

A New Look at

The Seven Churches of Revelation

Jesus Christ said, "I will build my Church" (Matt.16:18). Was that Church foretold to always be UNITED, and of "one accord"? Was it to always be pristine and pure? What is the real meaning of the seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor in the book of Revelation? Do they describe different types of people in the Church? Do they picture the Church down through the ages, in a historical sense? What is their message of our age and generation, today?

William F. Dankenbring

Jesus Christ told Peter and the apostles, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt.16:18). That church was to never die, or disappear, or vanish from sight. It would always exist, and continue to be, in one form or another, till the end of the age, when Christ would return!

But would the Church always be united -- singular -- in perfect oneness? Jesus, in His final prayer for the church before His death, prayed that the Father would "keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be ONE, as we are" (John 17:11). He added, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they ALL MAY BE ONE . . . that they may be one, even as we are one" (verses 20-22).

Does this mean that the church would never be "divided"? That it would never be "split" into various branches, or divisions, or various groups independent of each other, each answering solely to Christ?

Yet in the first century of the Church, the apostle Paul had to excoriate the Corinthian Church for its pride and divisive conduct. He rebuked them saying, "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for *you are still carnal*. For where there are envy, strife, and DIVISIONS among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal?" (I Cor.3:1-4, NKJV).

These disputes and divisions did not disappear from the church after Paul's rebuke. Over the course of the first century, eventually entire churches split off and became independent. Paul warned the churches in Galatia, "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a *different gospel*, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal.1:6-7).

The entire New Testament is filled with warnings to God's people about apostasy, divisions, false teachers causing division in the flock, and the need to be steadfast, steady, and hang on to the truth and Word of God. Paul warned the church at Ephesus, when he was about to leave them, saying, "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure *savage wolves* will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also *from among yourselves* men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves. Therefore watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:27-31).

By the time the apostle John wrote his third epistle, about 90 A.D., he warned a church in Asia Minor, "I wrote to the church but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us . . . prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, *putting them out of the church*" (III John 9-10).

Clearly, the church ran into serious spiritual headwinds, and opposing forces tore at the church, from its very inception. Some of the ministers in the church began to have divisions among themselves, and others broke away entirely with their flocks, with many of them becoming "independent" in authority and government, and the very teachings of the original church began to be watered down, changed here and there, and doctrinal differences and disputes arose over time. The history of the church has not been a pretty picture. It has been a scene of carnage, persecution, apathy, compromise, division, and apostasy. Many fell away from the truth entirely. Paul wrote to Timothy, his son in the faith, saying, "This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me" (II Tim.1:15). He warned, "But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (II Tim.3:13).

What Do You Mean, "One TRUE Church"?

In the last few years, I have seen and experienced "wolves in sheep's clothing," trying to "join" with me in this Work of God, who since proved to be virulent predators who led a few people off into the netherworld of religious apostasy. Unfortunately, those few who followed such were ripe for the picking or plucking -- their own attitudes were wrong, in some crucial way, and so God allowed them to be led off into the religious "boondocks" and "wilderness."

God allows such things to happen. We know that these things must happen -- why? "For there must be also heresies among you, *that they which are approved* may be made manifest among you" (I Cor.11:19). These "tests" which come upon God's people separate the "sheep from the goats," as it were. They prove to be a sort of "litmus test" of the reality of the

faith and obedience of those who profess to follow Christ!

When we look at church history, it becomes very apparent that fractures, divisions, and schisms, often occurred to the Church of God. Most of the resultant groups went into varying forms of religious apostasy, and departed from the truth, and could no longer be called correctly, "the church of God." They had been infiltrated, conned, and taken over by Satan the seductive devil and his devious minions.

However, history and Biblical prophecy also prove that there have been and can be "divisions" of various degrees WITHIN the spiritual "body of Christ," as well! There is no doubt that "divisions" and "differences" have occurred in the true church of God, throughout its history, due to human nature, human imperfection, and weakness -- as well as human sins, and "goats" among the sheep! Jesus Himself said that the "wheat and tares" would dwell IN the church, side by side, TILL THE HARVEST (second coming), which itself leads to a certain amount of division and contention within the visible "church" (see Matt.13:36-43). Jesus warned FIRST for us to beware of false prophets and teachers because they would be the church's MAJOR DANGER -- further evidence of strife, division, and "splits" occurring within the true church (Matt.24:11).

"Divisions" in Paul's Day

Paul beseeched the Corinthians not to allow "divisions" to crop up among them (I Cor.1:10). It was reported to Paul that there were "contentions among you," as he wrote to them, admonishing them to watch out for such things (v.11). These were serious contentions, so Paul asked them, "Is Christ divided?" (v.13). No -- of course not! Christ is ONE. But apostasy set in within the first century church, and communication was not easy from church to church, so local congregations began to become more and more independent. DIVISION set in! Those with the Spirit of God guiding them, remained loyal to the truth, but more and more "differences of opinion" crept in, after the departure of the original apostles.

Some of these churches were still God's Church, even though various "differences" had crept in. They had not yet made major changes in doctrine which militated against their being considered "Christian" in God's sight. They had various "problems" -- but they were not yet sick "unto death" -- spiritual death!

This was the CHURCH OF GOD, with all of its "spots and wrinkles." Clearly, it had carnal-minded ministers and leaders, in some cases, and there were arguments, debates, and strife. One of the major issues of that day was whether a Gentile needed to be "circumcised" and become a Jew in order to be saved. This controversy led to a major doctrinal meeting in Jerusalem over the issue (Acts 15).

So even the New Testament Church, as we see, was NOT "united." There were "DIVISIONS" in the church. Yet Christ is NOT divided. But experience proves that human beings, even those who STRIVE to follow Him, can be divided, and have differences of opinions about many things -- policies, judgments, prophecies, even some doctrines. Of course, the BASIC truths they should all adhere to. Paul and Barnabas had a major disagreement at one

point, which caused them to go their separate ways, and to conduct separate ministries -- although they still regarded each other as “brothers” (Acts 15:36-39).

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “And he gave some, apostles, and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers [WHY?]: For the perfecting of the saints [i.e., they are not yet perfect!], for the work of the ministry, for the edifying [BUILDING, strengthening] of the body of Christ [the church]: TILL WE ALL COME IN THE UNITY OF THE FAITH” -- ah hah!

