas, whom Hippolytus identified as Nicolaus who had been one of the seven deacons to serve tables in Jerusalem, but had departed from

correct doctrine. Others believe this sect merely took his name to associate themselves with apostolic authority. Irenaeus described them as living lives of unrestrained indulgence. Others spoke of them as shameless, in uncleanness. Clement said they *“abandon themselves to pleasure like goats . . . leading a life of self-indulgence.”* However, he defended Nicolaus, arguing that his followers had perverted his teaching that *“the flesh must be abused.”* By this Nicolaus meant the body must be kept under control; but the heretics, Clement explained, had distorted this to mean the flesh can be used as shamelessly as a man wishes. Regardless of their origin, the Nicolaitans were an early sect of licentious heretics who claimed to be Christians, yet led ungodly, immoral lives.

The Ephesian believers condemned the Nicolaitans, as well as all other false teachings. However, despite their sound doctrine, the Ephesians had a significant problem. They had lost their fervor for the Lord. They were well versed in the Scriptures, doctrinally sound, and had all the appearance of holiness. They hated immorality, and fought against the heresy of seditious teachers, diligently scrutinizing every one of them. But their hearts had grown cold. It had been a long time since they had earnestly thanked the Lord for His blessings. It had been even longer since they had fallen prostrate before Him, broken from the awesome reality of their own sinful nature in the face of His righteousness. Therefore, to them Jesus said, *“Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen and repent and do the first works. Otherwise, I am coming to you and I will move your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent.”* Evidently, the historical Ephesus failed to heed this warning, for neither the city nor the church continues to exist. Perhaps the ancient

³ See comments on the church of Pergamum.

proverb of the hard hearted is applicable: *“He that, being often reprov’d, hardens his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy”* (Prov. 29:1).

The prophetic portrait of the church in Ephesus

As for the prophetic view of Church history, as the years passed, Ephesus proved to represent the Church during the first and early second centuries. Even after the death of the apostles the pristine 1st Century Church continued to preserve the sound doctrine they had learned from them. But throughout the empire, the Church had slowly lost its enthusiasm, had grown lackluster, had simply lost its zeal. In time, this doctrinally pure, but evangelistically complacent, early Church transformed into the persecuted and martyred Church of the next few centuries, which is represented by the church at Smyrna.

To the church in Smyrna

And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write;

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

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 (Rev. 2:8-11).

To Smyrna, once an important ancient city that had virtually died out but had returned to life, and was now the home of martyrs, He is the one *“which was dead, and is alive.”* But that is not all, Smyrna proudly supported municipal rivalries and its citizens aspired to be in the “who’s who” of local society. To them, the Lord proclaimed, He is *“the first and the last.”* He is the ultimate “who’s who,” all others pale in comparison. The victors of Smyrna are promised they *“shall not be hurt of the second death.”* Due to Adam’s disobedience, death has passed upon all men; here, symbolically, the originally intended eternal life is restored.

Smyrna, the historic city

Also a city of distinction, even rivaling Ephesus in politics, religion, and culture, Smyrna was a famed seaport located north of Ephesus on a gulf of the Aegean Sea. While Ephesus may have been the Market of Asia, Smyrna was considered the Ornament, the Flower of Asia. Ramsay called it the City of Life and Lucian said it was the fairest of the cities of Ionia. This city of culture, boasting a large public library, a theater, and a stadium for games, it prided itself as the birthplace of Homer.

The heart of the city cuddled the end of a long, narrow bay providing a naturally safe harbor for war and merchant ships alike. Thus, Smyrna was the primary site of trade for the Hermus Valley. The broad, paved streets of the beautiful metropolis sprawled through the foothills to the Pagos—a summit sporting several temples, each dedicated to a different god: Cybele, Zeus, Apollo, Nemesis, Tiberius, Aphrodite and Asclepius. Leading across the Pagos, from the Temple of Zeus to the Temple of Cybele, like a necklace around the crown, was the celebrated street of gold, which inspired many to call Smyrna, the Crown of Asia.

Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a free city-state. In 195 BC, it became the first city in the world to build a temple to the goddess Roma. This had led to a longstanding friendship with Rome, so that, in AD 26, the city was granted the honor of erecting a temple to the Roman deity, Caesar Tiberius. Although the Temple of Tiberius made this a chief location for emperor worship, as long as citizens paid homage to the emperor, they were allowed to worship their own particular deity, something every group and working class had and each of which the city honored with a different holiday and feast.

If only the Christians had simply participated, even nominally, in emperor worship they would have been free to build a temple to their own god and would have easily blended in with the rest of the activities. No one in the city would have paid them any mind. However, and to their glory, this was not the case. The church at Smyrna refused to compromise. They would not participate in any of the feast days. They would not burn incense and they would not bow their knee to the emperor as a deity. Thus, they were persecuted.

The Jewish society of Smyrna was hostile toward the Christians as well. In AD 155, the Jews willfully participated in the martyrdom of Polycarp—the bishop of Smyrna, John’s former student, and the angel, or messenger, to whom Jesus addressed this letter. One early account of the event explains that during the public games, a cry went up from the crowd, “Away with the atheists” (for this is what they called Christians who refused to worship the Roman deity), “let Polycarp be searched for.”

The troops found him in the upper room of a building from which he could have easily escaped. But having already told his disciples of a dream in which he

was burned alive, he calmly went with his captors. Before leaving, he requested an hour alone for prayer. His captors gave him two, marveling at the composure, piety, and the obvious innocence of this gray haired old man. Tradition tells us that some of these guards evidently converted to the faith.

On the way back to the city, the captain of the guard pleaded with Polycarp, asking him what harm there could be to say Caesar is lord, and to offer a sacrifice to save his own life? Polycarp responded that for him, only Jesus Christ was Lord. Tradition also has it that upon entering the stadium, Polycarp heard a voice from heaven telling him to “be strong and play the man.” The governor offered him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar, or death, to which Polycarp answered, “I have served him eighty-six years and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” When the governor threatened to burn him, Polycarp replied,

You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.

As they tied him to the stake he said,

Leave me as I am, for he who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will give by the nails.

At this the crowd pressed in, tossing their sticks into the flame. It is then that Polycarp offered his now famous prayer.

