

The Standard Bearer

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Special issue

The letters to the seven churches:

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith”

Christ among the seven golden candlesticks

Rev. Martyn McGeown

Ephesus

Rev. William Langerak

Smyrna

Rev. Ryan Barnhill

Pergamos

Prof. Ronald Cammenga

Thyatira

Rev. Garrett Eriks

Sardis

Rev. Audred Spriensma

Philadelphia

Rev. Steven Key

Laodicia

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma



SEVEN
CHURCHES
OF ASIA MINOR

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Editor's notes

We pray you are edified by the articles in this second special issue of the *Standard Bearer*, volume 97. The articles explain and apply the letters of Jesus Christ to the seven churches of Asia Minor, found in Revelation 2 and 3.

A hearty thanks to all of the writers—a different writer for each of the seven letters. Rev. Martyn McGeown, from Limerick, in the Republic of Ireland, writes the introductory article. He explains the grand vision of Jesus Christ that the apostle John saw as he was exiled on the Isle of Patmos. Rev. McGeown describes the elderly apostle John: “Banished to Patmos, he was alone, cut off from communal worship, his heart aching

for the fellowship of the church.” One can hear an echo of the apostle’s sentiments in the heart of Rev. McGeown, as he himself awaits government approval to move to the U.S. to take up his charge in Providence PRC. It was one year ago today, as I write, that he accepted the call. We are thankful that the brother is able to serve the readers of the *Standard Bearer* from his ‘exile.’

The letters to the seven churches are appropriate for every age. But every age is different from the previous age. Thus, in addition to faithful exegesis, you will find current applications of these letters to the churches in every land today. Blessed reading. BLG



Christ among the seven golden candlesticks

Rev. Martyn McGeown, pastor-elect of Providence PRC in Hudsonville, MI, currently missionary-pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland, stationed in Limerick, Republic of Ireland

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

I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.

And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.

His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters.

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

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death. Write the things

which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.

Revelation 1:9-20

Introduction

Revelation (Greek: *apokalypse*) is the removing of a cover. In this wonderful book Jesus Christ removes the cover so that His servant John might see the truth. The Roman Empire, a type of the beast from the sea, and apostate Judaism, a type of the beast from the earth, raged against the church of Jesus Christ. The aged apostle John, the last of the apostles, was exiled to Patmos and suffered “tribulation...for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (v. 9). The world seemed to be on the brink of swallowing up the church of Jesus Christ, and each congregation faced serious issues (some persecution, some the beginning of apostasy, and some spiritual lethargy) that threatened their very existence in the world. In this book awesome characters are introduced and astounding visions relayed to the apostle: the four horsemen of the apocalypse, infernal locusts, the two beasts, the great red dragon, to name but a few. But before John sees any of those things, he

must behold the most awesome person of all, the Lord Jesus Christ, for it is on Him that we must focus our attention in this book. We have here the revelation not of the beast, nor of the great red dragon, nor even of the church, but the revelation of *Jesus Christ*.

What John heard

The apostle was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” (v. 10), engaged in the worship of his Savior—praying, meditating, remembering. Banished to Patmos, he was alone, cut off from communal worship, his heart aching for the fellowship of the church. The nearest congregation, Ephesus, was about 65 miles from the coast of Patmos. Perhaps John could see the faint outline of land in the distance as he mused upon holy things. His meditations were interrupted when a voice spoke to him: a person was standing behind him, the first human contact in many days. The voice made a deep impression upon him: a “great voice,” not a quiet, mousy voice, but one reverberating with majesty, power, and authority. In verse 10 John likens the voice to a trumpet, while in verse 15 it is “as the sound of many waters.”

This was no ordinary voice and the person standing behind John was no ordinary person. A trumpet makes a loud, clear, penetrating sound, for it is the magnification or the amplification of the voice. When a trumpeter makes a loud, long, clear blast with his trumpet, the listener must stand to attention. The trumpet symbolizes the voice of God: “when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice” (Ex. 19:13). A trumpet is not a harp or a lyre: it does not soothe the ears, but it warns and gives direction. Israel employed the trumpet to issue commands on the battlefield: “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (I Cor. 14:8). This voice gave no uncertain sound.

A voice “as of many waters” is one louder than the waves that crashed on the rocky coast of Patmos. This, too, is a supernatural, even a divine voice. “The LORD on high is mightier than the noise of many waters” (Ps. 93:4). “And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and his voice was like a noise of many waters: and the earth shined with his glory” (Ezek. 43:2).

Whose voice, then, is this, a voice of divine majesty, as of the surging of the waves of the sea, as of the trumpet sounding long?

Whom John saw

Did John perhaps recognize the voice before he turned around, as Mary Magdalene did when the risen Lord addressed her by name? If he did, he does not inform the reader. Indeed, the person is already identified in verse 11: “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the

last.” Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the alphabet familiar to John and his readers, are the equivalent of the “A” and the “Z.” The person standing behind John, therefore, is not a mere man. A man has a beginning (this one *is* the beginning) and an ending (this one *is* the ending), but the voice belongs to Him who is the first and the last, the Almighty (v. 8). Let the reader compare Revelation 1:8, 1:11, 21:6, and 22:13 with Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12 for unmistakable proof that the person who addresses John is divine: the eternal, infinite, almighty God.

As John turns around, his eyes first light upon seven golden candlesticks. A candlestick is not a lamp, but the pedestal on which the lamp is held aloft. We might say lampstands. In Matthew 5:15 Jesus says, “Neither do men light a candle (lamp), and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick (lampstand); and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.” These lamps were illuminated through a constant supply of olive oil and then elevated so that their light shone round about. John’s eyes then look upwards to a majestic figure standing tall in the midst of the seven lampstands, having power and authority over them, so much so that he can remove them at will. These seven lampstands are seven churches called to shine with the light of Jesus Christ in a dark world. In his right hand this majestic figure held seven stars: quite a man who can hold seven stars in his right hand, as he walks among his seven golden lampstands!

In verses 13-16 John describes this majestic figure, beginning with His clothing: “clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle” (v. 13). Long flowing vestments, golden girdle: this is a person of distinction. John’s eyes dare to gaze upon the person’s face: “his head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes as a flame of fire” (v. 14). Moreover, “out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength” (v. 16). John had seen such a face before, but only a glimpse of the true glory, on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29). The apostle was now in the presence of the Holy One. In Daniel 7:9 pure whiteness depicts the absolute holiness and eternal majesty of the Ancient of Days, which shows us that, although the Messiah is personally distinct from Jehovah, He is of the same essence and has the same attributes. Eyes flaming as fire belong to Him who in His omniscience searches the hearts of men, so that everything is naked and opened before Him (Jer. 17:10; Heb. 4:13; Rev. 2:23). The sword proceeding from His mouth, a long, heavy broadsword, not a small dagger, shows that this majestic figure judges by the words of His mouth, which are the words of the living God (Heb. 4:12). Finally, John describes the feet, at

which he will soon fall down as a dead man. They were “like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace” (v. 15; Dan. 10:6). Feet burning, as if made with brass glowing red hot in a furnace, belong to one who comes in omnipotent wrath against the wicked oppressors of His church and against the hypocrites who defile His beloved bride with their false doctrine, their ungodly lifestyle, and their stubborn impenitence.

In summary, then, John saw “one like unto the Son of man” (v. 13), which is the Messiah’s name, as He enters His kingdom at His ascension (Dan. 7:13-14). This person possesses the kingdom, the power, and the glory. His own self-designation is “Alpha and Omega, the first and the last” (vv. 11, 17), the eternal One. This eternal One was, however, once mortal: “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore” (v. 18). This majestic person has passed through death, for He suffered and died for John and for all of God’s people, who belong to Him in the decree of election and are united to Him by saving faith. Death could not hold Him, for He is alive forevermore, having been raised from death, to which doleful state He shall never return, and possessing “the keys of hell and of death” (v. 18).

John knew this majestic figure, but how different He was from the man John had once known! The apostle had lain in His bosom, enjoying intimacy and familiarity with Him, but now, afraid to draw nigh to Him, John falls at His feet “as dead” (v. 17). John had witnessed the life-blood drip from His crucified body, he had seen the empty tomb, he had seen the resurrected Lord, and he had been commissioned by Him to preach and baptize in His name. Now Jesus stands before him in all the fullness of His glory, as He really is, as the Judge of all, the Lord of glory, and the King of the church. This One, John must understand, is the sovereign over the nations. This One, John must proclaim, will return in judgment upon the wicked world. Therefore, the words of this glorious one are most fitting:

“Fear not” (v. 17). Awe is appropriate; terror is not. Worship is obligatory; cowardice is forbidden.

His commission to John

John’s commission was not to go, for, exiled on the island of Patmos, he could not go; but to write, and then to send: “What thou seest, write in a book, and send” (v. 9). “Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter” (v. 19). John’s message is to the seven churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—seven true churches, contemporary with the apostle, then located in Asia Minor (present day Turkey), and yet seven churches representative of the church of all ages. Each church had an angel, a messenger, or a preacher, and to each church the exalted Lord gave a particular message. For some the message was encouragement, for some it was warning, and for some it was rebuke. The message was tailored to each congregation, for the Lord, whose eyes are as a flaming fire and whose feet are like burning brass, knows the strengths, weaknesses, sins, and needs of every assembly that calls upon His name. “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

If the exalted Jesus stands in the midst of the golden lampstands, which are the seven churches, and He holds the seven stars, which are the angels, the messengers, or the pastors, of the seven churches, in His right hand, why should the church fear the beast, the false prophet, the great whore, or the great red dragon? The majestic, omnipotent, omniscient Lord will destroy the wicked and He will gather, defend, and preserve His church from all her foes. That is the message that the aged, exiled John needs to hear. That is the message that the church of every age must take to heart and to which every congregation must submit in humble obedience. And that is the message that we must hear: Jesus is Lord; therefore, all is well. Let us, then, listen to what the Lord of glory says to us in His seven letters to His seven churches.