Did you catch that? “TILL we all come in [or, INTO] the UNITY of the faith.” In other words, WE DO NOT YET HAVE TRUE OR PERFECT UNITY in faith, beliefs, doctrines, etc.!

The Seven Churches of Revelation

Jesus Christ gave a fascinating prophecy of the condition of God’s Church which would exist – and even prevail – down through the centuries. It is found in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is a book containing many prophecies of the future, down through the ages, from the first century, and especially of the “end times,” shortly before the coming of Christ (Rev.1:1). These things were to “shortly take place” (v.1), and continue until the coming of the Messiah in glory (Rev.19:11-16).

The book begins with a scene showing Christ in His glory, standing amidst “seven golden lampstands” (v.12-13), holding in His right hand “seven stars” (v.16). The apostle John is told: “The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches” (Rev.1:20).

These seven churches are listed in chapters 2-3 as Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These seven cities were connected by a great triangular highway and are named in their geographical order. The began with Ephesus, on the coast, then went inland about a hundred miles to Pergamum, passing through Smyrna; from Pergamum the route east to Thyatira, then south to Sardis, southeast to Philadelphia, and would up in Laodicea, futher southeastward, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. The chief city was Ephesus, but the political capital was Pergamum.

The fact that there were seven churches, and seven letters, is significant. Seven is the Biblical number of “completion,” “perfection.” A full week consists of seven days. Jericho fell after seven days; there were seven days of creation; seven notes in music; seven colors in the rainbow. Seven stands for completeness, a unit, fullness, totality.

People have argued over the meaning and purpose of these seven letters. Some claim they represent seven distinct “attitudes” among God’s people. Others claim they represent seven distinct churches with different types of government and independent organizations, yet all belonging to Christ. Others point out how these seven church descriptions seem to have a historical fulfillment, as the seven cities were all located on a mail route in Asia Minor, which began with Ephesus and finished up in Laodicea. That is, they represent seven distinct ages or

eras of church history from earliest times, the first century, down to the present “end of the age” generation.

This truth would appear to be confirmed by the fact that mail was delivered successively beginning in Ephesus and ending in Laodicean, last. The mail route began at Ephesus, on the sea coast, and wound its way finally to Laodicea -- in the exact order of churches given in Revelation. This first city -- Ephesus -- would represent the first stop of the “mail man.” Laodicea would represent the “last stop.”



Each letter sent to the seven churches consisted of all the letters and the whole book of Revelation, for their study and edification. Each city could therefore read the Lord’s words concerning all the seven churches in the seven cities, and take warning from all the letters and the entire book of Revelation. Nevertheless, the sequential order of the letters appears to tell us that not only are we to learn from all the letters, but that certain church ages would reflect the characteristics of the “church” representative of that age.

In general, we find that two of the seven churches were very good – Smyrna and Philadelphia; two were very bad – Sardis and Laodicea; and three were in-between, a mixture of good and bad – Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira.

How can we benefit from these messages to the seven churches, today?

Jesus plainly said that we should ALL listen to the messages given to ALL seven of the churches, indicating that we can profit spiritually from the warnings given to each church congregation! He declared, “Let everyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev.2:7, 11, 17, 29; 2:6, 13, 22).

Let’s study each one of the seven cities and seven churches, and survey the Church of God down through history. The seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2-3 are a “type” of God’s Church down through the ages.

Ephesus

The first church age was Ephesus, a type of the apostolic age. Jesus declared: “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (Rev.2:2-4).

Ephesus was one of the three greatest cities of Asia during its time. It was very rich, with Roman government but the language was Greek. The church there was founded by the apostle Paul and its first bishop was Timothy (I Tim.1:1-3).

The very name “Ephesus” has a strange, compound meaning. It means “Aimed at” and “Relaxed.” The high aspirations of this church age began with the fullness of God’s Spirit poured out, but this began to give way to a less watchful attitude. A less ardent, zealous following of the truth of God. It became more relaxed, and began to drift. It began to backslide.

This age ended with many people “losing their first love.” What was their “first love”? No doubt it was the LAW -- THE TORAH -- of God! The first age of the church was ZEALOUS of the law of God! As James told the apostle Paul, “You see, brother, how many myriads [Greek, ten thousands upon thousands] of Jews there are who have believed, and THEY ARE ALL ZEALOUS FOR THE LAW . . .” (Acts 21:20). But as the age wound down, the people began to lose this love and ardor for God's Law, Sabbath, and Holy Days, and began to weaken in their zeal for obedience. This process no doubt accelerated after the destruction of the Temple itself in 70 A.D. The seeds of error and false doctrine began to take root and grow.

This city housed the magnificent temple of Diana. The image of Diana in this city was almost shapeless and lusterless, seemingly depicting the spirit of antichrist let loose toward the end of this church age – no solid shape as to alarm people, but covert, hidden, yet worshipped by many. As the church age worn on, ceremony and form, ritual and physical works, began to replace the manifestation of the Spirit of God, creeds replaced the Word of God, dogmas replaced Biblical truth, and human leadership began to enslave the laity, as the leaders luxuriated themselves at the expense of the members, becoming the masters as the poor church people became the slaves.

Jesus rebuked this age, saying, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent” (Rev.2:5).

This age lasted about 120 years. The fervent desire to please God, the passion to know Christ and His Word, gave pace to formal, cool worship, and religious dogma. The spiritual ardor began to fade away, and a church once on fire for God became a compromising church conforming to the world around them. The church began drifting, and the goats came in and took over, replacing light with darkness, zeal with fine church buildings, freedom of the Spirit with formality and form. It was all so subtle, undercover, but gradually the influence of Satan took over the professing church and it disappeared back into the new “paganized Christianity.”

Says *Halley’s Bible Handbook*, “The voluptuous allurements of Diana worship had a tremendous appeal to human nature; and it was no easy thing for those who had been used to it to give it up. Naturally there were *all sorts of attempts to harmonize these heathen practices with the Christian religion*. Many professing Christian teachers were advocating the right to free participation in heathen immoralities” (p.694).

Over time, the church at Ephesus was corrupted by such teachings and influence. They forgot their first love. They had grown lax. The only way back into God’s grace was via the route of deep, sincere, earnest repentance!