O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of you; God of angels and powers, and of all

creation, and of the whole family of the righteous, who live before you, I bless you that you have granted unto me this day and hour, that I may share, among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. And may I today be received among them before you, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you, the God without falsehood and of truth, have prepared beforehand and shown forth and fulfilled. For this reason I also praise you for all things. I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Child, through whom be glory to You with Him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages that are to come. Amen.

The flames rose, but as they gathered intensity they began to flare out, arching about him so that he was not harmed. Seeing that he would not burn, at last the executioner reached up and stabbed him with his spear. In this account of the event, the volume of blood spewing from the wound quenched the fire, causing the crowd to marvel at the difference between them and the Christians.

Polycarp was not alone in his refusal to bow to Caesar as lord. The entire church of Smyrna denied his deity. Their failure to worship Caesar made it difficult for them to acquire even the small supply of daily necessities, for they were unable to find work with the idolatrous employers (each of whom demanded participation in pagan rituals). They were also subject to sudden and unprovoked attacks by the pagan mobs. During such attacks it was not unusual for believers to lose their possessions, their homes, and their businesses. It is for this reason the Lord encouraged them,

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.

The term Smyrna is the equivalent of myrrh, a bitter sap used as an anesthetic, a holy ointment, an embalming element, and a perfume. When crushed, its aroma becomes stronger and even more pungent. As a desirable aroma its typical significance is referenced three times in connection with our Lord: at his birth (Mt. 2:11); at the cross (Mk. 15:23); and at his burial (Jn. 19:39). This, no doubt, speaks of the pleasing aroma of the entire body of our Lord's work and his suffering to complete it (Eph. 5:2; Ps. 45:8). Here, also it has typological significance, speaking to the pleasing aroma of this suffering church, toward which the Lord has not one complaint.

The prophetic portrait of the church in Smyrna

Having comforted them with His knowledge of their plight, He then warned them of an even greater trouble they were about to incur,

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.

Prophetically, this message to Smyrna represents the Church Age from the turn of the 1st century through the early part of the 4th century. During this time the Church suffered ten great persecutions at the hands of ten deviant Roman Emperors.⁴ To

⁴ In AD 64 the Church suffered severe persecution at the hand of Nero. But by the time of this writing, 95 - 100, Nero's reign had ended. Ten other Roman Emperors followed with similar practices: #1, 96 Domitian; #2, 98-117; Trajan; #3, 117-138 Hadrian;

justify these persecutions, six different charges were typically brought against the Christians.

Cannibalism, because the sacrament of communion referred to the body and blood of Christ.

Orgies of lust, because the common meal was called the love feast.

Tampering with family relationships, because conversions often caused families to split.

Atheism, because they would not worship the images of the gods.

Politically unpatriotic, because they would not say Caesar was lord.

Incendiaries, because they foretold of the end of the world in flames.

To the church in Pergamum

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write;

These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.

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 stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee

quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

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 (Rev. 2:12-17).

To the church of Pergamum, who tolerated an immoral heresy, He is “*he which hath the sharp sword with two edges.*” Because the church would not separate truth from error, he would do it for them, and it would be painful. The victorious believers in Pergamum are promised “*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.*” The judgment passed upon man after the fall was that “*by the sweat of his face shall he eat bread, for the land would be accursed for him with thorns and thistles.*” Here, life without labor is restored. Also, perhaps it is a reference to the Jewish tradition, which taught that during the siege of Solomon’s temple, Jeremiah had hidden the ark and the golden pot of manna kept in it. The ark was to remain hidden until Israel was restored (2 Macc. 2:5ff.). The “*white stone*” is a clear symbol of victory, and it implies justification. To the Greeks it was a symbol of acquittal just as a black stone was a symbol of guilt.

Pergamum, the historic city

Pergamum, the northernmost of the seven cities, sat overlooking the valley of the River Caicus. Although not located on any major trade route, still it was a great and flourishing metropolis. Strabo described it as the most illustrious of the Asian cities. Pliny said it was the most famous; and it certainly was, at least

#4, 138-161 Antoninus Pius; #5, 161-180 Marcus Aurelius; #6 193-211 Septimis Severus; #7 235-238 Maximin; #8, 249-251 Decius; #9, 253-260 Valerian; and #10, 284-305 Diocletian.

historically speaking, the greatest of them all. In 282 BC, Pergamum became the capital of the Seleucid kingdom—a portion of the fractured empire of Alexander the Great. During 197 to 159 BC, Pergamum had grown under the rule of Eumenes II, who built a number of large buildings, including a library boasting some 200,000 volumes, second only to the library in Alexandria.⁵ Upon his death in 133 BC, Attalus III willed this territory to Rome, from which Rome formed the Asian province of Pergamum with this, the city Pergamum, remaining as its capital.

Its rich history, the voluminous library, and its many temples made Pergamum another important cultural center. Its citizens regarded themselves as the custodians of the Greek way of life and worship. Somewhere around 240 BC, Pergamum had been victorious over the savage invasion of the Gauls. To commemorate the victory, they had built an altar to Zeus in front of the Temple of Athena. Like Ephesus and Smyrna, Pergamum was littered with temples to their favored gods.

Not far from the great grove of Nicephorium was the grove and Temple of Asklepios—the god of healing, who was also called the god of Pergamum. Here, was a school for medical studies in honor of this, their favorite god. The symbol of Asklepios, a serpent, the emblem of

paganism, was etched into the rock alongside the great throne and altar to Zeus. This is a symbol with which we are still familiar today. Galen—second only to Hippocrates in the medical history of the ancient world—was born in Pergamum. Speaking of his favorite oaths, he observed that people often swore by Artemis of Ephesus, or by Apollo of Delphi, or by Asklepios of Pergamum.

Appropriately, the Lord said of Pergamum that this is, “*where Satan's seat is.*” It was to this city that the Babylonian priests had nested after the destruction of Babylon (Isa. 13:17-22). Although they assimilated to, and adapted their practices for, the local culture, Pergamum had become the center for the old Babylonian Mysteries, and for the imperial cult. It was the headquarters for emperor worship. In 29 BC, the city built a temple in honor of Augustus Caesar Octavian, and by the end of the 1st century AD, all Roman subjects were required to offer prayers and sacrifices in the name of the emperor, who was regarded as divine.

