

The Seven Churches

The seven apocalyptic letters dictated by Christ to the apostle John are each introduced similarly by the Saviour's directing attention to Himself. He describes Himself to each church under some particular designation in accordance with the symbolism of the preceding vision recorded in Revelation 1:12-20.

Undoubtedly these distinctive revelations have special significance to the churches addressed. We understand the seven churches to be prophetic of the seven historical periods of the whole church throughout the Christian Era. These seven periods mark changing experiences, conditions, and circumstances in connection with the church, and call for special help from God. Is Christ able to supply the need? We have the answer in the characteristic revelations of His Person given in the introductory announcements in His messages to the seven churches. They reveal to us an all-sufficient Christ qualified to meet any exigency in the changing experiences of His church. He will never be found wanting when the interests of His kingdom are concerned, and His people will never find themselves in a position for which He has not made ample provision.

Moreover, His enemies in the great controversy can never succeed in their efforts to overthrow the witness of His church. Should they endeavor to crush the church by persecution, they must contend with Him who was dead and is alive again. Should human authority dominate the church, it is confronted by Him who wields the sharp sword with two edges. Should formalism seek to stultify the church, there is One at hand who can supply the fullness of His revivifying Spirit. The church can never be confronted with any emergency which would place the glorified Christ at a disadvantage. Note briefly the glorious manifestations of His all-sufficiency for each of the seven crisis eras of the Christian church.

I. EPHESUS, THE INFANT CHURCH

"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." Rev. 2:1.

The Ephesus period was the period of the Christian church when it was first launched upon its gigantic mission in the environment of a hostile world. The servants of Christ were sent forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. (Matt. 10:16), charged with the greatest responsibility ever entrusted to men. If ever men needed the assurance of divine protection and provision, it was when that small band of first-century Christians set out upon their colossal task of carrying the gospel to a world of bigoted Judaism and hostile paganism. It is with a fitness suited to their particular need that Christ reveals Himself to them as the guardian and upholder of His ministers and the ever-watchful caretaker of His church, the high priest who maintains the light of truth which He Himself has lighted in the earth. His right hand, signifying His majestic power, upholds His workers, represented by the seven stars. No man can pluck them from His grasp. He is the true caretaker of His church, walking in the midst of the candlesticks. No human power can extinguish the lights.

These assurances given to the Christian church at the beginning of its career are in a special sense intended for the whole period of its existence, for Christ is pictured here as holding not merely the Ephesus star but the seven stars, and as tending the seven golden lampstands. Thus the Lord has guaranteed His care and protection to the faithful church and its ministry through all the ages of warfare.

2. SMYRNA, THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

"Unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead and is alive." Rev. 2:8.

These are Christ's words to a persecuted church at a time when many were called to suffer for Him. The devil would cast some into prison and attempt to crush the life out of Christ's church. But when he had done his utmost through heathen cruelty and Diocletian hate, there still remained the One whose name was the First and the Last, the Eternal One. He had conquered even death itself. How appropriate that to Smyrna, Christ reveals Himself as the one slain by His enemies, but risen to life again, a victor over the tomb. The cause of such a one could never be vanquished by the martyrdom of His saints. How comforting to the suffering and dying saints was this revelation of a Saviour who had conquered death and had a crown of life to bestow! It would seem that no other revelation of Christ could fit Smyrna better than Christ, the conqueror of Death and the eternal Life-Giver.

3. PERGAMOS, THE AUTHORITARIAN CHURCH

"Unto the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he that hath the sharp sword with two edges." Rev. 2:12.

The sharp sword with two edges which is represented as proceeding out of Christ's mouth (Rev. 1:16) is described by Mrs. E. G. White as "an emblem of the power of His word." (Acts of the Apostles, p. 582.) In this reference Pergamos signifies judicial authority. The context with its reference to the God-opposing "doctrine of Balaam" (Rev. 2:14) recalls the instances when "God's anger was kindled" against Balaam, and an angel of the Lord with stood him with "his sword drawn in his hand." (See Num. 22:22-32.) The Christ with the two-edged sword is Christ the judge, the Christ of authority and power who has testified, "The word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him [the one who will not receive His words] in the last day." John 12:48.

And how appropriate is this revelation when we remember that the Pergamos period was the time when human authority usurped the authority of the divine head of the church, the period when "that man of sin" (2 Thess. 2:3) "exalted himself above all that is called God" (verse 4), and the authority of human tradition was substituted for the authority of the Word of Christ in the Bible.

4. THYATIRA, THE APOSTATE CHURCH

"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." Rev. 2:18.