Ephesus: The church that left her first love

Rev. William Langerak, pastor of Trinity Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan

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 laboured, 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 Nicolaitans, 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.

Revelation 2:1-7

The church at Ephesus loved the Lord as her first love. She loved her Husband vehemently, faithfully, and exclusively. He was truly her only love. She loved the Lord, because He loved her first (I John 4:19). Indeed, Ephesus was the first of the churches established in Asia Minor to whom He writes by the apostle John. So to her, Jesus speaks first.

The Lord deeply loved the church at Ephesus. He sent Paul to visit the city with Aquila and Priscilla at the end of his second missionary journey. It was the one place where, after he preached in the synagogue, the Jews asked him to stay. But Paul left, promising to return and leaving them in the care of his two fellow tentmakers. While he was away, the Lord sent Apollos. After Apollos left, Paul returned and stayed for three years, his longest stay anywhere. For three months he preached in the synagogue until some, hardened, spoke evil of the Way. From then on, Paul taught daily from the school of Tyrannus. The Lord also wrought special miracles by him. The result was that many believed and confessed the Lord and a church was instituted in Ephesus. So mightily grew the Word in that city, that diseases and devils fled, former sorcerers burned a fortune in books, ungodly idol peddlers started a riot, and all they that dwelt in Asia heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:10-17).

When Paul met the elders the last time, he reminded them how he had labored night and day with many tears, kept back nothing profitable, taught publicly and privately, declared the whole counsel of God, and to all he testified repentance toward God and faith toward Jesus Christ (Acts 20:17-25). He warned that wolves would enter not sparing the flock, so they must take heed to themselves and feed the flock Jesus purchased with His own blood. Paul left, commending them to God and His Word of grace (Acts 20:25-36). The Lord would build on this foundation through Tychicus, then Timothy. And He would write to her, reminding her of His love, the great mystery of their marriage, and her calling to live faithfully as His bride.

The church at Ephesus lived faithful to Christ. She loved Him not only in word but in deed. Jesus, who walked in her midst, knew: “I know thy works, and

thy labor, and thy patience.” In love, she carried out her calling, laboring patiently without fainting for His name’s sake. Certainly, she did this in all their work. Officebearers and members of the church had patiently persevered as an institution to preach the gospel, serve the sacraments, administer discipline, and bring witness of the name of Christ through missionary labors and their own confession and walk to all of Asia Minor.

In particular, the Lord cites one specific example of her first love: “Thou canst not bear them which are evil. That is, she loved Him exclusively with great zeal for His righteousness and truth. Certainly, they could not bear the evil around them. And there was much evil in Ephesus. Due to many factors, including its temple (one of the seven wonders of the world), the city was an epicenter of Roman politics, commerce, science, culture, idolatry and decadence. Well it represented the world in which the church lives but must not love. Paul wrote that “the course of this world” in Ephesus was ruled by the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that works so that the children of disobedience, alienated from the life of God, fulfill the desires of the flesh, walk in the vanity of their mind, and are given over unto lasciviousness to work all uncleanness, greediness, fornication, covetousness, filthiness, and foolish talking (Eph. 2:2-3; 4:17-19; 5:3-5). But the Lord in His eternal love, had chosen some in Ephesus to be His. By His irresistible Spirit, He had united them to Himself and called them to put off the old man and put on the new man, to let not such sins be named among them, and to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness but rather reprove them, walking circumspectly, redeeming the time (Eph. 4:22; 5:3-5; 5:11-12). This the church at Ephesus had surely done in her first love.

The church had also labored patiently without fainting to try false teachers and their doctrines. First, they “hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” The Nicolaitans were antinomians that had cast a stumbling block in the churches by advocating an indulgent, sensual lifestyle under the guise of Christian liberty (Rev. 2:14-15). When this doctrine appeared in the church of Ephesus, they examined it and declared it false, as something they hated because the Lord hated it. Secondly, they tried not only doctrines but teachers, even those claiming to be apostles, and the church had found them to be liars.

Nevertheless, the Lord declares that Ephesus had left her first love. This was no small error. Ephesus did not *lose* her first love. *Lose* does not indicate the seriousness of her actions. To lose something is an accident or carelessness; if we lose something we love, we search until we find it. Ephesus had not, like a young married woman, merely lost

the emotional excitement and zeal she first had while dating her husband. Her actions were far more serious. Ephesus *left* her first love. Deliberately, willingly, she sought out and found other lovers, while forsaking her Husband. Her actions were the sin of an adulterous or whorish woman.

The church at Ephesus had left the Lord in her heart. The Lord indicates this when He notes she still labored patiently and could not bear them which are evil. Formally, the marriage was intact, the bed undefiled, and no physical separation or divorce papers filed. As institution, she still played the part of a faithful wife, fed the family, kept the house, and gave herself to her Husband. Church services and catechism lessons were well attended, the offices filled with qualified men who did their work, the gospel was preached, sacraments and discipline administered, false doctrines and teachers tried, the poor and sick visited, and the members still learned, confessed and obeyed the truth in their walk of life. But her heart was not in it.

The Lord, who sees the heart, knew. As He attended the worship services, listened to the preaching, prayers, and singing, observed the collections, and saw the Sabbath keeping, conversations, and activities afterwards, he noticed. As He sat in on the catechism lessons, consistory meetings, Bible study societies, and visited the sick, He saw. Bodies, hands and mouths, were there. But hearts were elsewhere, longing for other lovers. And much of it invisible to anyone else. Hearts loved self—members yearned for shorter services, fewer church functions and meetings, smaller collections, and less visiting; but more money, longer vacations, bigger houses, fancier clothing, and better transportation. Hearts loved the world—members desired more respect, recognition, and friendship with the world; less persecution, enmity, and opposition. Hearts were sick with anxiety and depression over physical, earthly matters; joyless, unenthusiastic, and unmoved by spiritual, heavenly matters. Hearts lusted for the pleasures, lifestyle, and sins from which they had been delivered; and chafed at the joys, friendships, and holiness to which they were called.

Although the church at Ephesus had left the Lord only in heart, the Lord calls her actions sin. She had fallen. Her sin was spiritual fornication. For she was married to Christ who said that even to lust after another is already to commit adultery in the heart (Matt. 5:28). Principally, her sin was that of a false church, the beginning of every actual, permanent forsaking of Christ for the world (Rev. 17). Thus, the Lord threatens that her sin warranted speedy removal of any light of His Spirit from her midst. And swift removal of His candlestick would not only be deadly, but just, for in leaving Christ, the church had spurned the only one who loved her in the world, loved her exclusively, and with a jealous love

unlike any in the world. Leaving Christ, she rejected the comfort and light of His fellowship, labor of love, faithful care, and powerful protection. Leaving Christ, she would again be subject to all the miseries that fornication with other lovers brings, including tyranny and abuse, guilt, shame, and death.

But all was not lost or hopeless. Ephesus had left her first love, but the Lord had not left Ephesus. Her first love was elsewhere, but the Lord to whom she is married loved her with more vehemence and jealousy than she had for Him. He is faithful to His marriage vows. He is gracious in His marital life. His Spirit still shines in her midst. So the Lord by His Spirit not only calls out her sin, and threatens, but He calls her to repent. He does not forsake her. He does not yet remove His Word and Spirit. Being still present, He also does not call her to split into factions, or forsake the fellowship of the other six churches to go her own way. He calls her to repent, and then patiently labors to effect such repentance.

Genuine repentance is to confess and sorrow over one's sin, to seek and find joy in the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ, and to turn from the way of sin back to the way of holiness in gratitude. To such repentance the Lord calls Ephesus when He exhorts her to "remember whence thou art fallen...and do the first works." First, she must remember something. Essentially, she must remember the promise of Christ: "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. 2:7). She must remember the riches, peace, blessedness, and heavenly glory promised and graciously given by her first love to the entire church, beginning with Adam and Eve, as well as the depths of hell into which she had plunged herself in the garden. She was a whore—defiled, hated, and rejected. The Lord alone had chosen, bought, cleansed, and cared for her. He had given His life for hers, died for her while she was yet ungodly, delivered her from every enemy, justified and sanctified her, lived with her, and promised her eternal, perfect, marital bliss with Him in a new creation. What could any other lover do but bring her again to death and hell? Secondly, the Lord calls the church at Ephesus to repentance not only in the heart or in words, but in deeds. He calls her to do the first works, that is, to do again whatever things she stopped doing because she had given her heart to others, and had once done in heartfelt thankfulness for the Lord's love granting her heavenly glory from the lowest hell into which she had willingly brought herself.