Some, within the church of Pergamum, had refused to comply with the idolatry. For Antipas and others, like Agathonice, Attalus, Carpus and Polybus, who kept the faith even to the point of death, there is praise, “*you hold fast my name and did not deny my faith.*” But for others, those who had tolerated the teachings of Balaam and the teachings of the Nicolaitans, there was condemnation. The doctrine of Balaam goes back to the Midianites, who worshiped Baal with the practice of fertility rites (Num. 25:1-17). They believed their god died and arose each year in conjunction with the changing season, which resulted in the cycle of fertility for their crops and their flocks. Balaam's doctrine was to corrupt the people of the Lord. He told Balac to have their young women infiltrate and seduce the Israelites. Their specific

⁵ The word parchment comes from the name Pergamum (*pergamene charta*, the pergamene sheet). For many centuries scribes had used papyrus, made of the pith of a very large bulrush that grows beside the Nile. In the 3rd Century BC, the Pergamene king, Eumenes, persuaded Aristophanes, the librarian at Alexandria, to come to Pergamum. Ptolemy, of Egypt, was enraged, imprisoned Aristophanes and put an embargo on the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Thus, the scholars of Pergamum invented parchment or vellum, made from the polished skins of animals—a superior medium, in time it overtook papyrus as the preferred writing material.

mission was to persuade the Israelites to disobey God's command for separation, so that ultimately, they could cause Israel to forsake the Lord. Quite fittingly, the name Pergamum means the "objectionable marriage."

The *Nicolaitans* brought great shame to the Church.⁶ Although they professed Christianity, they lived lives steeped in immorality and vice. Nicolaitans abused the doctrine of grace by exercising Christian liberty as a license to partake in sensual pleasures, while yet professing the faith. Unlike the believers in Smyrna, they were willing to compromise with the Imperial religion by permitting Christians to participate in worship at the pagan temples.⁷ It is also believed that the Nicolaitans were the first to divide the clergy from the laity. Jesus warned them, "*Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth (Rev. 2:16).*"⁸

The prophetic portrait of the church in Pergamum

Prophetically, the message to Pergamum represents the early part of the 4th Century through the 5th and into the 6th Century. It is during this era that the

⁶ See comments of the church of Ephesus.

⁷ This practice seems quite similar to the present day confessional of Roman Catholicism. It also seems similar to the popular Armenian "saved and lost" doctrine, held by many Protestants. Herein, church members are permitted to openly partake in a licentious lifestyle as long as they show up at the temple from time to time to confess their sins and be absolved of all wrongdoing, or in the case of the modern Armenian Protestants, to be saved again.

⁸ Roman governors were divided into two classes—those who had the right of the sword, and those who did not. Those who had the right of the sword had the power of life and death. On their word a man could be executed on the spot. The proconsul headquartered at Pergamum had the right of the sword and at any moment he could use it against the Christian.

Church is befriended by the empire. After the great persecutions of ten successive emperors, the Church increasingly assumed a role as a ward of the state, until at last, the table was turned and the Church took control of the Empire. The Empire's embrace of the Church began with Constantine the Great, who openly expressed his favor for the Christian faith. Whether he did so to achieve political unity or out of personal commitment has always been debated. Ultimately, the outcome is undeniable—immediately, the empire became overtly tolerant and encouraging toward the Church.⁹

Although Constantine seemingly accepted Christianity,¹⁰ he continued to placate the pagans by retaining the title and performing the duties of the Pontifex Maximus—the High Priest of the pagan

⁹ By an imperial edict in 311, Christians were granted a limited tolerance. Another edict in 313, by the emperors Licinius and Constantine, granted Christians full liberty to follow their faith as desired. Many have called these the Magna Carta of Christianity.

¹⁰ Constantine's professed conversion was the result of a supposed vision just prior to the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312. He claimed to have seen a cross, with the words written above it, "In This Sign Conquer." The reality of his conversion has always been questioned. Because he simultaneously appeased the pagans by retaining the title and performing the duties of the Pontifex Maximus (the High Priest of the pagan religion), continued to serve the pagan idols, and refused Christian baptism until just prior to his death, many consider his conversion merely a brilliant political ploy that sought, and succeeded, to unite the empire religiously, as it was politically, and thereby extend his influence. Whether his conversion was real or not, we don't know, but one thing is certain, it changed the course of history. From that day forward the Church and the empire were united. It was also a change in the adversary's strategy that cannot be overlooked. This was a ploy Satan had used before, when persecution failed to do the job. His plan is so predictable there is nothing new under the sun—infiltration and seduction from within is always the next step after persecution fails.

religion.¹¹ This had a significant effect upon the Church. With the chief of the pagan priests, so strongly patronizing and favoring the Church, it was only natural that other pagan priests would embrace it as well; or rather infiltrate it, for their ostensible conversion was motivated by political gain. Instantly, yesterday's pagan priests became Christian priests. These new leaders, naturally—like their supreme leader, the High Priest, the Pontifex Maximus—also retained their priestly titles.

This infiltration (although not a new tactic) was an obvious change in Satan's heretofore strategy of Imperial persecution. It is here that the harlot of the seventeenth chapter (the symbol of the false prophetess who has plagued the people of God from days of old), gains her first real foothold in the Church.¹²

¹¹ Once Constantine became the sole emperor he strongly encouraged his subjects to become followers of the Christian faith. In 313, he declared the Christian clergy exempt from taxation. In 314, he assembled the Council of Arles to settle the Donatist controversy. In 315, he did away with certain ordinances offensive to the Church. In 321, he issued a decree for the observance of Sunday as a day of worship. In 325, he assembled the Nicean Council—the first General Council of the Church. In 330, he transferred the seat of government to Byzantium, largely to escape the heathen influence of Rome. Constantine also gave large sums of money for the support of Christian clergy, the circulation of Christian Scriptures, and to the building of Christian cathedrals, which was a new thing for the hitherto persecuted believers. He made certain that his son was given a Christian education and he sought Christians to fill his chief advisory posts.

¹² Except for Julian the Apostate (361-363), all subsequent emperors embraced the Church. In 392, Theodosius the Great decreed that all heathen sacrifices were to be considered treason; and in 529, Justinian the First demanded the school of philosophy, in Athens, be closed. Outwardly, it looked as though Christianity had vanquished paganism, but in truth the Imperial Church had merely absorbed it, tradition-by-tradition and rite-

To the church in Thyatira

And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write;

These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass; I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.

Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you no other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear,

by-rite, it had bedded down with Jezebel.

let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (Rev. 2:18-29).

To the assembly in Thyatira, which allowed itself to be seduced by Jezebel (the same immoral heresy that Pergamum merely tolerated), He is the one “*who has his eyes like a flame of fire and his feet are like polished brass.*” Judgment is soon coming. To the victors of Thyatira is given, “*authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as the pottery vessels are broken to pieces*”—again a restoration, in that Adam was to subdue and have dominion over God’s creation.

Thyatira, the historic city

Located inland on the banks of the Lycus river (northeast of Smyrna and about forty miles southeast of Pergamum), of the seven historical cities Thyatira was the least significant. Although it did not have a commanding presence, still it was a prospering industrial city, known especially for its booming trade guilds and the production of royal purple. Lydia, who was converted at Philippi (Acts 16:14), and her family, have long been considered the likely founders of this local church.

Jesus leveled very serious charges against the Christians of Thyatira. They had permitted “*that woman Jezebel*” to seduce them. Although she called herself a prophetess, she had taught, and seduced, his servants “*to commit fornication*”—a clear reference to both physical and spiritual infidelity.

Apollo was the primary deity of Thyatira, a center of activity for the idolatrous and licentious Nicolaitans who had also been seduced by the prophetess Jezebel—an advocate of pagan worship. Like Balaam, she persuaded believers to compromise their faith by comingling with hers. She taught that promiscuity and physical infidelity was

acceptable, even necessary. It was a profane treatment of the spiritual teaching of Christian liberty.

But there was another offense. She also taught them “*to eat things sacrificed unto idols.*” Meats sacrificed at the pagan temples were seldom consumed on the altar. Only a very small portion of the meat was actually burned, sometimes only a few hairs from the animal’s head. After the priest took what portion he wanted, the worshiper who had brought the sacrifice took the rest. Worshipers then served these meats at special feasts for friends and coworkers, either in the temple compound or at their homes.

These feasts, when served at the homes of friends and coworkers, presented a problem for the Christians. Should they or should they not eat of it, in that it had been offered to an idol? An additional problem was that even the butcher’s meat had very likely been offered to an idol as well, and then sold to the butcher from the priest’s excess. This issue of sacrificial meats had been a controversy since the beginning of the Church. The Apostles addressed it at the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:29), and Paul spoke of it to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 8-10). Each had come to similar but slightly different conclusions: the Jerusalem Council instructing new Gentile believers to simply abstain, and Paul admonishing the Corinthians to abstain if it was going to cause those with weaker conscience to stumble. The overriding principle was that one should not offend either his own, or another’s conscience in this or other such matters.

In Thyatira, abstinence from these meats seriously limited the Christians’ social lives. It also made it impossible for them to join any of the trade guilds, all of which held common meals served with meats offered to the idols. Paul explained to the Corinthians that both an idol and the

meat offered to it are nothing, for in and of themselves, they are insignificant. However, not everyone had this understanding, and many ate the meat with consciousness toward the idol as if giving regard to the sacrifice; thereby offending their conscience. It is for this reason that abstinence is best, lest one offends the conscience of the weak.

The religious significance placed on these sacrificial meats in Thyatira compounded the issue. Participation in the ritual of these religious feasts was expected, no one got along in society without it. If one did not attend the feasts and eat the meats, he did not take part in a guild and, ultimately, he found no work, or his business received no patronage. Thus, no doubt Jezebel used an argument of situational ethics to convince believers that it was acceptable for them to partake in these banquets. After all, their very livelihood was at stake.

The prophetic portrait of the church in Thyatira

Prophetically speaking, the Thyatiran Church Age brings us into the dark ages. During the Pergamum period, the Church was tolerated and controlled by the state. By the Thyatiran era, the tables had turned; the Church now controlled the empire. Soon, this Imperial Church was littered with the atrocities of the same Babylonian Mysteries that Pergamum had merely tolerated. Beyond mere toleration, now the Mysteries were being practiced by some as holy necessities of the Christian faith.

Years earlier, attempting to escape the oppression of paganism, Constantine had moved the center of the Church to Byzantium, granting equal status to both the bishops of Constantinople and Rome. But in the centuries to follow, the bishop of Rome would become the clear leader of the state Church. By the time the last Emperor

was dethroned in 476, the Roman Bishop was already the real power of the empire and, subsequently, the real power over the new territorial kingdoms established after the barbarian conquest.

One by one, the new territorial kings professed their conversion to the Imperial Church and bowed their knee to the Pontiff, the Bishop of Rome. To this day, the Bishop of Rome (now known as the Pope), wields power over the fractured, sleeping, Roman Empire. To this day the Pope claims the title, Pontifex Maximus (the title held by the chief pagan priest of the Babylonian Mysteries). The rituals of Babylonianism (introduced by pagan priests who had migrated from Babylon to Pergamum, and then on to Rome), are the hallmark of the Imperial Roman Church. They are also the hallmark of the harlot in Revelation chapter seventeen. The names of the gods and the rituals were altered to seduce the unwary, but the essence of Babylonia remained unscathed.

Thus, many of these ex-pagan priests, now the leaders of this new Imperial Church, decided at the council of Ephesus in 431, that Mary was born without original sin, that she was the mother of God, the mediator between man and Christ, and that four feasts should be established in her honor: annunciation, purification, assumption and nativity. Herein is the essence of Babylonianism—Satan’s counterpart to God’s revealed truth. In ancient Babylonianism, Nimrod was worshiped as the savior and his mother, Semiramis, whom he eventually married, was worshiped as the Queen of Heaven, the mother of god. This comparison is by no means meant to bring any dishonor on Mary, who was indeed “blessed among women,” but Mary must be viewed with proper perspective. To worship her as some sort of demigod is not fitting.