Does this situation describe your life? The message to the seven churches is a message for ALL of God’s people everywhere THROUGHOUT all time!

Christ did give this church some credit. He said, “I know that you cannot tolerate evil-doers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first” (Rev.2:2-5, NRSV).

The Nicolaitans

One thing in their favor, they hated the teachings of the Nicolaitans – the followers of Nicholas. Yeshua said, “Yet this is to your credit: You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (v.6). The Greek word Nikao means “to conquer,” and “laos” means “the laity” or the “people.” The original “Nicholas” was Nimrod, son of Cush, who was “the first on earth to become a mighty warrior. He was a mighty hunter before [or “against”] the LORD” (Gen.10:8-9, NRSV). He was a “hunter of men” and sought to turn them all against God.

The church of the Nicolaitans taught AUTHORITY, and stressed ministerial authority, ruling over the flock like despots and tyrants, threatening members with disfellowshipment and abused the flock with terror and cruelty, whenever they felt they were not properly honored and

glorified and meekly submitted to by a groveling flock. In other words, they organized the church by *human government*, calling it the “government of God.” At least the Ephesian church saw through this kind of religious charade and rejected such authority-wielding pompous strutting martinets!

Human government forms entered the church, brought in by self-seeking, self-aggrandizing men. They made it sound “good.” They called it “democracy,” or “government from the top on down,” or “unity,” or appointed a “board,” or had “one man rule.” The problem with each and every form of government was that it was of *human origin*. God’s true government is always based on *His written Word, the Scriptures, and inspiration of the Holy Spirit*. Every other form is a counterfeit – a shadow, an image, a mere likeness – but false, because it is not truly derived from God or His Word. Thus the “image of the Beast” came into the Church – and congregations were organized according to the Roman Empire hierarchy, and patterned after the Roman model. The Roman Catholic Church became the “image of the Beast” – Rome itself (Rev.13:15).

Worldly churches adopted Nicolaitanism as a doctrine – the assertion that they had the true form of “church government,” and ruled the church like an army with various ranks in the ministry, patterned after the military, in many cases. The clergy set themselves in ranks over each other, one over another. In some cases the structure evolved into a new “priesthood.” Ministers began to be called “father,” “your holiness,” “reverend,” “most reverend,” or even “Mr.” in some churches. Far be it from mere members to address a minister by his “given” name! So rank consciousness entered the church, with much bowing and scraping and genuflecting. In God’s eyes, it was an abomination (see I Pet.5:1-4; Matt.23:8-12; 20:25-27).

Human government, even in the church, is politics, plain and simple. Titles lead to egalitarianism. Once the ministers acquire the “authority,” they seemingly can lead the flock wherever they want to, and the flock dutifully follows, meekly and without argument. They are taught to “follow God’s church,” right or wrong, or “follow Mr. So-and-so, right or wrong!” It is assumed by them he cannot be wrong – for he is “chosen” by God – because he is “an apostle” or “a prophet” chosen by God. Thus the Nicolaitan doctrine corrupted the church and led it astray while men sought political power among themselves, competing with each other in different church organizations. The key was subjection of the people and access to their tithes. This teaching eventually spawned the Roman Catholic Church, and many others today with similar church government structures.

What about you? Are you able to discern “false apostles”? Can you detect spiritual “Nicolaitans”? Can you spot abuses in churches and recognize the wrong kind of church government and Hitlerian-type ministers? Is your church governed by *fear*?

Smyrna

The city of Smyrna was situated 40 miles north of Ephesus. It was famous for its science, medicine, and the beauty of its buildings. Its main bishop, Polycarp, was a disciple of the apostle John, and suffered martyrdom in 169 A.D. The city suffered much from earthquakes, causing the people to be constantly vigilant and on their toes. In A.D. 178 or 180 it was

destroyed by one, and the new city was rebuilt as one of the most beautiful in Asia. The streets were laid out at right angles, it had a large public library, and a museum. It continued to exist down to the 20th century.

Yeshua said of Smyrna, “Christ had nothing bad to say about this church. It was poor in wealth, but rich spiritually. It held on to the truth, and remained educated, and faithful to the Word of God.

Yeshua said to this church: “I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of *those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue [church] of Satan*. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for *ten days* you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev.2:9-10, NRSV).

The second church age, typified by Smyrna, had no material wealth, and was relatively small. It had been eclipsed by the great number of professing “Christian” churches which had forsaken Jewish and Biblical practices and laws, such as Passover observance, and Sabbath keeping, and which had adopted pagan practices. By this time the apostasy had spread far and wide, and there were those who composed the “synagogue” or “church” of SATAN the devil – false brethren, who looked down upon the Smyrna Christians! Satan had co-opted the visible church of God, and created his own IMITATION and counterfeit Church!

Smyrna would be the time of the Jewish Nazarene churches, in the region of Galilee and northern Judea, and along the coast of Palestine, which endured for the first four or five centuries, in a persecuted and small state. During its primary period of existence, the second and third centuries, the Christian religion was outlawed, persecuted, forbidden, and its adherents were violently attacked, imprisoned, and martyred.

What are the “ten days” of affliction? These “ten days” may refer to the ten years of persecution and affliction upon the church during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan who ruled from A.D. 98 to 117. He considered Christianity as an illegal religion because Christians refused to take part in emperor worship. The church was looked upon as a “secret society,” and when Christians were they were accused or found they were punished. Among those who perished under his reign was Simeon, bishop of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus, who was crucified by the order of the Roman governor in Palestine in 107 A.D. During Trajan’s reign, also, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, was taken to Rome and thrown to wild beats in the Roman amphitheater in 108 or 110 A.D. Even worse persecutions soon followed.

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was burned to death in 155 A.D. When brought before the Roman governor and commanded to curse the name of Christ, he replied: “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me nothing but good; and how could I curse him, my Lord and Saviour?”