This call to repent was no suggestion nor an option. Repent they must. And repent they do. For this command is delivered with the almighty power of her faithful Husband, and the candlestick still burned in the house of

Ephesus with the efficacious and irresistible power and life of His Spirit. And by the power of His presence, the church at Ephesus repented—she received this rebuke of the Lord, remembered from whence she had fallen, and did again the first works in love for Christ. We know this because in the year 431, an ecumenical council of all the churches was held, fittingly, in Ephesus. There, the church universally condemned Nestorianism, the false doctrine that denied this very gospel of her first love, and upheld the truth concerning the Person and natures of Jesus Christ.

So what would Christ say after walking in the midst

of your church? Is it this: I know your works, labor, and patience, and how you cannot bear them which are evil; but nevertheless you left your first love (even if it be only in your heart)? Then His word is clear, powerful, and gracious: “Remember 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.... 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.”



Smyrna: Encouragement for a persecuted church

Rev. Ryan Barnhill, pastor of Peace Protestant Reformed Church in Dyer, Indiana

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.

Revelation 2:8-11

His name was Polycarp. Church history tells us that he was the angel in the church at Smyrna. He was arrested and brought into an amphitheater brimming with people eager to watch a man burn alive. The proconsul said to Polycarp, “Revile Christ, and I will release you.” Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme Him, my King, who has saved me? I am a Christian.” The proconsul, addressing the crowd, declared, “Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.” The frenzied spectators shouted, “Let him be burned!” The wood necessary for the public burning was brought. Polycarp asked not to be fastened to the stake: “Leave me thus. He who strengthens me to endure the flames will also enable me to stand firm

at the stake without being fastened with nails.” The flames consumed his body.¹

The letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11) is encouragement for a church facing present and future persecution. The words of Christ in this letter cheered the saints in their present suffering and comforted them regarding the dark days ahead. Could it be that Polycarp remembered Christ’s promises as the flames engulfed him?

Smyrna was a city in Asia Minor, northwest of Ephesus. Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a city bustling with business and industry. But the church in Ephesus was far different than the one in Smyrna: Ephesus was a church doing well outwardly, but she had left her first love and was rebuked by Christ (Rev. 2:1-7); Smyrna was a church struggling outwardly, but she was spiritually rich and received no rebuke from Christ.

The church’s condition

Regarding her outward condition, Smyrna was a persecuted church: “I know thy works, and *tribulation*, and poverty...” (v. 9). Tribulation is a squeezing inflicted by persecutors, leaving the church only a small place in the world. Referring to future persecution, verse 10 uses the word “tribulation” again, and also speaks of suffering, the suffering of persecution: “Fear none of

¹ This story, including the quotations, is related in *The Church in History* by B.K. Kuiper (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988. Reprint), 9-10.

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....”

It was certain Jews in Smyrna who subjected the Christians to this suffering. These Jews are identified in verse 9: “...I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” They *said* they were Jews, but were not: nationally they were Jews, but they were not true Jews in the spiritual sense. In fact, Jesus calls them “the synagogue of Satan” (v. 9). It is possible that these men who said they were Jews gathered in a real synagogue in Smyrna, but more important is what Jesus means by this phrase: they belonged to Satan and were governed by him. This reminds us that Satan was behind the persecution, attacking and seeking to destroy Christ’s body on earth. Regarding their beliefs, these satanic Jews maintained that *they* were the people of God, being the physical descendants of Abraham. They also taught that the Messiah had not yet come. And so, when the Christian church in Smyrna proclaimed that Jesus was their King and that He had already come, this did not sit well with the Jews. In hatred for the Christ who had already come, this Jewish element persecuted the Christian church.

This persecution likely took the form of economic penalties, for Jesus also describes the church as materially poor: “I know thy works, and tribulation, and *poverty*...” (v. 9). That is, the poverty of the church was a result of persecution by the Jews. What might this have looked like? First, the wicked Jews would slanderously contend that the Christian confession of Christ’s kingship was a threat to Smyrna’s rulers. Then, the magistrate, at the encouragement of the Jews, would impose economic penalties on these “dangerous” Christians in order to minimize their place and influence. This, in turn, would result in destitution for the church—not enough work, little to eat and drink, hardly habitable homes, a very small church building or none at all, and other marks of poverty.

Even more persecution was to come. Jesus speaks of the future in verse 10: “Fear none of those things which thou *shalt* suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” Imprisonment and death lay in the church’s future. Perhaps the slanderous and satanic Jews would eventually convince the authorities to imprison the Christians, even to kill them. Dark days loomed.

So it is today. Already now the church in some places must suffer sorely for Christ’s sake. For many of us in the West, the present persecution is yet mild. However, the day is coming also in the West that the ungodly world, spurred on by the slander of the false church, will severe-

ly persecute God’s saints. It might not be long before the courts of the land consistently decide against Christian business owners for taking biblical, principled stands. The days may not be far away that companies begin terminating, in the name of tolerance and sensitivity, those who will not sign documentation approving the wicked lifestyles of others in the workplace. Perhaps sooner than we think, buying and selling may become very difficult for the “narrow-minded and dangerous” Christians. Persecution in the form of economic penalties and pressure! All of this, a part of the road paved for the man of sin himself, who will strangle the people of God financially, imprison them, and kill them.

The church in Smyrna: as to her outward condition, persecuted and poor.

But she was rich! That is, as to her *spiritual* condition, she was rich: “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art *rich*)...” (v. 9). United by faith to the living Christ, they were partakers of all His blessings. Rich indeed! In the furnace of affliction, they were patient and joyful; in contrast to the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna had not left her first love, but burned brightly in zeal for Christ. And note: she was a church *in persecution* that was rich, something we see repeatedly throughout church history. Why is this? God uses persecution for the strengthening of faith in Christ; the stronger faith is, the more the church increases in these true riches that flow from Christ. In the dark days to come, may this also be said of us, by God’s grace: impoverished and suffering...but truly rich!

The comfort given

Jesus accompanies the announcement of future persecution with a beautiful word of comfort for the church in Smyrna and for us. The overarching message is, “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer...” (v. 10). The persecution may be severe and the enemies strong, but you need not be frightened by them.

Comforting for the church is how Christ identifies Himself in verse 8: “And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; these things saith *the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive*....” Christ says that He is the *first and the last*. Christ stands above time, including all the persecution of the church included in that history. The Lord Jesus controls all things that happen, even the oppression by the evildoers.

In this connection, verse 10 states that the church will have tribulation ten (the number of completeness) days (indicating brevity). The meaning of “ten days” is that God has determined, in His good pleasure, a definite period for persecution of the church by the devil—and when that certain time is up, the devil will be stopped. Christ is sovereign.

The Savior also identifies Himself as *He which was dead, and is alive*. He entered into death for our sins, the third day arose from the grave, and has power over death and the grave. He lives forevermore. Older generation, you need not fear as you consider your children and grandchildren passing through the dark days ahead. Younger ones, you need not dread the persecution to come. We have a Savior who is in control, working all things for the good of His church! And we have a Savior who lives!

Jesus further cheers His own by saying that there is purpose in their suffering: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, *that ye may be tried...*” (v. 10). It is certainly true that the devil’s purpose with persecution is tempting us to repudiate the truth and deny Christ. But verse 10 is referring to *God’s* purpose, namely, that the saints may be tried in prison. This trying is the testing of faith. Perhaps you are familiar with the process of testing gold in fire: fire burns away the impurities of the gold, and the gold is shown to be genuine. Like that, our faith is tested in the fires of persecution. Those fires burn away the impurities of our faith, and our faith in Christ is shown to be genuine. This we must remember when wicked men mistreat us: there is purpose in it. Christ will accomplish His purpose, and it will be good for us—this we know!

The sure promises

Says Jesus, “...*be thou faithful unto death*, and I will give thee a crown of life” (v. 10). Faithfulness is loyalty to the Lord Jesus, even in the extreme adversity of persecution. Faithfulness is to confess His name, even though it means suffering; never to deny Him, even though this means so much pain. Faithfulness is loyalty to Him, confessing

His name, even if it means death. We are not faithful in our own strength, but only by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. In the mighty power of Christ, who is the “the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive,” all the elect will certainly persevere to the end.

Says Jesus, “...*be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life*” (v. 10). A crown, a wreath, was given to the victor in an exhausting and rigorous athletic contest. The church in Smyrna experienced the rigors and exhaustion of persecution that would only wax worse in the future. He tells this church in the throes of suffering, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” Jesus does not give a physical crown, of course, but a crown of *life*. The crown is eternal life—not earned by our faithfulness, but earned by Jesus alone. He who “was dead, and is *alive*” gives eternal *life* to His own.

And there is another promise of Christ: “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” (v. 11). The first death is physical death, which we will experience unless the Lord returns first. It may be that we, or our children and grandchildren, face a violent first death. Harm may come to our bodies, but fear not, for this first death is “not a satisfaction for our sins, but only an abolishing of sin, and a passage into eternal life” (LD 16, Q&A 42). The second death, we are told elsewhere in Revelation, is the lake that burns with fire and brimstone—hell. He that overcomes in the power of Christ alone in the battles against sin, the world, and the devil shall not be hurt of the second death. What a glorious promise of our Savior!

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches!



Pergamos: The church infected with antinomianism

Prof. Ronald Cammenga, rector and professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

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 stumblingblock 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 Nicolaitans, 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.