As in Israel's time, with Jezebel and King Ahab, this Thyatiran period (in which the Imperial Church champions the Mysteries of Babylon),¹³ is the darkest period in Church history. And just as Jezebel promoted false worship and claimed to be a prophetess of God, so too, the ruling Imperial Church took upon herself the prestige of self-proclaimed infallibility. It was during this period that the Church became completely compromised by the pagan doctrines and rituals of Jezebel. As a result, we now have such "Christian rituals" as the Christmas tree, the Easter egg and bunny, hot cross buns, the sign of the cross, holy water, prayers to the saints and even prayers to the mother of god. These same pagan affiliations gave us prayer beads, various icons, sanctuaries, altars, holy church buildings, convents, chants, monasteries, priesthoods, holy orders and the vast divide between the laity and the clergy.

Once again, the name is nothing less than fitting. Thyatira means "continual sacrifice." What could better depict the Imperial Roman Church than the Eucharist, wherein transubstantiation is said to occur. Here, the bread and wine change into the body and blood of Christ, so that He is continually sacrificed,¹⁴ a doctrine that blatantly ignores the truth that, "*Christ was*

once offered to bear the sins of many" (Heb. 9:28).

Although the period of Thyatira eventually relinquished its prominence to the era of Sardis, the corruption remains to this day; like Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, remnants of Thyatira will linger until the end of the age. Jesus warned Thyatira that she would be cast "*into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.*"

There are few words of encouragement for the Thyatirans, but Jesus does commend them for some things; He said, "*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.*" This statement that the last works are greater than the first leads us to believe that Thyatira (the remnants of which extends unto the end of the age) will experience some reform near the end of the Church Age. It does not take much consideration to equate these last works with those of the Vatican Council in 1962-65, from which, a gentler Imperial Church emerged. Here, the Roman Church determined to seek reunion with the reformation denominations, increase laity participation, and use vernacular languages rather than the ancient, cryptic Latin. Of note also, is the genuine concern Pope Benedict XVI seems to have had for the faith (as did the late Pope John Paul II), taking a stand for fundamental doctrines, even against great opposition. Certainly, as the Church Age is coming to a close, these last works of the Imperial Church outnumber her historic failures, which reached their zenith during the Dark Ages.

Another encouraging word is given to those devout souls who, although having a heart toward God, have unwittingly found themselves members of this Thyatiran Church. To them he says,

¹³ The darkest period in Israel's history was under the rule of King Ahab, and his wife Jezebel. She, a worshiper of Baal, had infiltrated Israel, seducing them with her devilish doctrine. The blackest, most sinister action of this Imperial Church was its outright murder of the true saints of God—those precious souls who refused to participate in its heathen rituals and doctrines.

¹⁴ The doctrine of transubstantiation—in which it is believed that Jesus dies at each Eucharist, was a key issue with the reformers: Luther, taught consubstantiation—that Jesus was nearby during the communion; Calvin taught symbolism—that communion was simply a symbolic gesture by which we remember Christ.

As many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you no other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.

Jesus telling them to *hold fast till I come* seems to be a reference to the transfiguration of the faithful, the rapture, just prior to the Great Tribulation.¹⁵ During His ministry, Jesus warned His listeners to watch and pray that they be counted worthy to escape the Great Tribulation (Lk. 21:36).

To the church in Sardis

And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write;

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

Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (Rev. 3:1-6).

To the church at Sardis, which had a name and is dead, He is the one who holds “*the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars.*” Although they fall short in their work, the Lord does not. The work of the Spirit is complete. Those few in Sardis who overcome are promised to 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.*” Only those so clothed in the righteousness of Christ will escape having their names blotted out of the Book of Life—a gain, another symbol of restoration, in that blotting out names from the book of life began in the Garden of Eden.

Sardis, the historic city

Located east of Smyrna and Ephesus, some thirty miles southeast of Thyatira, once the capital of the great kingdom of Lydia and home to the rich king Croesus, Sardis was an old city by the time of this writing, with an illustrious history of financial wealth dating back to the 6th Century BC.

Its strategic location on the northern slope of mount Tmolus, with the river Pactolus flowing at its base, made it practically impregnable. However, Cyrus was able to conquer Sardis in 549 BC when a Median soldier paved the way to victory by successfully scaling the acropolis. In 214 BC, Alexander the Great conquered the city again. Then years later it suffered yet another defeat at the hands of Antiochus the Great, so that now, when John addressed it, it was a city of contrast—that of its past splendor coupled with its present unrest and decline. Although it had lost its greatness, it was still a considerable city in the 1st Century. Pliny said it was here that the dyeing of wool was discovered. Ramsay called it the City of Death, while others have said it was a city of softness,

¹⁵ (see 1 Thess. 4:15-18)

luxury, apathy, and immorality. This was also the seat of the licentious Cybele worship.

Along with Laodicea, Sardis is the most condemned of the seven churches. The church of Sardis is admonished for its failure, *“I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.”* Melito, a 2nd Century bishop of Sardis, was known for his piety and learning. After visiting Palestine to assure himself and his flock as to the Old Testament canon, he wrote an epistle on the subject and a commentary on The Revelation. But things had changed in Sardis. This church was like the city itself; though it once had a wonderful reputation it was now morbid and decaying. Jesus cautioned them to,

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

These believers had let their faith deteriorate to the point of mere nominal Christianity. Their experience and their deeds were all but non-existent. Thus, Jesus warned them, *“I will come as a thief in the night.”* This would have special meaning to them, for they lived under the constant threat of a notorious band of vicious thieves residing unchallenged in the mountains surrounding the city. Led by a man called Chakirijali, they would swoop down, ravish and plunder a community, then quickly return to the high country before capture.

The prophetic portrait of the church in Sardis

Sardis means “that which was left” or “remnant.” In the prophetic view this church speaks of the Reformation Age. The Reformation—and its subsequent Protestant movements—began with much glory, founded by heroic theologians and their faithful followers who sought, and managed to some degree, the return to godly principles and biblical doctrine. Many of these saints gave their lives defending God’s Word and attempting to rid the Church of the Babylonian influences introduced by the Pergamum and Thyatiran periods. Their labors led the world out of the cruel inequities of the Dark Ages, into an era that produced many great theologians and evangelists.

But from the beginning, they were hindered by traditions and practices which they had brought with them from the previous period. Each reformer withdrew from the Imperial Church by differing degrees. The variations, although relatively minor, prevented them from uniting in their quest for purity. The divisions were immediate and sometimes very harsh. The end result was our many Protestant denominations.