Justin Martyr was one of the ablest men of his time, and became a foremost defender of the faith. His martyrdom took place in Rome in 166 A.D. In 202 A.D. Septimius Severus launched a fierce persecution which lasted till his death in 211 A.D. Could this have been the

fulfillment of the “ten days” of affliction – a day for a year being fulfilled? (Num.14:34; Ezek.4:6). He was morbid and melancholy in nature and sought to restore the decaying pagan religions in the realm. Everywhere persecution raged throughout his kingdom, especially severe in Egypt and North Africa. Says Hurlbut, “In Alexandria, Leonidas, the father of the great theologian Origen was beheaded. A noble lady in Carthage, perpetua, with her faithful slave Felicitas, was torn in pieces by wild beasts 203 A.D. So bitter was the spirit of the emperor, Septimius Severus, that he was regarded by many Christian writers as the Antichrist” (*Story of the Christian Church*, p.55). Under the following emperor, Carcalla (211-217 A.D.), citizenship was confirmed on all people who were not slaves in the Empire. This included Christians, so they could no longer be crucified or thrown to wild beasts (unless they were slaves). For forty years the church had a respite from severe persecution and was left unnoticed.

What is the lesson we should gain from the letter to Smyrna? It should serve to remind us that there is a price to pay for being a true, faithful Christian. It may require you to stand up for the truth of God, even at the cost of your life!

Are you willing to be “faithful unto death,” if it is required of you?

Pergamum

Pergamum was noted for its vast library second only to that in Alexandria, Egypt. This was also a very sumptuous, wealthy city. It was a center for emperor worship. Pergamum became the site of the first temple to the Caesar cult. The worship of Askleios and Zeus were endemic. On a crag above the city was a throne-like altar to Zeus. It was decorated with a representation of the conflict of the gods and giants, Zeus being referred to as “Zeus, the Saviour.” Pergamum was obsessed with the serpent-image. In this city politics and paganism were closely allied.

Yeshua said to this church, “I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. . . . But I have a few things against you; you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumblingblock before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols [idolatrous festivals] and practice fornication. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev.2:12-15).

This church was holding fast, even in the midst of persecution, but it has some serious flaws. It was a seat of emperor worship, where incense was offered before a statue of the emperor as to God. It also held a temple to Jupiter, and a temple of Esculapius, a serpent-like god of healing, worshiped as a Serpent – one of the names of Satan. It was also a stronghold of Balaamic teaching and Nicolaitanism. Balaam, of course, was the false prophet who attempted to defeat the children of Israel as they came out of Egypt by encouraging the Midianites to seduce them through sex and festivals of immorality, causing God to turn His back on them (Num.22-24). Surrounded by this kind of culture, the church suffered from constant temptation and a spirit of compromise – live and let live. These perversions invaded the church, which let down its vigilance and immorality became accepted. Rigorous, tyrannical church leaders also gained sway and ruled the flock with an iron rod – with abuse and cruel leadership, in the manner of the Nicolaitans.

In Pergamum, heathen practices infiltrated the church, including the adoption of pagan festivals – Christmas, the celebration of supposedly Christ’s birthday on the birthday of the sun god Mithras, and Easter, a pagan goddess of fertility and springtime also known as Venus, Aphrodite, and Semiramis.

The third church age, of Pergamum, saw further infiltration and paganization, of the remaining Church of God. It would have begun about the time of the Nicean council, in 325 A.D., and lasted for several centuries, till about 1,000 A.D.

Have you been seduced by Balaam-like teachers to compromise the truth of God, to engage in pagan-like festivals which have been falsely baptized and called “Christian”?

Have you been a member of a tyrannical-led church group organized rigidly like the Nicolaitans? Examine yourself – and your church fellowship! WAKE UP, and READ and APPLY the messages to all seven of the churches of Revelation to YOURSELF!

Thyatira

Thyatira was an ancient city in Lydia on the road from Pergamos to Sardis, with a thriving dyeing industry. It was a garrison town over long centuries. It had no illustrious history and was a center of commerce. It is first mentioned in the Bible in connection with Lydia, “a seller of purple,” a very costly dye used by royalty and the very wealthy. It was also used in the “fringes” or *tzitzit* which were worn on the corners of the garments of the Jewish men (see Numbers 15:30-34). Thyatira was an ancient cosmopolitan “mixing pot” for the races – a great amalgamation of races occurring there. Many religions were brought there, and syncretism and blending of them occurred continually.

Yeshua said of this church: “I know your works – your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. But I have this against you: you tolerate *that woman Jezebel*, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to IDOLS. . . . Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call ‘the deep things of Satan,’ to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; only hold fast to what you have until I come. To everyone who conquers, and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered” (Rev.2:19-27).

“Fornication” means idol worship – which is rampant among churches today. Some have their crosses, crucifixes, icons, images of various “saints,” other worship movie stars, actresses, rock and roll musicians, sports figures, great athletes, etc. It is all a form of idolatry. And among some of the end-time churches, many virtually worship a “man” – his memory, his personality, his charisma – and will follow him “right or wrong.” God even foretold that He

would raise up an “idol” shepherd. He declared, “Take once more the implements of a worthless [“idol”] shepherd. For I am now raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hooves. Oh, my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be completely withered, his right eye utterly blinded!” (Zech.11:15-17, NRSV).

The word “Thyatira” means, “Dominating Female.” This is one of the greatest curses in the world. It has special application to this church of God. Paul said plainly, “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (I Tim.2:11-12, NRSV). He also wrote, “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches” (I Cor.14:34). But some women will not yield to that commandment of the law of God. One such was renowned in Thyatira.

Jezebel

Thyatira was famous for its magnificent temple to Artemis, another name for Diana. Jezebel, it is believed by some, was a prominent devotee of Diana (also another name for Astarte, Isis, Ishtar, Venus, Aphrodite, Easter, etc.). The name, however, no doubt refers back to the original Jezebel, wife of king Ahab and her religious influence (the worship of Baal and Astarte). She introduced the worship of Astarte into Israel. This pagan worship goes all the way back to Nimrod and Semiramis, soon after the Flood.

Jezebel was a daughter of Ethbaal, who was the king-priest of Astarte, king of Tyre, a Sidonian priestess adept at the pagan arts and practices of Baalism. She married Ahab, killed the priests of the LORD, erected temples to worship Astarte-Venus and Baal-Zeus, the sun-god. The people, under oppression, began to compromise their values and beliefs. Ritual and ceremony were given a greater role in church services. The whole system was a militant and diabolical power which controlled the masses through propaganda, subtle teaching, and seduction.