Revelation 2:12-17

The city of Pergamos: Satan's seat

The third of the seven churches of Asia Minor was the church at Pergamos. The fact that a church existed in such a godless city is a testimony to God's sovereign grace. Pergamos was a large and very prosperous city in the days of the apostles. It was located in western Asia Minor, about sixty miles north of Smyrna and ninety-five miles north of Ephesus. Previously, Pergamos had been the capital of Asia Minor. Gradually it had lost its status because it had been unable to compete with the seaport cities of Ephesus and Smyrna, which had deep harbors that could accommodate larger ships.

The outstanding feature of the city of Pergamos was that it was wholly given over to idolatry. One of the wonders of the ancient world was a forty-foot-high altar dedicated to Zeus, the chief god of the Greeks. Historians also inform us of Pergamos' worship of the god Aesculapius (Ae-scul-â-pius). Aesculapius was the god of healing. Sick folk from all over the Roman Empire came to the temple of Aesculapius in search of healing. But to the city of Pergamos belongs especially the distinction of being one of the main cities in the empire dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperors. As has been the case down through history, and as will be the case in the kingdom of antichrist, rulers proclaimed themselves gods. In Pergamos temples were built in their honor and worship was paid to them.

Along with its gross idolatry, Pergamos was also characterized by gross immorality. In large measure that was due to the fact that fornication is generally an important ingredient of idolatry. That was not only because of God's judgment on those who were guilty of spiritual adultery, which is what idolatry is. But it was also the case that committing fornication with the priests and priestesses of the gods was part of their worship. The various feasts and festivals dedicated to the gods always involved debauchery of the worst sort.

It is undoubtedly due to the depths of Pergamos' depravity that it is referred to as "Satan's seat," and "where Satan dwelleth" (v. 13). In the Greek, we do not read of Satan's "seat," but of his "throne." In a unique sense of the word, Pergamos was the place where Satan had his throne. And it was the city where he dwelt. Clearly, it was a city where Satan held absolute and uncontested sway over the citizens. Whereas in other cities Satan exercised his influence, in Pergamos he dwelt.

It was in these circumstances that God had called and gathered a church. As was the case with other of the seven churches, very likely the church in Pergamos had been established by Paul during his third missionary journey when he labored with Ephesus as his home base, "so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). In principle, of course, this is always the situation of Christ's church in the world. One small congregation, one ray of light midst the darkness of sin.

Infected with antinomianism

In the early days of its existence, the congregation at Pergamos had remained steadfast in the face of persecution. They had "[held] fast my name, and hast not denied my faith" (v. 13). Though the persecution had been severe, the saints held fast to Christ's name. Christ's name is all the truth that reveals Jesus Christ. And they had not denied "my faith," that is, the faith that trusts in and confesses Jesus Christ as the only Savior.

They had remained faithful even though they faced the threat of death, and in spite of the fact that one of their own members, Antipas, had died as a martyr. The passage refers to Antipas as "*my* faithful martyr" (v. 13). In the end, Christians are not persecuted and do not die for a belief system or for a lifestyle. They die for a person—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Despite their early faithfulness to Christ, the congregation at Pergamos was at present influenced by serious error. That serious error threatened the judgment of God: "I will come against thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (v. 16).

What was that serious error? It was the error of antinomianism. It was an antinomianism that set aside the demands of God's law for Christians. It was an antinomianism that taught that since we are saved apart from works, good works are not necessary (demanded) in the life of the Christian. It was an antinomianism that rejected works—all works—on the ground that we are not saved by works. It was an antinomianism that insisted that since our works are not part of our justification, they have no place at all in the life of those who are justified.

Verse 14 describes these errorists: "But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication." You will recall Balak's desperate attempt to defeat the children of Israel as recorded in Numbers 22-24. He had hired the false prophet Balaam against them in order to curse them. Every time he attempted to curse Israel, God caused him to bless them. Nevertheless,

Balaam had secretly given counsel to Balak of a sure way to bring about Israel's ruin. Infiltrate them, was Balaam's counsel. Invite them to a huge feast to Moab's idol god, Baal-peor. Invite them to sing, dance, and dine. Then seduce them to fornication. Convince them that because they are the people of God, nothing can change that. A little bit of sin will not change their favored status. Grace excuses ungodliness.

That was Balak's plan through Balaam and, apart from the intervening grace of God, that plan would have resulted in Israel's ruin. Israel's sin was an Old Testament form of antinomianism. It is the same sort of evil condemned by the prophet Jeremiah: "Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods, whom ye know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?" (Jer. 7:9-10).

There was another error threatening Pergamos, it would seem. Besides the error of Balaam, there was also the error of the Nicolaitans, "which thing I hate" (v. 15). The Nicolaitans are also referred to in connection with the church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:6). There the "deeds of the Nicolaitans" are singled out, whereas in connection with the church of Pergamos the "doctrine of the Nicolaitans" is mentioned. Taken together, Scripture teaches us that faith and life, doctrine and deeds always go together.

We are mistaken, however, if we conclude that there were two different errors against which the Lord warned the congregation at Pergamos. Instead, the idea is that the teaching of the Nicolaitans was just a revival of the age-old error of Balaam—antinomianism.

That is the case with every heresy. In that respect, too, there is nothing new under the sun. Every heresy in the church today is always the old errors dressed up in new garb—always promoted in a more subtle way. Error always morphs, much like a deadly virus, making it more difficult to eliminate. That has always been true of the heresy of antinomianism.

The Nicolaitans were antinomians. They derived their name from a certain Nicholas. The early church father Irenaeus identified Nicolas as a proselyte from Antioch, who was among the first seven deacons chosen to serve the congregation in Jerusalem, according to Acts 6:5. He said that Nicolas had forsaken true Christian doctrine, perverting the truth of salvation by grace in order to justify unrestrained licentiousness. Hippolytus substantiated Irenaeus, alleging that Nicolas corrupted right doctrine and the Christian life (*Refutations of Heresies*, 7:24). A number of early fathers associated the Nicolaitans with those referred to by the

apostle Paul in Galatians 5:13, who used their Christian liberty as an occasion for the flesh. Isidore of Seville wrote in AD 636, "The Nicolaites are so called from Nicolaus, deacon of the church of Jerusalem, who along with Stephen and the others, was ordained by Peter. He abandoned his wife...so that whoever wanted to might enjoy her; the practice turned into debauchery, with partners being exchanged in turn."

The Protestant Reformed Churches must never suppose that they are immune from the error of antinomianism or that the only threat is Arminianism. The Reformed faith is the middle way between both errors.

Discipline of antinomians

Altogether too often, the error of antinomianism is minimized or excused. Some suppose that, whenever the charge of antinomianism is made, the explanation is that those against whom the charge is leveled are teaching the truths of sovereign grace. Never, or almost never, is the charge leveled against those who are indeed teaching the error of antinomianism. The seriousness of the error is dismissed. And then there ought to be no surprise that children and grandchildren are swept away by the error.

The church must take a firm stand against the error. And that, too, belongs to the fault that the Lord finds with the congregation in Pergamos. Not only did they have false teachers in their midst, but they tolerated them. The antinomians continued undisciplined in the church. They continued in their own sin and influenced others. The elders and the pastor ("the angel of the church in Pergamos") did not rebuke those defending their unholy lives by appealing to grace. They never initiated formal discipline against them or excommunicated them from the church. They and their cancerous error were not removed.

For the church at Pergamos there was one word: "Repent." "Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (v. 16). That is a sharp word of rebuke! It could not have been sharper! Christ Himself says, "Repent! Repent, or else!"

The promise to those who do repent consists of three things according to Revelation 2:17: the hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name. The "hidden manna" brings to mind the manna God sent to the children of Israel during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The manna was one of the great Old Testament types of Jesus Christ, the true and spiritual manna. The white stone symbolizes acquittal and pardon. To indicate the verdict of a jury that the man brought before it for judgment was innocent, at the conclusion of his trial

he would be given a white stone. And a new name. A new name refers to a new life, the new life of the child of God in heaven. The old name refers to the old life, the present life of sin and misery. The new name refers

to the new life of sinlessness and glory. It is the life that awaits those who live in holiness out of gratitude for the grace of God in Jesus Christ.



Thyatira: The church tolerating immorality

Rev. Garrett Eriks, pastor of Unity Protestant Reformed Church of Byron Center, Michigan

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 none 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, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Revelation 2:18-29

Every true church of Christ has strengths and weaknesses. This was true of the church in Thyatira. She had attractive strengths and repulsive weaknesses. It is good for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ to consider her strengths and give thanks to God for them,

and to consider humbly her weaknesses and repent before God of them. May the word of Christ to the church of Thyatira guide our consideration of strengths and weaknesses in the churches of our readers.

Before looking at her glaring weaknesses, notice that Jesus begins by addressing her strengths: “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” (v. 19). Why does Jesus do this? He values the good found in the church because *He* is the source of this good. Failing to see the strengths is a failure to see *His* work in the church. The Lord Jesus Christ pours out His Spirit on the church enabling her to do good. Therefore, this good must not be brushed aside or ignored even when there are substantial weaknesses.

If this is the way Jesus deals with the weaknesses in the church, should we not deal with them in the same way? Let us take inventory of the strengths found in the churches of which we are a part and thank our Savior for them. Then address the glaring weaknesses with God’s Word in humility and all seriousness, while avoiding two ditches. The one ditch is ignoring the weaknesses in the light of the strengths. The other ditch is ignoring the strengths to address only the weaknesses.