Like Sardis of old, these Protestant denominations, which once stood boldly for Christ, are now, largely, Christian in name only, so that today, much of organized Protestantism no longer even accepts the basic doctrines of Christendom (the authority of Scripture, the deity of Christ, etc.). For them, Christianity is a tradition, a philosophy that molds itself to the times. Recently, at the 2012 national legislative meeting of the United Methodist Church (the largest Protestant body in America), the council voted 60% to 40% to uphold the denomination’s policy that homosexuality, is incompatible with Christian teaching. That it was even on the docket for discussion is most distressing;

that 40% of the council voted to modify the stance is abysmal.

Even more appalling is that the United Methodist Church is the only mainline Protestant body that has not, as yet, relaxed its stance on homosexuality. The Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ have all moved toward winking at this lifestyle that is clearly forbidden in Scripture. Within a week of the United Methodist's vote, the president of the United States of America announced that he, too, approves of the homosexual lifestyle. Thus, Jesus warned the believers in Sardis: "*You be watching and establish the remaining things that are ready to die.*" The New International Version translates this "*You be watching*" as "*Wake Up!*"

Jesus does commend them for having a "few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments." Others have mentioned that out of Sardis flow two streams. Of the one there is nothing to rebuke, and of the other there is nothing to praise. These, of course, are Philadelphia and Laodicea.

To the church in Philadelphia

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write;

These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.

Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and

worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.

Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.

Behold, I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (Rev. 3:7-13).

To Philadelphia, those who were faithful even though having little strength, he is "*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*"—a pleasant reminder that their strength is in him and that without Him they can do nothing. He promised the Philadelphian victor that he would be made *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.*

Here is another restoration, for Adam was expelled from the garden and given the task of tilling the ground from which he was taken.

Philadelphia, the historic City

The city of Philadelphia, "brotherly love," is located about twenty-eight miles southeast of Sardis in a valley leading to

the Aegean Sea. Its economy was based on agriculture, industry, and commerce. The Emperor Tiberius had rebuilt the city after it was badly damaged in the earthquake of AD 17. Sardis had been struck even harder by the quake, but subsequent frequent tremors had so plagued the Philadelphians that for many years some residents had been living in tents, in fear, outside of the city.

Although not a large city, it was frequently visited by travelers. Situated on the trade routes leading to Lydia and Phrygia, Ramsay called it the Missionary City, for it was a prime avenue to promote the spread of the Greco-Roman civilization, and later, Christianity—whose primary opposition in this region was Judaism. During the Byzantine and medieval periods, Philadelphia was perhaps the busiest trade route in the old world.

Although important to the empire, Philadelphia was not as gifted as the other six cities to which these letters are written. Neither was the church corrupt. The pagan authorities often tested the Philadelphian believers, demanding them to blaspheme the name of Christ or be killed. But they remained true with what strength they possessed. In this Jesus commended them, for although they had “*little strength*” they had kept his word and had not denied his name. Not even the slightest hint of judgment or condemnation is found in this message to the Philadelphians. There is only praise, encouragement and promise. Only Smyrna and Philadelphia escape censure. They are also the only churches of the seven historical sites still in operation.

The prophetic portrait of the church in Philadelphia

Prophetically, Philadelphia depicts the Church of the 19th and early 20th Century, a time of great revival and missionary outreach. Avenues for evangelism, which

had been closed for centuries, were suddenly and miraculously opened. Jesus said, “*Behold, I have set before you an opened door.*” These champions of the faith were quite different from those leaders of the Dark Ages, who used the sword to force Christianity upon the vanquished.

The Philadelphians were promised deliverance: “*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.*”¹⁶ In the prophetic sense, this is a reference to the Great Tribulation from which the Church will be saved via the rapture. This is not a time for the Church, but it is a time for Israel and for the whole world, so that none, but the faithful shall escape it. Speaking of the last days, Jesus warned, “*then shall be Great Tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world . . .*” (Mt. 24:21). Paul, too, warned that it would come “*as a thief in the night, for when they shall say peace and safety, then sudden destruction comes upon them . . . and they shall not escape.*” He then encouraged his readers, saying, “*but you, brothers, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you like a thief*” (1 Th. 5:2-4).

Differing views exist among the futurist, or pre-millennialist, as to when the resurrection of the Church takes place. Pre-millennialism understands that the Great Tribulation will occur just prior to the Lord’s return to earth, at which time he will establish his 1,000 year kingdom, thereby fulfilling the Davidic covenant.

I will raise up your offspring after you, who will come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for

¹⁶ The Church is always promised escape or deliverance from the tribulation while Israel is merely promised to be preserved through it (see Lk. 21:36; 1 Th. 5:4, 9, 10; Jer. 30:7; Zech. 13:7-9).

my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12-13).

Pre-tribulational, pre-millennialism provides the most plausible chronology.¹⁷ Herein, the Great Tribulation is viewed as period belonging to the Jews. It is not a time for the Church. It is the 70th week of Daniel (Dan. 9:24-27). Daniel was told that from the command to rebuild Jerusalem, his people had seventy weeks to make reconciliation of iniquity and to bring in everlasting righteousness. The Messiah, he was told, would be cut off after the 69th week.¹⁸ This was fulfilled with the death of Christ, but the 70th week is yet to occur. Daniel was also told that the 70th week would span a seven year covenant made by the evil prince who would also orchestrate the abomination of desolation. Jesus made it clear that this abomination of desolation is yet to occur and that when it did occur, it would be a sign of His soon return (Mt. 24:15).

¹⁷ Some hold to a Mid or Post Tribulational viewpoint. Mid-Tribulationalists believe the translation of the Church will occur in the middle of the 70th week, while Post-Tribulationalists believe it will occur at the end of the 70th week, immediately prior to the return of the Lord. However, both of these views have serious trouble reconciling such chronologies with very important passages. For example, upon the dividing of the just and unjust at the return of Christ, in the Post-Tribulational view there is no one left to populate the kingdom, for everyone is either in hell or in a glorified, resurrected state. The Mid-Tribulational view fails to consider Paul's comment that the restraining power must be removed before the man of sin, the one who is to make the seven year covenant, is revealed.