We come now to the full development of the great apostasy when the symbolic little horn of Daniel is doing its blasphemous work. This is the period of Antichrist and the seeming defeat of the true church. "That woman Jezebel" (Rev. 2:20) reigns in the so-called kingdom of Christ. Great words are spoken against God, the saints are worn out by long persecution, the law of God is changed, and the truth is cast down to the ground and trampled upon. Christ is defied and counterfeited. The very existence of the kingdom of grace is challenged.

Surely in circumstances such as these it is significant that Christ now announces Himself as "the Son of God." The title occurs only in this place in the Apocalypse. With His

eyes like a flame of fire He is the omniscient Son of God fully cognizant of all the dark deeds in this dark age of Thyatira. His feet are like glowing brass at white heat as it appears in the process of fire. The reference to fiery feet associated with the thought of His coming (verse 25) draws the mind to His coming in judgment at the Second Advent to "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12). The letter deals throughout with judgment on Jezebel and her children. The piercing eyes and the burning feet reveal Christ the divine Son of God as the avenger of His cause.

5. SARDIS, THE DEAD CHURCH

"Unto the angel of the church in Sardis "write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God." Rev. 3:1.

Sardis marks the age of a dead formalism in the church, for which there is only one remedy—not creed, but the life-giving Spirit of God. Christ presents Himself to needy Sardis, with its absence of spiritual vitality, as the supplier of the Holy Spirit. He also draws the attention of the ministry to Himself as their source of strength. "Even in Sardis" (verse 4) He is not without witness. He still holds the stars. The candle of truth is still burning. Neither the darkness of Thyatira nor the dead-ness of Sardis has deprived Him of a light in the earth.

6. PHILADELPHIA, THE DISAPPOINTED CHURCH

"Unto 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." Rev. 3 17.

The church of brotherly love was the church with the sweet message and the bitter experience. (Revelation 10.) Looking as it did to the imminent advent of Christ, and yet failing of its realization at the expected hour, this church needed special assurance to keep it steadfast. And this is given abundantly. The assurance comes from the Holy One, and the believers need that "holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14.) Christ is the true, genuine one, not a false Messiah who has led them to trust in some false hope. The promises of the true Messiah are sure. He possesses the key of David, which symbolizes His regal right. The throne of David is His, and believers may rest assured that He will reign. The minds of His followers are directed to His priestly work in the sanctuary above where no human power can hinder the outworking of His plans. He opens one phase of His ministry and closes another, and His purposes know no delay. (See *The Great Controversy*, pp. 428- 430, 435.) The blessed hope in the hearts of His followers, though not realized when they expected it, is the promise of the genuine one, and will meet its fulfillment.

7. LAODICEA, THE SELF-CONTENTED CHURCH

"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." Rev. 3:14.

The last prophetic letter brings us to the hour of God's judgment. The prevailing spirit of this last hour is one of spiritual lukewarm-ness, a feeling of spiritual security with a tendency to trust in "goods" (verse 17) to the neglect of heart religion.

To those in such a condition Christ would reveal Himself as "the Amen." The expression comes from the Hebrew and is equivalent in the Greek to "the truth." It seems that Christ would impress our minds with the lesson that truth is not a mere system of doctrine or interpretation. He Himself is the truth, and the inference is that unless we possess Him we do not possess the truth. Doctrine is only a shell without the kernel when Christ is left out of the life. Furthermore, the One who is the truth is the faithful and true witness. We need to remember this when we read the message of rebuke in the letter to Laodicea. The elucidation and the application of that message are given us in the Spirit of prophecy in the remnant church. Let us remember that the testimony of Jesus is the testimony of the faithful and true witness.

It seems fitting too in the last days, when the prevailing philosophy is evolutionary, that Christ presents Himself as the Creator to the church which is to exalt the memorial of His creation. It is important that Christ be recognized as the Creator, for only one with the power to create can make us new creatures and release us from that condition when we are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." (Verse 17.)

It should be noted in closing that these revelations of the person of Christ, so appropriate to the particular periods to which they were addressed, are applicable also for the church at all periods of her earthly warfare. The admonition is repeatedly given, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (plural). (Rev. 2:7, n, 17.) Do we not need a vision of Christ in all His fullness today?

The intimate relation of Jesus Christ to each of the seven churches spanning the Christian era is set forth in the third column below.

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

TO

AS

Ephesus The Infant Church

Guardian, upholder, caretaker

Smyrna The Persecuted Church
Eternal life

Conqueror of Death, Giver of

Pergamos The Authoritarian Church
Judge

Authoritative, Omnipotent

Thyatira The Apostate Church
God

Omnipotent Avenging Son of

Sardis The Dead Church
Spirit

Supplier of the Life-giving

Philadelphia The Disappointed Church
Coming King

True, Genuine Messiah and

Laodicea The Self-contented Church
Witness, Creator.

The Truth, Faithful and True