What strengths do you see in your church and denomination? Take some time to thank God for the strengths of the church and churches to which you belong.

From the description of Thyatira’s strengths in verse 19, we would say, “This is a church where I want my membership.” This church showed in many respects that it was a vibrant, healthy body of Christ. She loved Jesus Christ although she suffered for it. This love of Christ was demonstrated in a fervent love for her fellow church members. Her love of Christ produced service. And her faith produced patience. In suffering, the members trusted in God’s promises and patiently waited upon Him. This church was not stagnant but growing in love and

patience—“and the last to be more than the first.” This means they were growing in love and faith together. This was the result of Christ’s work in them through the faithful ministry of the Word. So far so good.

Is this true for the church and denomination where you are a member? May there be found in our churches love and faith that are ever reaching higher to Christ. Where it is found let us thank and praise our Savior profusely.

The church in Thyatira, however, had a disturbing and glaring weakness: unholiness. The list of strengths in verse 19 does not include holiness. This is serious omission because a chief characteristic of the bride of Christ is holiness. We affirm this every time we speak the words of the Apostles’ Creed, confessing that we believe “an *holy*, catholic church.” This church was tolerating horrible immorality that threatened to permeate the entire church.

This church was influenced by the immorality of the city of Thyatira. This city was a trading center located on a busy trading route. This city was booming economically because of her successful textile and metal industries. The workers in these industries were organized into trade guilds that were stronger than the labor unions of our day. If a man wanted to work in Thyatira, he must belong to one of these guilds. But there was a great danger for Christians who belonged to these guilds. These guilds were connected to idolatry. Each of these guilds had idol gods they worshiped. The worship of the idol gods included feasts dedicated to idols that the workers were required to attend. These feasts included sexual orgies. Intertwined with work was idolatry and sexual immorality. This was life in the city of Thyatira.

Christ had something against the church: she tolerated Jezebel. By tolerating Jezebel she tolerated fornication and idolatry! Jezebel was an actual woman who lived in that city, but this was most likely not her real name. This is the name Jesus gives her to warn the church of the seduction and wickedness of this woman. You will remember that Jezebel was the wicked wife of Ahab who introduced Baal worship in the northern kingdom of Israel. An important element of Baal worship was cultic prostitution. Baal was, supposedly, the god of fertility who made the crops grow. So sexual pleasure was part of Baal worship because it pictured agricultural fertility and financial success. The name Jezebel stands for seduction to idolatry and sexual immorality.

This woman in Thyatira told the church members to indulge in the sexual immorality and idolatry of the trade guilds in the city (v. 20). She would have said something like this, “What is a little sexual immorality and idolatry when you have to feed your families?” Within the church she encouraged the eating of foods offered to idols, indulging in sexual immorality, and

having a good time in the name of feeding their families.

Sadly, this church tolerated this immorality and idolatry. We learn from verses 22 and 23 that there were those in the church who did what Jezebel said and the church did nothing about it. The pastor did not preach against the immorality of the city. The members and elders did not follow the steps of discipline found in Matthew 18 with those walking in this idolatry and sexual immorality. Instead, they ignored it.

What must we learn from this weakness of the church in Thyatira?

First, we learn that Satan has many weapons in his arsenal. He attacks the church with false doctrine. He attacks the church with persecution. In Thyatira he attacked the church with the wickedness of the world through the temptress Jezebel. This is one of the ways Satan attacks the church today. We must be aware of the danger of false doctrine and the attack of persecution. But we must not ignore Satan’s deadly weapon of worldiness.

Second, a danger for the church today is idolatry. Not the idolatry of bowing down to the statue of a fat man or a cow. Yet, idolatry is a problem in the church because, as Calvin said, our hearts are idol factories. The sin of idolatry is the sin of placing anything before God in our lives. It is the sin of trusting in something other than God. This has been and continues to be a problem in the church. We should take some time to examine our own hearts. We can do so with heart-piercing questions like the following:

- What do you fear? What do you tend to worry about? What do you believe would bring you the greatest pain or misery?
- What do you want? What do you believe would bring you the greatest pleasure, happiness, and delight?
- What sin would you commit to obtain what you desire, or what sin would you commit if what you desired were denied you?

Third, one of the greatest dangers the church faces today is the sin of sexual immorality. This is especially true because of the danger of pornography in our day. Our culture is saturated with sexual immorality, which can affect the way the church views sex. One danger is that a church that loves Christ and His truth and loves the members of the church begins to depart from what the Bible says about sexuality and marriage. This begins with the acceptance of divorce for reasons other than adultery and desertion. The next step down this road is that the church reexamines its stance on homosexuality.

But this departure is not the only danger. There is the ongoing danger that the sexual immorality and filth of this world enters our homes by means of our screens. What about in our homes? Do we entertain ourselves with the

movies promoting idolatry and sexual immorality? Are we so naive to this danger that we have no accountability and blocking software on the devices in our homes and in our pockets? If this is the case, then Christ has a word not only for Thyatira, but also a word for us. A warning!

Christ in this letter announces judgment for those who do not repent. He announces this by declaring who He is. He is the Judge, the Son of God! In the Roman empire, Caesar had stolen this name calling himself the son of god. Jesus takes back His rightful name saying, "This is not Caesar's title, but mine. I am the Son of God."

He has eyes like flames of fire. Nothing escapes His eyes. Nothing is hid from Him. He sees all that we do, think, and desire. There is no escaping the gaze of the Son of God.

His feet are like fine brass or bronze. This refers to the brilliance and judgment of the Son of God. With these feet He tramples those who will not repent of their sins.

The Son of God sends judgment on those who refuse to repent. Notice that Jesus is not specifically calling the church to repent. He called Jezebel and her followers to repent, but they did not. Therefore, the Son of God will judge them.

The judgment is severe. He will cast her into bed. This is a play on words since sexual immorality is usu-

ally committed in bed. Jesus promises to send her to the bed of sickness and death. This does not mean she will become sick, but the Son of God will send a tribulation worse than the persecution that comes for those who are not part of the guilds in Thyatira.

And the Son of God will kill her children with death. This refers to the followers of this evil seductress. This death they will face is the wrath of God. Think of the brutal death of Jezebel and her children at the hands of Jehu. The Son of God is declaring that such judgment will fall on those who do not repent!

With this warning of judgment, the Son of God is calling the church to repent. So let us examine ourselves with this Word of God and repent of our idols and sexual immorality. I have idols to repent of and you have idols to repent of. There are so many of them. Those who are struggling with sexual sins, repent. Confess your sin to God and turn in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let us do so in the assurance of what we read in Isaiah 55:6, 7, "Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."



Sardis: Dead orthodoxy

Rev. Audred Spriensma, pastor of Cornerstone Protestant Reformed Church, Dyer, IN

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.

Revelation 3:1-6

The church of Sardis was located with the other six churches in Asia Minor. Sardis was a city that had been celebrated for its wealth and magnificence. It was one of the most beautifully situated cities in all Asia Minor. Six hundred years before, Sardis was the capital of the kingdom of Lydia, the name of whose last king, Croesus, has become proverbial for unbounded wealth. In the time of John, it still retained much of its ancient splendor. Twice in its history, Sardis was defeated because there was a lack of vigilance! Enemies were able to come suddenly and break into the city bringing destruction.

There, in the midst of its wealth and abundance, a church had been established; when or by whom, we know not. She had become distinguished among her sister churches. She seems to have been congratulating herself as being quite prosperous, maybe even more so than all the other churches of the province. There were no divisions within her and no fierce conflicts without. This last item is surely something to be concerned about. Where was the antithesis? Where was the hatred of the enemies of the church? Why was there not much, if any, opposition? Did Jesus not say that as they hated the Master, they will also hate His disciples? In Matthew 10:22ff. we read, “And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.... The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord.”

With the good opinions of the other churches, their reputation was that they were a truly live church. How shocked they must have been when they were assembled together to receive this new message from the aged apostle in Patmos. They had been told that Jesus had just appeared and had Himself delivered it. Oh, to hear in the words of their ascended Lord Himself, “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.” What is it about their works? Others only saw the exterior and therefore praised the church of Sardis, holding them up as a model church. That praise stimulated their pride to still further labors of self-righteousness. But God, who searches the heart, knew that these works were dead works; they were not the earnest outgoings of a heart alive with grateful love to God. Jesus told them that it was only a reputation for life that they had, “but thou art dead.” This was the brief, terrible, and startling charge against this church of Sardis.

Dead orthodoxy: Following the church of Ephesus who had lost their first love, Sardis continued in this sad state. Unless she would repent, she would continue downwards to the state of the church of Laodicea, whom the Lord said He will spew out of His mouth. From all that men could see, Sardis might have been a model church. The Lord did not charge her with any special sin. Her liberality and charity, her adherence to sound doctrine and morals, and her observance to the sacraments were all such that the mere superficial observer could see nothing to censure, but very much to praise. A visitor from poor and persecuted Smyrna or from weak, tired, laboring Philadelphia might arrive and go home to their suffering saints and speak of what great things Sardis was doing. She was liberally supporting her pastor, as well as caring for the poor. What a fine and beautiful building they had. Even the heathen around them seemed to respect them and were

quite friendly with them. Christ in His message did not say a word about the defects censured so severely in other churches; about divisions or heresies; about eating meat in idol temples or fornication; about Balaamites or Nicolaitans, or a Jezebel, or even about any failure in discipline. The church’s whole state was described in these words, “a name that thou livest, and art dead.” It is the sin of apathy, lack of zeal and earnestness for the Lord.