This church was the church most noted for serious compromise of values. As a commercial center, with guild membership necessary to trade, the temptation to compromise was strengthened. They were noted for their “love and service and faith and patience,” but like Pergamum, they were tolerant of false teachers in their midst! The reference to “Jezebel” recalls the wife of king Ahab, the princess of Tyre, who worshipped Baal and was a priestess of Astarte (“Easter”), who persecuted true saints of God and even sought the death of Elijah. She was an ardent foster of compromise and syncretism, merging religions into one universal worship. The church at Thyatira sanctioned such a “Jezebel” type religious approach in their midst!

Not all were guilty of compromising, in this church, but many were cleaving to these false teachings. Those who did not learn “the deep things of Satan,” were warned to hold fast to the truth, and they would be given authority over the nations (Rev.2:26-27).

In church history, this church would best describe the period of the Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation – the time from Peter Waldo to Martin Luther.

The church of the Middle Ages was the church of Thyatira. It consisted of the Waldensians, followers of Peter Waldo, who broke off from the Catholic Church about 1200 A.D., and preached the gospel throughout France and Europe. He gave his fortune to charity, and began preaching in 1173, and his work grew greatly. The pope at Rome forbade Waldo and his followers to preach, since they were not “priests,” and persecuted them and eventually issued Crusades against them! Waldo’s work laid the foundation for the Protestant Reformation, which began in 1513, with Martin Luther’s proclamation of his 93 disagreements with the Papacy. This church began around 1200 A.D., and there are still around 50,000 members of the Waldensian church scattered around the world, with its headquarters at Rome.

The “Jezebel” referred to would be the Universal or Roman Catholic Church. Her “children” mentioned here would be all the Protestant churches which were born from her bosom, coming out of her in “protest,” but still clinging to many of her false doctrines and dogmas. The Protestant reformation would synchronize with this church age.

The people in this church congregation are warned that unless they repent, they will be cast into the fiery flames of “great distress” – great tribulation! Spiritual compromise never pays good dividends. Compromise and immorality always lead to suffering and death.

How do you stack up against Yeshua’s warning to the Thyatira church? Are you compromising – or faithful and steadfast, filled with love, faith, service, and patient endurance? Are your last works greater than your first works? Are you growing – or declining – in zeal and spiritual prowess? Are women teaching and setting doctrines in your church? Is the Jezebel influence permeating the church spoiling the attitudes of many?

Sardis

Sardis was the capital of Lydia, 50 miles northeast of Smyrna. The region was extremely fertile and a commercial center of importance. A massive temple of Cybele stood there, bearing witness to the wealth of the city. Sardis was famous for arts and crafts and was the first center to mint gold and silver coinage. So wealthy were the Lydian kings that Croesus became legendary for his immense wealth. He also was famous for his pride and presumptuous arrogance, when his attack on Persia led to his conquest by Cyrus the Great and the fall of his kingdom and loss of all his wealth. An earthquake in 17 A.D. ruined the city physically and financially, and it never recovered.

This is the “dead” church, alive in name only, except for a few.

Yeshua warned the Sardis church, “I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but *you are dead*. WAKE UP, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. . . . If you do not *wake up*, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Yet you have still a *few* persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy” (see Rev.3:1-6).

Historically, the Sardis church represents the church of God as it existed from the eighteenth century up to the present. Many Sabbatarian groups, and Pilgrim and Puritan churches, formed in Germany, England, Holland, and the United States in the 1700s. They were striving to get back to the faith once delivered to the saints. They abhorred the huge church monoliths which had become pagan, and tyrannical, and sought religious freedom to serve God according to His Word. Many of them came to the United States, founding the Plymouth colony.

In 1844 many people expected the coming of Christ, due to the prophecies of William Miller. They were known as “Millerites.” When the prophecy failed, many of his followers searched the Scriptures, and discovered the need for Sabbath observance. Out of this group emerged the Church of God (Seventh Day), and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Both are still very active today, with Seventh-Day Adventists numbering in the millions. Nevertheless, because of their doctrinal problems, and blindness, and compromise, Jesus Christ says of them, “you have a NAME that you are alive, but you are DEAD. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.”

In our time today, another church seems to fit this description as well. It came out of the Worldwide Church of God, formed into the “Global” church of God, but was taken over by a dissent-driven board of directors, and those who left it reformed under the rubric “Living Church of God.” But alas, it is mostly “dead,” dead in the water, just as the Messiah described, unwilling to admit error or to repent and change. Nevertheless, some few in that church appear to be sincere, righteous, and worthy of walking in white with the Messiah.

Jesus says of them, “You have a *few names, even in Sardis*, who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy” (Rev.3:4).

But again, each one of us is warned, “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev.3:6). Where do you stand, spiritually? Do you have a “name” that you are “living”? But are you really “dead”?

Yeshua says to be “WATCHFUL, and STRENGTHEN the things that remain,” that are about to perish. Strengthen yourself, spiritually! Exercise yourself spiritually in prayer and constant, daily Bible Study! Do not neglect so great a salvation. “Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. . . . How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Heb.2:1-3).

The Philadelphia Church Age

Following Sardis, we come to Philadelphia. The name of this city means “brotherly love.” It was founded by Attalus II Philadelphus (159-138 B.C.), so named because of his devotion to his brother Eumenes. This city had the longest duration of any of the seven churches receiving the seven letters. In fact, it still exists today under the Turkish name, “Alasehir,” or “City of God”!

The city lies 28 miles southeast of Sardis, 650 feet above sea level. The region is disastrously prone to earthquakes. The Roman geographer Strabo describes the city as

constantly subject to earthquakes, which rendered the town walls unsafe. It was destroyed completely in the disastrous earthquake of 17 A.D. – the same one that demolished Sardis! Placed right above a fault-line, seismic activity was a constant with 20 years of reoccurring quakes after the major temblor of 17 A.D. The district was renown for grape vine growing and its delicious wines.

The historian Edward Gibbon bears witness to the character of the people of this city. He wrote, “At a distance from the sea, forgotten by the (Greek) emperor, encompassed on all sides by the Turks, her valiant citizens defended their religion and freedom above fourscore years. Among the Greek colonies and churches of Asia, Philadelphia is still erect, a column in a scene of ruins.” There are still 21,000 inhabitants of the city.

This is one of the two churches which is not corrected or reproved. It is rather encouraged, for it is a “small flock” with little human power. Yeshua says to it: “I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have *but little power*, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying – I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you” (Rev.3:8-9).