¹⁸ This is a reference to weeks of years. It was a common and important measurement of sabbatical time in the Jewish calendar (see Gen. 29:26-28). Failure to keep these sabbatical weeks played a large part in the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish nation; and it determined the 70-year period (Lev. 25-26).

Furthermore, it is also understood that the last half of this 70th week is the time of Jacob's trouble—a time of punishment, specifically targeting the Jewish nation for having rejected their Messiah. *“Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it. It is even the time of Jacob's trouble, but he will be saved out of it” (Jer. 30:7).* As such, this period is not designed for the Church, which is a separate redeemed body. Therefore, it is believed that the Church will be caught away, translated into its heavenly state immediately prior to the tribulation. This is what we commonly refer to as the rapture.¹⁹ Thus the encouragement to the Thessalonians,

But we do not wish you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are sleeping, that you grieve not, even as the rest—those having no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so those having slept in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the Word of the Lord, that we—those living, those remaining unto the arrival of the Lord—by no means shall precede those having slept. For the Lord himself, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, shall descend from heaven and the dead in Christ

¹⁹ In the Greek term in the text, 1 Th. 4:17, *απαγησομεθα harpageesmetha*, literally means “shall be seized, shall be taken away” in a physical sense. Although our popular term “rapture,” which we use to describe this event, is not found in our popular versions, the term is not exactly amiss. Our modern term rapture has a meaning of “a mystical experience in which the spirit is exalted to a knowledge of divine things.” Thus, because when we are caught away physically into the heavens to be with the Lord, we will see Him as He is, “rapture” is a justifiable figurative term (in a dynamic equivalence sense) to express this event: see 1 Th. 4:13-5:10; 1 Cor. 15:51; Jm. 5:7-9; Lk. 21:36.

shall rise first. Then we—those living, those remaining—together, shall be caught up with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words (1 Th. 4:13-18).

Paul had discussed these things with the Thessalonians, but false teachers had crept into the congregation and contradicted his instructions, telling them they had missed the gathering and that they were actually in the Day of the Lord, the seventieth Week. Therefore Paul wrote to them again, carefully explaining the chronology of these future events. First the apostasy; then He that restrains the evil (the Holy Spirit) will allow the son of perdition (the antichrist) to be revealed; then is the Day of the Lord.

Now we beseech you, brothers, touching the arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto him, so that you be not quickly shaken from your mind, nor disturbed, neither by spirit, nor by speech, nor by epistle as from us, as that the day of the Lord is come. Let no one deceive in any way, because [that day shall not come] except the apostasy come first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, the one opposing and exalting himself against all that is called God or that is worshiped; so that he sits in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God. Don't you remember that when I was yet with you, I used to tell you these things? And now you know the thing restraining, so that he be revealed in his own season. For the mystery of lawlessness already works—only there is one that restrains now, until he be taken out of the midst, and then shall be revealed the lawless one (whom the Lord Jesus

shall slay with the breath of his mouth, and bring to naught by his glorious appearance), of whom whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceit of unrighteousness for them that perish; because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And, therefore, God sends to them a working of error, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be judged—those who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Th. 2:1-12).

The promise and prophetic statement that those of the Philadelphia Church Age would be kept from the hour of trial about to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth, cannot, in itself, be considered conclusive evidence as to the pre-tribulational taking away of the Church—indeed, no single passage can be used in such a manner for any subject or doctrine—but this passage certainly lends strong evidence to this view. In a context speaking to this coming time of judgment, Paul told the Thessalonians that they were, “not appointed unto wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Th. 5:9); and speaking of this time, Jesus instructed believers “Be watchful, always, praying that you might be able to escape” the Great Tribulation (Lk. 21:36).

To the church in Laodicea

And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write;

These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see.

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (Rev. 3:14-21).

To the church at Laodicea, those who had fallen into a lukewarm testimony of the faith, Jesus is *“the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God.”* A statement designed both to convict them and to portray Himself as the example in service and life. To the victors of this seventh and final church, He promised they would be granted *“to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne;”* once again a restoration. Adam had been a co-ruler and shared a deep intimate fellowship with the Lord.

Laodicea, the historic city

Not far from Phrygia, Colosse, and Hierapolis, Laodicea was located in the Lycus valley, about forty miles southeast of Philadelphia and forty miles east of Ephesus. Settled along the bustling eastern

trade route from Ephesus, it was home to many trading banks and manufacturers of wool carpets and clothing. It was a city very proud of its wealth and affluence, Ramsay called it the City of Compromise. Here too, was another seat of Asklepios worship and thus, another medical school. Centuries later, Cicero would live here and write several of his letters.

Jesus describes the historic church of Laodicea as nothing less than apostate in both word and deed.²⁰ It is a church no longer concerned with sound theology. Their concern was for the luxuries of material life. Appropriately, the name Laodicea means “laity rules,” which in the historic context means “people rule.” This is a rebellious church that has little regard for its elders, its pastors. It is a renegade church in pursuit of personal satisfaction.

As with each of the seven churches, the Lord’s comments are tailored to their peculiarities. Here, he gives not one word of praise; nothing good is said about them. Rather, he indicts their faith for being *“lukewarm . . . neither cold nor hot.”* Certainly the Laodiceans would have understood the meaning of this statement. Not far from town were a number of extraordinary hot springs; by the time their waters reached town they were lukewarm, tepid, not fit to drink. Thus, he said *“I will spue thee out of my mouth.”* His words are strong; the Greek term for spue ἐμέσαι (*emesai*) is the term from which we get the word emesis. It meant to vomit or reject with disgust. Who enjoys a lukewarm beverage? Aside from the unsavory taste, it breeds bacteria.

Laodicea was the exact opposite of Smyrna. Christians in Laodicea took glory in, and bragged of, their material wealth. The persecuted saints in Smyrna lost their

²⁰ Apostasy (see 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-8, 4:1-4; 2 Pet. 2 & 3; 1 Jn. 2:18-19; 2 Jn. 7-11).

worldly possessions; many lost their lives for their faith. The believers in Smyrna served as role models for the faith; not so the Laodiceans. They were very pleased with their personal financial success; the Lord was not impressed. His words were stern. Thus, it is worth noting the special rebuke He has for each of their prized possessions.