For a little while this church might still fight over words used in a sermon. They might speak loudly about other churches that are forced to deal with false doctrine. They might be quite proud of their own theological understanding. But sadly, all this proceeded from head knowledge rather than from love for God in their hearts. The pastor of the church was guilty of this, and the church was like the pastor. They do not manifest the life of Christ!

Christ also told the church in Sardis that her works were not perfect. “Perfect” here cannot mean sinless perfection, that all her works were imperfect because of sin. Rather, it means that her works were not “full,” “filled up,” “completed;” her works were wanting in some essential element to make them what they professed to be. It was not for a *lack* of works that they were censured, but for a defect in the *character* of their works. They were works of dead souls, not of living souls. Every work of a church—whether an act of charity, her form of worship, and every sermon preached—is defective if not from a heart that is full of love for God. Those works are hollow, mere shells without the precious kernel. This is true for the pastor as well as for the church as a whole.

The other expression referred to is, “defiled garments.” This is implied, for Christ says that only a few names in Sardis had not defiled their garments. This means that most of the members were unfaithful to their profession and lived lives of sin in the world. This is why they were not persecuted like the saints in Smyrna. They did not live antithetically. Rather than rebuking the evil, they would join the world in their drinking and fornication. What a miserable picture of the church!

As we read this description of the church, we need to question whether this describes us as a church. Do I, as an angel (pastor) of Christ’s church, have a name that I live, full of the new life in Christ, manifested in ardent zeal and devotion to the Lord, diligent in my calling, abounding in good works? Am I an example to my church of one who is seeking the kingdom of God and walking in holiness? How terrible and disgusting is a minister who is dead! Am I devoting myself with all my power to the study of the Scriptures, the preaching of the Word, the instruction of the young and old in the

truth? Do I as a pastor love the sheep, visiting them in their homes or hospital rooms in times of distress or sickness or the infirmities of old age? Someone may say, “I am a preacher of the Word, not a pastor of the sheep.” No, one cannot be a good angel of the church if he does not care to visit them in their need, whether it is in encouragement and comfort to the afflicted, instruction of the young, or rebuke and admonition of the disorderly. Sad to say, there are pastors who are negligent. They hate to go out and visit the flock. Visiting the sick, the aged, and widows they rarely do. The word of life and comfort they do not bring. Am I a living pastor who is busy in meditation and prayer, adorning my work of the ministry by a walk in all good works? The pastor of Sardis was dead! He did not give himself to the study of the Word. His life was characterized by a lack of consecration. He was unfaithful as a pastor to watch over the flock. Instead of diligence there was laziness. Instead of zeal there was apathy and indifference. He was just putting in his time, loving the things and pleasures of the world.

But this is enough regarding the angel of the church. The church is just like the pastor, needing rebuke. Is Christ’s life manifest in her confession and walk in faith and hope? Or does she “talk the talk” and refuse to “walk the walk”? Is her walk characterized by holiness and righteousness? Is she fighting the good fight of faith, keeping her garments clean in the midst of a wicked world? At a time when we are talking about the place of good works, is our church letting her light shine, that men may see her good works and glorify her Father which is in heaven?

But sadly, the church in Sardis was dead. There were only a few in Sardis who had not defiled their garments! Of the majority, the flesh dominated. The Lord accused her that her works were not perfect before God. This means that the church as such, and believers individually, failed to walk in those works that are required of them. She might talk theology and search high and low if her pastor is using the right words in his sermon, but is she listening to the sermon to hear what the Spirit is saying regarding her faith and walk? Does she seek to apply the word spoken to her life? The church had a name that she lived; but she was dead. She did not let her testimony go forth in the midst of the world. She was not a light in the midst of the darkness of this present world. Rather, she, like her pastor, loved the things of the world living in sin. Therefore she could not be distinguished from the world.

What was the admonition of the Lord to such a dead church? She was called to be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, which are ready to die (v.

2). They were to “remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent” (v. 3). There was still hope for the church in Sardis. She was still a true church. There were a few names that had not defiled their garments. Others were still alive but sleeping. There were things that remained, though they were about to die. Like the church in Ephesus, the church must remember how they had first heard and received the gospel: with joy and faith. Do you remember when you first heard the gospel?

I remember a believer who complained to me about those who joined our churches who came from the outside. This person said that these folks weaken our churches. “No,” I said, “these are exactly what our churches need desperately.” It is when the church does evangelism, and new converts are brought by God into our churches that we see an eagerness for the gospel and a zeal for living the Christian life. Their living faith becomes contagious in the church! They love what they have learned and believed. They are excited about being disciples of Christ. These are things that it is easy for those of us who have been raised all of our lives in the church to take for granted and become lethargic. It is “ho, hum.” Therefore, there is the admonition, “Be watchful, wake up! And strengthen that which is about to die!”

The situation in Sardis was miserable, but not hopeless. Most of the members had already fallen sound asleep; the rest were about to die. The congregation as such could still be changed and repent. The admonition to Sardis was similar to that which was given to the church of Ephesus. They were admonished, “Remember therefore whence thou art fallen.” To the church in Sardis the Lord writes, “Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard.” The church in Sardis is a further development of what was the case in Ephesus; the church that has lost its first love is about to die. There is something about their past that might appeal to them and cause them to repent. What profound joy was wrought in their hearts when they had heard the gospel preached to them! What enthusiasm when they took the gospel and witnessed to all around them of the grace of God and the wonderful salvation that there is in Jesus Christ. By the grace of God they walked in a new and holy life, fighting the good fight of faith. Remembering their former state, they see how far they have fallen, and repent.

Is this true of you and of me? Do we need to wake up and be aroused by what we had, and repent and return to our former state? I am saddened when there are many today who listen to sermons, not to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church, but to find fault with the angels of the church. This is not so much about correct theology, but a spirit of pride.

With the admonition comes a threat, an emphatic announcement of judgment! “I will come on thee as a thief.” The figure certainly means that the Lord will come suddenly and expectantly. Because they are sleeping, Christ’s coming is to them unawares, without their noticing it. And what happens? The Lord takes away the influence of the Spirit and the ministry of the Word.

This admonition comes from the Christ who stands in the midst of His churches with the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars. This is the fullness of the Spirit of Christ. It is the Spirit who was poured out upon the church. It is the Spirit who unites the Head with His body, the church with her King. Christ is the One who supplies His church with the seven stars who are the ministers of the Word. He gives them to His church; it is also He who withdraws them. Then they will no longer exist as the church of Jesus Christ! Without the light of the Word that shines through their star, the lamp is taken away.

But to the church in this miserable state, there is also a promise attached. The faithful receive beautiful promises. They are described as those who did not defile their garments. They are members of the church who are faithful to their calling. They refused to walk in the sins of the world as did the others. These are those who were alive and awake, loving the truth and busy in the things of the kingdom of God. They are those who talk the talk and walk the walk! They refused to become conformed to the world in which they lived. How sad when the church refuses to take seriously the call to sanctification. It is grievous to profess to belong to the church of Christ and willfully defile one’s garments with sin.

The Lord knows His own and to them that overcome Christ promises eternal life and glory. First, they are promised that they shall walk with Christ, clothed with white raiment. This white raiment is a symbol of perfect righteousness, purity, glory, and deliverance from sin and corruption. Second, Christ assures them that their names shall not be blotted out of the book of life. The book of life is God’s eternal election to life. Sadly, there were those who appeared that they had been written in that book of life; for their names had appeared on the rolls of the church. Now, however, their apostasy and walk in sin prove that their name had never been written in the book of life. But those who are faithful are assured that, “when the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there!”

Third, the Lord will confess the names of these faithful ones before His Father in heaven. As we read in Matthew 10:32, 33 (see also Luke 12:8, 9 and Rom. 10:9-11), “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.” Christ shall confess their names before His Father! Christ claims them as His own, given to Him by the Father.

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” What does the Spirit say? Watch! Many are the ministers and the churches that have a name, saying that they live, but are dead. Shall we remain faithful? Many are defiling their garments. Shall we keep them clean? We shall if by the grace of God we fight the good fight even until the end. “Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.”



Philadelphia: To the feeble yet faithful church

Rev. Steven Key, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Loveland, Colorado

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 that fast 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.

Revelation 3:7-13

Throughout history we observe a general trend toward decay in the church on this earth. But God preserves His church and gives exceptions to that trend toward apostasy. In the letters to the seven churches, Smyrna was the first exception, a church poor and persecuted, but spiritually rich. Then followed three more letters in which were spoken strong words of warning, even sharp rebukes, pointing out dangerous evils that had infiltrated the churches. So it comes as a relief once again when we find in this sixth letter another congregation, the church in Philadelphia, that reveals no reason for reprimand.

A church commendable

The congregation received the warm approval of her Savior and Lord. Her commendation had nothing to do with outward appearance. She was small in number, had little influence and few financial resources, and therefore had “little strength.” The congregation had labored faithfully and diligently in the preaching of the gospel and in its Christian witness. But their labors appeared to be without any positive fruit.

Part of the problem, it seems from verse 9, was that they were troubled by the Jews, the same kind of Jews that troubled the church in Smyrna—Jews that were the natural children of Abraham but which spiritually were “of the synagogue of Satan.” They were adversaries of Christ and His cause, doing all in their power to stifle the witness of the church and to harm her cause.