As we have covered five of the seven churches already, this brings us down to the END of the age, or nearly so, before the return of the Messiah. The Sardis Church, historically, represents the Church after the Middle Ages – from the time of the Discovery of the New World, and its settlement, through the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Philadelphia “era” of the Church of God, then, would be raised up after the Sardis Church – most probably in the twentieth century – to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ!

This would be a humble but faithful church. It would exemplify the love of Christ in the midst of a corrupt and pagan society. It would not compromise. It would not be huge, or lofty, or self-satisfied, or smug in its self-righteousness. It would be faithful to the Word of God, keep ALL the commandments faithfully, and would not turn its back on any new truth or proven revelation from God. It “kept” God’s Word. It used His name appropriately – and did not deny use of the Hebrew names of God, but did not compel people to only use Hebrew either, in a English-speaking world. It broke the yoke of “hierarchy” and “ranks” and the usual church organization profiles and business managerial methods, which seek to maximize dollars and income and carefully control all outgoing expenses, running the church like a corporate business machine intent on increasing income and wealth for the “stockholders” or corporate officers. It rejects the human “business model” completely, and follows instead the pastoral model set by Yeshua and His apostles – the method of prayer, and dependency on God in faith.

Could this church refer to an end-time church of God comprising of people who are very zealous, on the alert, watchful, and faithful to God? A church characterized by brotherly love and affection?

The Church in the 20th Century

Some think that the Radio Church of God, begun by Herbert W. Armstrong, in 1934 A.D., at one time was such a church. There are flaws with this analysis, however.

The evidence is that in the beginning God used Mr. and Mrs. Herbert W. Armstrong to bring much new truth to the end-time Churches of God which virtually all of them rejected. Herbert Armstrong learned the truth about the Sabbath day, and brought the truth of the annual holy days, espoused the identity of the “lost” tribes of Israel, and built a marvelous worldwide religious organization, which for a time was filled with zeal, enterprise, and dedication. However, things were never “perfect,” and along with growth came controversy, doctrinal disputes, and errors. Two of the major errors of the church involved an extreme view of healing, and denial of all medical drugs and most medical practices, and a very extreme take on the divorce and remarriage issue. At that time the church also made many false predictions based upon its interpretation of Biblical prophecy. Herbert was convinced World War III would end in Armageddon. When that didn’t occur, he began teaching Christ would come in 1975. When that also didn’t happen, he stopped trying to predict the second coming altogether.

Over time, the church modified the teachings on healing, divorce, and prophecy, and other subjects, but the issues remained a ‘thorn in the flesh’ and unresolved for decades, and much was still in limbo when Herbert Armstrong died in 1986.

Herbert had been ordained a minister in the Church of God (Seventh Day) in the early 1930s. He was appointed as one of the “seventy.” He works for years side by side with various ministers of that Church. But conflict and disagreement arose, over the holy days of God, and soon he severed his connection with them, and in faith struck out on his own, beginning a radio broadcast called “The World Tomorrow,” and a magazine called “The Plain Truth,” in 1934.

From this inauspicious beginning, after many trials and tests, God began to bless the Work tremendously in the 1950s and 1960s, with exponential growth. By the 1970s and 1980s the church numbered over 150,000 members, including children, and was receiving over \$200 million annually, used to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom of God!

It *seemed* like a halcyon age -- like a spiritual “Camelot.” People were thrilled, enthused, being converted, growing in grace and knowledge. Very much was being accomplished with very little. The “open door” was truly open, for radio and television broadcasting, and for the printing press. The “Plain Truth” circulation reached in the realm of 10 million at its peak. But there was a lot of pride, vanity, at the top, and totalitarian church government replaced a more open government structure in the late 1950s, when the church began issuing new dictation regarding wearing of make-up and cosmetics. The only “authority” for doing so was admitted as being “church government.” In those days, church ministers were accused of “spying” on the people and making “Gestapo-like” visits of members in their own homes. It seems “authority” went to ministers’ heads, big time.

So, all was not what it seemed to be on the surface. In 1967 Mrs. Loma Armstrong died. And the church seemed to lose its focus, and its sense of direction. Growth stalled. Compromises began to set in. In the 1960s, fornication -- adultery -- became known among

higher ranked ministers, notably Garner Ted Armstrong. Our article, “How Are the Mighty Fallen!” chronicles this fall from grace. In the 1970s, these heinous sins were exposed to the world, and Garner Ted was written up in *Playboy* magazine as “America's Playboy Preacher.”

After Mrs. Loma D. Armstrong died in 1967, Herbert Armstrong came under the baleful influence of Stanley Rader and others. The church engaged in publishing non-religious material, and an irreligious magazine. Splits and divisions struck the church with a vengeance. The church seemed to go into a “survival” mode, growth slowed, and even stopped. Herbert Armstrong died in January, 1986.

The reins of leadership passed to Joseph Tkach. Rather quickly, the work of Herbert Armstrong was all replaced, his books and writings struck from the church agenda, and a “new era” set in. Basic doctrines were jettisoned, and a return to mainstream churchianitiy progressed rapidly, with a return to Sunday worship, Christmas and Easter celebrations. It was indeed like the “passing of a baton” -- as if the baton had passed from the “Philadelphia” church era to the new “LAODICEAN ERA” *and beyond!*

The True Philadelphia Church

Somewhere, no doubt, the remnants of the true Philadelphia era of the Church of God exist on the earth, today. You will know them by their fruits (Matt.7:20). Their main fruit will be faithfulness to truth, the Word of God, using God’s name correctly, being small, and being characterized by “brotherly love” – true love, according to the Scriptures.

There is one church today which names itself “The Philadelphia Church of God,” but naming oneself isn’t what counts, but whom GOD in heaven names a church is what counts! Self-adulation and self-advertising is a sure mark of self approval and not God’s approval. That church is another fanatical brand of totaliterian Nicolaitanism with rampant ministerial abuse and military hierarchical government of mere men. It loves money, and that is not a good sign.

Yeshua says to the true Philadelphia church: “Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (Rev.3:10-13, NRSV).

This church is promised protection in the hour of trial and testing coming upon the whole world. It is promised that it will be PILLARS in the temple of God. A pillar is a solid support structure on the foundation holding up the roof and superstructure – the whole building.