As for their material wealth, being rich and increased with goods, and in need of nothing, He told them to *“buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich.”* The Laodiceans produced very rare and expensive black wool which was used for making fine garments. To this he said, buy from me *“white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear.”* They manufactured a special powder as well, which, when mixed with a certain medium served as a medicinal eye salve. He said, *“anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see.”*

Someone has paraphrased this message as such: “All that you have, all that is so precious to you, that which is the center of your life, means nothing to me. It has no value toward your future state. Buy from me, without price, that which is needed. Put to use the very medicine for which you are famous.” As we might recall, the Lord gave a similar message to Israel: *“Everyone that thirsts, come to the waters, and he that has no money, come, buy and eat. Yes. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isa. 55:1)*. Eventually these lukewarm, non-committed Christians of Laodicea were exterminated in a great massacre. In the end, their wealth was of no value.

The prophetic portrait of the church in Laodicea

Now we arrive at the purpose for including this chapter among these

critiques in the practical theology of 21st Century Western Christendom. Laodicea is the prophetic picture of the Church in the last days. We are in the last days. We are Laodicea. Any honest look at the modern Western Church and Western culture will see the Laodicean state of mind.

The Western culture is wealthy beyond belief. We are the world leaders in luxurious items and medical supplies. Our churches are wealthy as well. When compared to other cultures, even the majority of those living on government assistance in our culture are rich. They have plenty to eat, a closet full of clothes, a roof over their heads and indoor plumbing. They have a cell phone, a big, flat screen TV and cable, air conditioning, and a nice car in the driveway. All this and they don't even have to work.

Truly, we are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing. In our culture, even in many churches, one's success is measured by his financial statement. It is quite telling that the greatest health issue among our “poor” is obesity. We are the modern embodiment of Laodicea. We are the fulfillment of this prophetic passage.

This is especially true of American culture where, although we comprise a mere 5% of the world's population, we are among the largest consumers of manufactured goods, the niceties of life, and advanced healthcare. Of course, we appease ourselves with the idea that God has blessed us because of our righteous heritage and commitment to Christian ethics. Because we are the product of God's blessing, we take great national and personal pride in our material possessions, which, after all, we have earned. Slick looking, fast talking, Bible toting, preachers and televangelists, on the airwaves 24/7, affirm our God-given right to these blessings. They sell books and sermons,

seminars explaining just how Christians can, and are meant to, receive financial rewards.

But I submit that this is a facade. It is the prosperity theology of Laodicea. Outwardly, most followers of evangelical orthodoxy reject this health and wealth gospel as fallacious; but inwardly, and behind closed doors, they likely admire it, practice it, and rely upon it as truth. Like Laodicea, this self-deception is nothing more than a mask covering the ugly face of misplaced trust, which, like that of the Laodiceans, is placed in self, wealth, materialism, and a medical system promising impossible cures.

A prime example of this opulence within the Church can be clearly observed by simply comparing the yearly missionary budget (of nearly any local church in America) with the total sums spent on worldly excesses by its parishioners. Then, to further make the point, divide the total of these worldly excesses into separate categories; it is likely that even the individual categories will top the missionary expenditures. It is just as likely that certain families alone, within the church, will have personal excessive expenditure that top the entire church's missionary fund. Some topics that might fit well into these categories of excess could be extravagant vacations, expensive dinners, ball games, expensive jewelry, elegant clothing, luxurious motor vehicles, recreational flying, mansion-like houses, luxurious church buildings, ad nauseam.

In general, the average church member in America finds more pleasure in, and gets more excited about, sporting events than evangelism. And no doubt, he finds a greater sense of fulfillment in his patriotic fervor than in discipleship. Frankly, he is more concerned with his IRA, stock options, 401K, and retirement plan, than with his spiritual life or missionary work.

Am I saying that all luxuries, material goods, wealth and entertainment are wrong or sinful? Of course not; but I am saying they are clearly out of perspective. When as much, or more, concern is given to such trivial activities and luxuries and sports than is given to spiritual matters, it is a good indication that we do not know how "*wretched . . . and miserable and poor and blind and naked*" we are.

Furthermore, to counterbalance this lust for wealth (perhaps for no other reason than merely to placate our consciences), we have developed a legalistic mindset that, at least outwardly, seeks the ethical reformation of society. Laying aside true efforts of evangelism, achieved by the testimony of personal example, we exert vast amounts of energy on socio-political reform. It is echoed from our pulpits, on Christian television and radio programs, books are written about it; we have demonstrations and protests. We even form alliances with Christian heretics that we might further pursue this self-serving, temporal agenda. We are so dogmatically bent on, and content with, the mere socio-political reform of our society that we pursue it even at the expense of those whom we actually would seek to convert. Sadly, I fear it is not society's conversion, or even reform, that we truly seek with our pharisaical legalism; but we seek, merely, to placate our consciences.

Basking in the luxury of material wealth, the historic Laodicean Christian community was content and proud of its success. They were fat and sassy and without conviction. But this temporal, pseudo-happiness, coupled with their spiritual ignorance, resulted in spiritual lethargy and indifference. They are we. We are them. We are delusional and do not know just how "*wretched . . . and miserable and poor and blind and naked*" we were.

Scripture warns of the apostasy that will prevail in the last days. Jesus asked, “*when the Son of man returns, shall he find faith be on the earth?*” (Lk. 18:7-9). The entire letter of Jude is given to this subject. Paul, Peter, and John refer to it in their epistles. At the beginning of these seven letters, and thus prophetically, at the beginning of the Church Age, Jesus is standing in the midst of the churches (Rev. 1:13); now in Laodicea, at the end of the Church Age, he is standing outside, knocking on the door, seeking entrance. “*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*” (Rev. 3:20).

Conclusion

What a mixture, this Church in the last days—with remnants of the Thyatiran, Sardis, Philadelphian and Laodicean ages co-mingled, representing Christ to the world. One is entangled in ancient pagan mysteries. Another bears no vestige of Christ, other than the “Christ” in Christianity, a title to which it clings even though it denies the fundamental doctrines that define the faith. In yet another (the dominant body of the times), is opulence and gaudy self-reliance. Aside from the relatively few faithful souls within these apostate bodies, only those of the Philadelphian remnant are upholding the Word of the Lord; and they, Jesus said, are of but little strength. May every reader of this work seek to be among the remnant of the Philadelphian believers.