Christ’s church will always face opposition in the world. But when a congregation is small and the opposition is strong, life can be very difficult and even discouraging. After all, the church desires to grow. When the love of God thrills our souls, we would like others to come to the same understanding and experience what *we* enjoy in the riches of God’s fellowship. When we live with a heartfelt desire for Christ’s return, we long for the gathering of the church. That has to take place before Christ will come again. When a congregation is small and stays small, seeing no fruit upon its labor, that is a trying situation. There is even the temptation to forsake the church’s biblical calling, and to use worldly means and methods to attract people to come to church. The temptation is to begin to speak the world’s language and to cast aside the truths of God’s Word. Growth by any

means! That is often the motto of the church in our day.

But this church in Philadelphia was faithful to her Redeemer. “Thou hast kept my word,” Christ says. His word is the gospel, in which Christ testifies to us of His perfect righteousness and His obedience to the Father for our salvation. Contrary to the teaching of those “which say they are Jews,” Christ’s word reveals to us that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one who believes.

But He also goes on to refer to that word as “the word of my patience.” Patience, or endurance, presupposes opposition. Christ Himself laid hold of the promises of God and endured the cross, receiving the victory (Heb. 12:1, 2). When He says concerning the church in Philadelphia that they had kept the word of His patience, the idea is that they had faithfully maintained the truth of the gospel and thus had also received strength to endure in the face of the opposition they experienced.

The church had *kept* the word of Christ. There is a very beautiful idea expressed here. The members of the church in Philadelphia had wrapped the living arms of their earnest faith around that word, and with fervent love held it fast. That presupposes, of course, that they knew the word. That knowledge was important to them. This congregation had doctrinal soundness and sensitivity. They defended God’s truth, they confessed it, they preached it and taught it without corrupting it or watering it down. On the first day of the week, every week, this word was sounded forth clearly from their pulpit. The children were faithfully instructed in this word. The word had the central place in the home and in the education of the children.

Because they loved the word, they had not denied the name of their Redeemer. Here is another instance where a positive truth is put in a negative form: “You have not denied my name.” The emphasis is on the fact that they had faced the temptation to deny the name of Jesus, but they had not. They had confessed His name faithfully. Within their own homes and in their daily walk, this truth was their life and confession. They loved their Lord and served Him with all their hearts. Their lives were in harmony with the word of Christ.

We ought to pause here and examine ourselves. Certainly that is the purpose of this letter for us. Is this beautiful characteristic of the church in Philadelphia true also of your life, of your congregation? I can give that testimony of the PR congregation in Loveland, Colorado. Can you bear that testimony of the congregation where you have your membership? You cannot be neutral with respect to Christ. It was not the case that the church in Philadelphia was perfect. That shall be true only of the church in heaven. The admonitions and exhorta-

tions found throughout Scripture had to be preached and applied also within the church in Philadelphia. But the congregation found refuge in the blood of the Lamb and looked for acceptance in Christ's righteousness rather than their own. Out of a passion for God and His cause, for Christ and His word, they not only attended to the preaching of the gospel, but they lived in thankfulness for that gospel, showing others by their walk and talk that they were the children of God. Do you?

A comfort for the present

The Lord comes to His church with words of comfort: "Thou hast little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name." In other words, "You didn't compromise my truth, in the attempt to gain numbers." The Lord emphasizes a truth seen throughout the Bible. The church at any given time and in any given place is Christ's *little flock*. But the Lord of the church promises His congregation in Philadelphia an open door: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." "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." The King of the church is the Holy One, jealously consecrated to His own glory. He is also true. The word that He speaks is true and therefore authoritative. Also the promise that He speaks will surely come to pass.

When the Lord says that He has the key of David, He refers to Isaiah 22:22. There we find that a certain man named Shebna was found unfaithful, and was replaced by Eliakim, the man of God's choosing. The office that he occupied was, in general, the supervision over the house of David. He received keys that signified his authority to determine who would and who would not enter the presence of the king. One could never get into the presence of the king, except through Eliakim.

Christ is the fulfillment of that Old Testament picture. He is the One who has the key of the kingdom. He alone determines who shall and who shall not enter His church. When He opens, no man can shut; and when He shuts, no man can open. He executes God's eternal decree of election, and that on the basis of His own cross upon which He died for His elect. No one and nothing can frustrate His work in gathering them.

That is a comfort to the church that faithfully proclaims His word. This proclamation of the exalted Christ provides Philadelphia and every faithful church a powerful incentive to preach the gospel. The proclamation of the gospel must go forth with urgency and with faithfulness to the word of truth. So He gives her the calling also in verse 11, "Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." Christ reminds us

that when faithful preaching and personal witnessing seem to bear no positive fruit, that is not for us to worry about. "You cannot change the heart," says Christ. "I open, and I shut," says the King of the church. "I will turn that key one way or the other through the faithful preaching of the gospel and by the work of my Spirit. But that will be My work." So Christ reminds us. He is the One who speaks. He speaks efficaciously—saving some and hardening others.

But in this case, He promises an open door for the church in Philadelphia. The figure used here is quite common in the New Testament. In Acts 14:27 the apostle Paul, upon returning from his first missionary journey spoke of the *door of faith* that the Lord had opened among the Gentiles. During his second journey, Paul labored for a lengthy period of time in Ephesus, explaining his stay this way: "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me" (I Cor. 16:9). The *open door*, therefore, is an effective entrance into people's hearts for the preaching of the gospel. The Lord calls His church in Philadelphia to continue preaching, knowing that His purpose is indeed being accomplished. He is giving to them an open door. The Lord is adding to His church such as should be saved.

With the promise of an open door He adds this: "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." The reference here is to something profound, which is why the Lord introduces it with, "Behold!" The word *worship* here is a word used exclusively with reference to true worship, a bowing toward in spiritual reverence and devotion. The idea, therefore, is this: The Lord will reveal the wonder of His grace and will show the power of the gospel in Philadelphia in such a way that even from among their fiercest enemies He will gather His church, adding to the number of believers in Philadelphia.

Not that the church shall look for a huge influx of new converts. But the lost sheep of the true house of Israel, those chosen from eternity in Christ, shall be brought into the fold by means of the church's faithful labors, as Christ calls His own out of darkness into His marvelous light. Those who once were persecutors of the church will repent and humble themselves in the presence of the redeemed, and will say, "What a sin we committed when we persecuted you! For now we see that the Lord loved you!"

Christ always loved His own. But there is one moment when that love was manifested in a way unmatched by any human love. That was at the cross. When, therefore, these from outside the church in Philadelphia shall be brought by the Spirit under the powerful influence of the gospel,

they shall receive an entirely new perspective of Christ and of the cross and of His relationship with His people.

What a tremendous blessing that is when Christ, the King of the church, turns that key to open the door and to gather into His bosom those who were His from eternity. And what a comfort it is to know that even though those fruits often seem so few, our Lord continues to gather His church by means of the preaching of the gospel and the living testimony of His redeemed saints. But there is still more.

An encouragement for the future

The Lord also gives His church an encouragement for the future: “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.” The faithful witness of the church always results in persecution. But the promise to the church in Philadelphia is this: “I will keep thee.” Therefore, be not discouraged, but maintain your witness no matter the cost.

This promise is crowned with the promises that follow. “Behold, I come quickly,” says He whose word is true. To the struggling church and waiting child of God that is the sum of all promises. The prayer of the waiting church is, “Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.” The victory is already ours in Him. But the victory spoils are yet to be enjoyed.

In that light there follow the promises of everlasting blessedness.

In the first place, “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out.” The reference is to the realization of God's covenant. God's temple is realized by the Spirit of Christ taking us into God's perfect fellowship. A pillar denotes permanence and adornment. The faithful will receive such a place in God's everlasting fellowship. From that place they shall never be moved.

Christ also promises to His faithful people a threefold name—the name of God, the name of the heavenly Jerusalem, and the name of Christ. These names will be our tokens of identity, marking us as belonging to God, to the heavenly Jerusalem, and to Christ. And this promise speaks of the final, public adoption that the glorified Christ, on God's behalf, shall reveal to all who are His. They shall appear as those who have the right of citizenship, the name of the new Jerusalem being written upon them. As citizens of that city, they shall be known as the redeemed in Christ, partakers of His glory.

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” Lay hold of the promises given us by our great Redeemer, who irresistibly gathers His church.



Laodicea: The spiritually dead church

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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 eyesalve, 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.

Revelation 3:14-22

The church in the city of Laodicea is a sad specimen of a church. This is not *my* evaluation of this church. Christ says of her, “Thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” He has nothing good to say about this church. This church, however, did not feel the same way about herself. Her angel and members thought their church to be alive and thriving. To all outward appearances this seemed to be true too.

But Christ's assessment of her and her members is that she is spiritually dead. This is why Christ writes to this church last. Laodicea represents the church in her lowest condition—a church of Jesus Christ in name but not in truth—a false and apostate church.