Do you know a church like that today? This church is humble, yet faithful. It is greatly beloved of the Lord. There is not a word of reproof, but rather encouragement. God had warned the churches of Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis against compromising and their influential standing. Here Yeshua cautions the church not to depressed because they are so

small, or discouraged because they appear like a “nobody,” and are routinely sneered at, ignored, ridiculed, and savagely attacked by the “synagogue of Satan” – branches of the church which have given themselves over to Satanic influence, teachings, and a spirit of competition. God encourages them to realize His approval is all that counts – not worldly prestige, money, “growth,” or “numbers.”

This church, in the end times, will restore much Biblical truth and understanding, and knowledge of the laws and commandments of God. It will refute the heretics and compromisers who claim to teach the “full counsel of God” but refuse to do so. It will restore the true Biblical calendar and correct festival dates. It will teach the truth about the Godhead, the true relationship between the Father and the Son of God. It will perform a role of restoration and revival of the truth of God.

God says, “So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, my great army which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied” (Joel 2:25-26, NKJV). The locust here is dual – physical locusts, but also devouring men and ministers, who eat, creep, crawl, and consume the truth from among the people. This church will RESTORE much of the lost, neglected, forgotten, and ignored TRUTH of God and His commandments. God says HE will do it, and He works through His chosen instruments, like Abraham, Noah, Enoch, Moses, Samuel, David, Paul, Peter, John and all the apostles and the prophets. It will denounce false doctrine, and the antichrist spirit manifest among other organizations, denominations, and their erroneous teachings and dogmas. But the vast majority will not see or comprehend it. They will continue on, “the blind following the blind,” to their sorrow and destruction (Matt.15:14).

Do you know a church that really, honestly fits that description today? This church is not haughty, or lifted up with pride; it is not hasty, or comparing itself with others. It is patient, enduring trials and tests, and trusting in God. It knows God will deliver us when His time comes, and He will use us according to His inviolate and perfect will, in His Work, in His own time. It has learned to pray with patience, and endurance, waiting patiently for God’s expected answer to prayers. It seeks only to serve God and feed His flock and proclaim His wonderful true gospel message of salvation and hope and the kingdom of God.

“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (v.13).

The Laodicean Age -- the FINAL Church

The last age of God’s church is both the age of restoration and the age of apostasy! It finishes the seven-part cycle of the history of the church of God. The final church is the church of apostasy – complete black-out of the truth. It is the age of the rise of the Antichrist. It is symbolized by the church of Laodicea.

Laodicea was a metropolis – a major banking center, proud of its wealth. It was beautified with resplendent temples and theaters. Laodicea means “pertaining to Laodice,” named after the wife of a Seleucid monarch. This city had great trade, lay on a great road, and seemingly had great wealth and pride. It was noted for the manufacture of rich garments of

black, glossy wool. It also featured a thriving medical school that made powder for the treatment of eye problems. It was later destroyed utterly by Muslim invaders and became a scene of total desolation. Frequent earthquakes caused its complete abandonment.

This church met with thorough divine disapproval.

Yeshua said to Laodicea: “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God’ (Rev.3:14, NKJV). He tells this church point-blank that He is “the beginning of the creation of God” – that is the “first-born of every creature” (Col.1:15). He was the Logos, the Companion of the Father, created by Him “in the beginning,” and who with Him created all things in the present Creation (John 1:1-4). The Laodicean church has difficulty accepting this iron-clad truth! Write for our articles “Who or What Was Jesus Christ Before His Human Birth?”, “Was Christ Created?”, “The Pre-Existence of Christ,” and special issue of Prophecy Flash magazine on “The Mystery of God.”

The Messiah tells this end-time generation church: “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see” (Rev.3:15-18, NRSV).

The Laodicean church age is the seventh and FINAL church age before the coming of the Messiah! This last church age is amazingly lukewarm. It has all the problems of the previous church ages, only compounded and magnified. This lukewarmness demands a penalty. They are no longer fervent in spirit, but tepid, insipid – worthy of being spewed out like dirty bath water!

This is the only church of the seven that “speaks” back to God. It has a voice. It protests, “I am rich.” It boasts. Yet Yeshua says to it, “You say” – they claim to be God’s church, His mouthpiece. But they have become arrogant and proud, lacking in humility and the fear of God. They have a “form” of religion, and vast “building program,” but neglect the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy and faith. They are rich, but they neglect the poor, the widows, and the orphans among them. They have a large bankroll – but they are spiritually bankrupt.

This church says, “I have need of nothing.” It believes it has all the truth. It is unteachable and uncorrectable. It is “full,” complacent, and has that “satisfied” feeling. So it isn’t striving to seek God, to seek more of His Holy Spirit, more of His divine power, a closer walk with God and Christ. It has little spiritual power and no true love. It is in love with itself!

This church age is naked, and doesn’t even know it. Can you imagine? It is like the Emperor who had no clothes. He thought he was attired in the finest weaved material in existence; but in reality, it was a scam – he was completely naked. It took a little boy to see his nakedness and shout out to everyone, “Look! The emperor is naked!”

This church is “wretched.” In the Greek this word is *talaiporos* and literally means “enduring trial.” It is a constant never-ending trial to God and Christ. It is also translated as “miserable.” Webster’s Dictionary defines “wretched” as meaning “grievous, deeply afflicted, woeful, hatefully contemptible, despicable, very poor in quality.”

Storms of God’s wrath will sweep over this church with fury and ferocity. It needs real cleaning, inside and out. It is blind to its own condition – and yet arrogant and haughty and will hear nothing, listen to no rebuke or reproof. It is indeed pitiable, a depressing, sad church.

Sadly, the majority of end-time Christians, however, are compared to ancient Laodicea, which had to retrieve its water from distant springs, and by the time the water reached the city it was always “lukewarm.” These church members are “neither cold nor hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will VOMIT you out of My mouth” (Rev.3:14-16). These people say in their hearts, that they are spiritually rich, wealthy, and need nothing – everything is going very well for them – or so they think. But Yeshua says of them, “You are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (verse 17) – yet they don’t even realize it! Why? Because they are BLIND to their own condition!