The city of Laodicea lay about 150 miles directly east of Ephesus and within a few miles of Colosse. Paul was familiar with this church though he did not himself plant it. We can safely assume, therefore, that this church had existed about as long as the church in Colosse. In this letter that Christ authors through the pen of the apostle John, Christ Himself examines the works that characterized this church. Christ's examination of her works, however, is much more thorough than any man can make. Christ not only examines the external works of this church, but He examines the internal, spiritual state of this church as well. Also, while Christ examined this church as a whole, He also looked at the hearts of her individual members. He examined her minister, officebearers, and members. As a result He could say, "I know your works. I know your spiritual condition. And this is my conclusion: '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'" (Rev. 3:15-16).

This church was lukewarm. Good thing Christ explains this for us. We might be apt to think that the church of Laodicea was not on fire for the Lord but then she was not cold to the truth either. But Christ says to her, "I wish you were hot or cold!" We might liken what Christ says to a cup or glass of tea. We can enjoy a cup of tea when it is hot or we can enjoy a good cold glass of iced tea. But if the tea has been setting out for a time and is room temperature, it is not very enjoyable anymore. Christ goes even further and says that the lukewarmness of the church of Laodicea was repugnant and repulsive. For that reason, in disgust He would spit her out upon the ground. Mind you, He did not merely threaten her with this. Jesus writes to this church, "I *will* spew you out of my mouth!" Christ was not impressed by the works of this church—external nor internal.

Christ explains in verse 17, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." The assessment this church gave of herself was glowing. "Thou sayest...." She boasted in her riches. She placed all her stock in the fact that she had increased with goods. She had a beautiful church building. She had fame and popularity in the community. She therefore trusted in herself: I have need of nothing! She felt that she attained to a certain status in this world that everyone else merely

coveted after. There can be no doubt that this church prided herself not so much in the gospel as in her own self-image and the way she appeared to others.

It is striking that this description fits many different churches in modern Christianity today. Many churches of an independent nature are out to build the biggest and finest facilities. They are out to make a name for themselves in this world. They are not interested so much in the gospel they teach, though they certainly make a pretense of this. They are more interested in entertaining worship services, social programs, and hosting the largest membership in the area. No concern is expressed for the salvation of sinners, commitment to the truth, or holy living. Their claim is, "We are rich, increased with goods, and have need of nothing."

Christ's assessment of the church of Laodicea is this: "Thou knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Because the leaders and membership of a spiritually dead church are devoid of the knowledge of sin, Jesus Christ, and salvation, such a church does not even know of her error. She is convinced that she is alive in the gospel. She even mocks and despises the true church of Jesus Christ in this world. But Christ says to this false church, "*Without even realizing it* you are wretched—lost in sin and the object of God's anger. You are miserable—not a church to be admired, praised and followed, but pitiable. You are poor—spiritually devoid of the riches of God's grace. You are blind—not seeing the truth of salvation nor leading others to Christ. You teach the lie in the place of the truth. You are naked—stripped of the spiritual garments of truth, holiness, and grace." This church was guilty of false doctrine, false worship, and unholy living.

Christ's judgment on the church of Laodicea therefore is this: I am going to spit you out of my mouth! Such a church so highly offends Christ that He will spit her out. He will cast her from His fellowship and presence. His Spirit will be removed from her offices, her pulpit, her labors, and from the hearts of those who belong to her. She may continue to exist as a church in name only, but Christ will no longer dwell in her midst. This letter must have come as quite a shock to the church of Laodicea, just as it would today in churches that fit her description. If Christ were to stand up in the midst of such a church and say what He does in this letter, the leaders and members would drive Him out in anger just as the Jewish leaders did when Christ pointed out their error.

This is why Christ describes Himself at the outset of this letter to Laodicea as the "Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God." Christ is the Amen, that is, the end of all things to the praise and glory of God. Likewise, He is the faithful and true

witness. Christ witnesses all things. He is the discern-er of the thoughts and intents of a man's heart. Everything that Christ witnessed of this church, her leaders and membership, is true and faithful. Christ does not lie about what He sees. Neither does Jesus as a mere man write these words to an apostate church. He is God. He is the Amen or end of all things, but He is also the beginning of the creation of God. Through Him and for Him all things exist. He was the Word who in the beginning is with God and is God. When He speaks every man must humble himself and hear what He has to say.

When Christ therefore counsels the spiritually dead church, what He says must be heeded and obeyed: "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" (v. 18). Christ had just informed this apostate church that she was poor, naked, and blind from a spiritual point of view. The admonition of this verse is the antidote for such a miserable and wretched condition. The apostate church must buy of Christ gold tried by fire. The riches Laodicea claimed to have as a church were impure and unholy. In the place of these polluted riches Christ commands this church to purchase from Him the true spiritual riches or blessing of salvation found in Him alone. These blessings could be purchased only by means of faith. Because she was naked and destitute of true spiritual raiment, Christ counsels her to buy white raiment, that is, the clothing of Christ's righteousness and holiness. In this way she would be clothed in purity once again. This church must likewise anoint herself with the eye salve of faith so that she no longer would be blinded but be able to see the things of Christ's kingdom.

With this counsel Christ instructs the apostate church in one matter: She must turn from her unbelief and cast herself before the cross of Christ in repentance. She must cast herself on the mercy of Christ that He might make her rich again, that He might clothe her, and that He might be the eye salve that makes her see. She must do this because she lacks Christ himself. Christ has departed from this church. Let that church beware who "ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ" (Belgic Confession, Art. 29)! God is not mocked. Christ spits that church out that no longer brings the gospel truth to God's people.

But Christ always has His faithful people too. The church prior to the Flood had corrupted itself, but there was a faithful few left—Noah and his family. Even when the entire nation of Israel had apostatized and was ripe for judgment, God still had 7,000 who did not bow

the knee to Baal. So also in this spiritually dead church of Laodicea God still had His people whom He loved. To these Christ writes in verses 19, 20: "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." Even these who yet believed had given in to what was going on in the church of Laodicea. Their faith was weak. They were not standing against the false doctrines that had overtaken their church. They too were getting sucked into the abyss of the sinful, man-centered worship and unholy living that characterized their church. So Christ rebukes them too with this letter. The scathing rebuke He writes to the church as a whole applies to them too, but it is administered to them in His love for them. If they were to continue in the ways of falsehood with the rest of the church, they too would be spit out of Christ's mouth. Christ chastens them with these words.

Then the call to repentance: Turn from the sins of this apostate church and become zealous in the cause of the gospel once again. Humble yourselves under the hand of God and return to the truth of the gospel. This same call goes out to many today who chafe under the apostasy found in a church that has departed from the Word of God: be zealous and repent. Come out from among them.

The incentive for those whom God loves to separate from the apostasy of a false church is given in verses 20 and 21: "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." Christ was no longer in the church of Laodicea. He stood outside of this church. For that reason, He now stands at the door of this church and knocks, calling to those whom He loves yet to seek Him in faith. They must turn from sin and earnestly call upon Him. With these He will come in and sup, that is, have fellowship with them. Understood is the fact, of course, that they could only hear the call of Christ by the Spirit who gives them an ear to hear. But upon repentance Christ will restore the fellowship they had not been experiencing as long as they fellowshiped with their apostate church. When they overcome and do the right thing as far as the cause of Christ is concerned, they will also sit with Christ in His throne.

Ah, yes, the question: how to overcome? Stand up against the sins of the church. Speak out against them in the proper, godly manner. If it does no good, then find another church that worships God in Spirit and in truth. If none is available, then the hard decision is to

start up a faithful institute (again, in a proper ecclesiastical way) with others of like faith and mind with you. Then Christ will share in fellowship with you again. Someday God's saints will then sit around the throne of

Christ and share with Him in the glory that He has as the One who has overcome. He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Dirk and Beth Westra and to Dave and Norma Rau in the death of Dirk and Norma's mother, **Thelma Westra**. She went to be with her Lord on April 2, 2021. "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (II Corinthians 5:1).

Rev. D. Noorman, President
Tom VanderWoude, Clerk

Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, May 12, 2021 at 8:00 A.M., in the Trinity Protestant Reformed Church.

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk

Call to Synod

Synod 2020 appointed Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan the calling church for the 2021 Synod.

The Consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2021 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 8, 2021 at 8:00 A.M., in the Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, MI.

The Pre-Synodical Service will be held on Monday evening, June 7, at 7:00 P.M. Rev. R. VanOverloop president of the 2020 Synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the Consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. Philip VanderWall, O-3705 W. Leonard, Marne, MI. Phone: 616 302-4725.

Consistory of
Georgetown PRC
Mr. Philip VanderWall, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of the Loveland PRC extend our sympathies to Kevin and Nicole VanBaren and Glen and Twyla Griess and their families in the death of Kevin's mother and Twyla's sister **Sylvia VanBaren**. Knowing the victory that is ours in Christ Jesus, we rejoice in the Word of God in Psalm 116:15, "Precious in sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."

Rev. Steven Key, President
Eric Solanyk, Clerk

Teacher needed

The Edmonton PR Christian School is in need of a full-time teacher for the 2021-2022 school year. The school will be starting with grades 1-6 minus grade 5. Please contact Gord Tolsma at gr.tolsma@gmail.com or 780-777-5780 if interested.

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Rev. R. Kleyn

- May 2—Joy in the Groom's Presence
Mark 2:18-22
- May 9—Legalism and the Sabbath
Mark 2:23-28
- May 16—The Healing of the Withered Hand
Mark 3:1-6
- May 23—The Pressures of Jesus' Ministry
Mark 3:7-12
- May 30—The Appointment of the Twelve
Mark 3:13-19