So Yeshua says to those in this category -- many of His people alive, today, I am afraid: “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten [“discipline”]. Therefore BE ZEALOUS [eager] and REPENT” (Rev.3:19). They are in deep need of spiritual repentance and change. Yeshua reproves and disciplines those whom He loves. He loves these people. He urges them to be zealous and to repent. What kind of “zeal”? It is not zeal for one’s own works, creeds, dogmas, ideas, organizations – but ZEAL FOR GOD’S WORD – the zeal to cry out, “I AM WRONG,” “I have been terribly WRONG!” and to admit it and to eagerly, earnestly CHANGE!

Yeshua declared to them, “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev.3:20-21).

What a strange picture! Here is a church of God, but God is standing on the *outside looking in!* *Christ has left the church!* This kind of church is buried deeply in real blackness and apostasy! It is in almost total eclipse. Christ is knocking on the door, hoping someone will let Him back *in* the church, and listen to Him, and repent, and change their ways!

Most churches – even those which are true remnants of the church of God – which exist today are *in this deplorable spiritual condition!* They often rant and rave, accusing one another, but remaining in DENIAL of Biblical truth! Their main objectives today seemingly is to try to “outdo each other” in copying Herbert W. Armstrong, along with all his mistakes and errors!

After Herbert Armstrong died, Joseph W. Tkach took the Worldwide Church of God in a direction its members never suspected. He began to change doctrines, one after another, surreptitiously, clandestinely, quietly, claiming that Mr. Armstrong had given them permission to do so. The Sabbath was jettisoned, the Holy Days were rejected, the food laws were thrown in

the trash heap, Sunday worship was encouraged, and Christmas and Easter made their way back into the church. The doctrine on what it meant to be born again was changed, the doctrine of the kingdom of God was altered, the Trinitarian doctrine was brought in, and prophecy was cast aside, along with the identification of the “lost tribes of Israel” – the opus magnum on which Herbert Armstrong had built the original church and work! It was a sad time in Mudville.

The church began to ignore all prophecy, repudiated the identity of the lost tribes of Israel -- a major teaching of Herbert Armstrong. It repudiated as well the idea that God is working out a 6,000 year plan. It began to ridicule all prophecy, and then -- as the crown of its achievements -- it repudiated the LAWS of God, including the Sabbath commandment, the Holy Days, and the laws of clean and unclean meats!

How hard and how far so many fell so quickly!

Since that time, of course, we have entered the LAODICEAN AGE! Many people have since exited the Worldwide Church of God. In a noteworthy article in the *Los Angeles Weekly*, Joseph Tkach, Jr., was parodied, in an article titled, “Honey, I Shrunk the Church!” The Worldwidars have gone back into mainstream Protestant “Babylon.” They have rejected more truth and revelation than any other church in history in so short a time!

As a result of the apostasy of the Worldwide Church, many people began to leave in droves, by the thousands. Many ministers were caught in a vice – should they remain, or go with the people? From the shipwreck of Worldwide have sprung up some 150 or more churches, religious works, groups, and fellowships. The various churches and groups that have come out from Worldwide are now struggling with their own identity, problems, and fighting among themselves for a following. Each claims to be the original church, best following Herbert Armstrong’s tradition and leadership. But each has its own version of the truth, and its own range of problems and troubles.

The Worldwide Church of God has now sunk so far, it would be hard to even refer to them as “Laodicean” any more -- they have gone completely back into the Protestant mainframe of religion – modern Babylon (Rev.17). However, God is their judge. Maybe some of the members still fit into the category of Laodicea, and are in danger even right now of being vomited out of Christ’s mouth!

What about all the various scattered churches and groups? Where do they fit into the picture? Are they the real LAODICEAN churches? We need to examine the EVIDENCE!

Jesus said, in all his letters to the seven churches, words to this effect: “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*” (Rev.2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

How many of them are growing in grace and true knowledge? How many of them acknowledge the true Passover? The true date for Pentecost? The true meaning of the annual Holy days? How many are clinging to tired-worn error despite correction and reproof? How many of them seem to have the attitude, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing!”?

Yet God says of them, “You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked!” Yet there is hope for them. Yeshua tells them even in this condition they can be saved by being purged in fire – like gold and silver. “Gold refined by fire” means fiery tribulation and testing (Rev.3:18). Peter wrote that we have to suffer “various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (I Peter 1:6-7).

A Warning to ALL

The message to Laodicea is the last message to the last church era. It has profound implications for today. It is the last warning to the last church. There will be no more. This is the “Final Warning.” The red light is flashing, urgently – the whistle is blowing loudly. “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev.3:22).

The letters to the seven churches of Revelation constitute a WARNING to all of us, today. The last church era mentioned is the Laodicean era – so it would predominate in the END times! But the messages to all the other churches are still pertinent and vital for our hearing, and spiritual growth and maturity. Today, there are remnants of ALL SEVEN church ages – there are people in EVERY ONE of the spiritual conditions described in the letters to the seven churches.

Therefore, each of us must sort out where we are in God’s plan -- what our problems are and what we need to overcome -- and what God expects of us! The wise thing, I believe, is to apply ALL the warnings to ALL the churches, to ourselves, personally! And PRAY! And study the Scriptures! And take action, and WATCH! And strive to become OVERCOMERS!

The Seven Churches Exist Today

Notice that to the first church, Ephesus, Christ says, “Remember therefore from whence thou art FALLEN, 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” (Rev.2:5). Here is a church, in the end time, just before the “Day of the Lord” (Rev.1:10), which needs to REPENT!

The second church, Smyrna, is a poor church, but rich in faith. Christ says to it, “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev.2:8-10). This church must suffer imprisonment, persecution, even martyrdom, but is promised a glorious reward (Rev.2:11).

The third church, Pergamum, was located in the city of Pergamos, which history tells us was the center of Baal worship, the seat of the Babylonian Mysteries, during its day. “Satan's throne” was there (Rev.2:13, NKJV). Some in that church held pagan doctrines, including the teachings of Balaam (“prophecy for hire”), and compromise. Christ tells this church, “REPENT; or else *I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth*” (Rev.2:16).

This church also will exist just before the second coming of Christ -- it will be in existence “when he comes” and He will fight against them -- those who partake of the pagan customs -- when He returns, “with the sword of My mouth”! Yet it also has faithful saints, typified by the martyr Antipas, whom Christ refers to as “my faithful martyr” (v.13).

The fourth church, Thyatira, is told that Christ knows of her “works, love, service, and your patience [perseverance, margin]; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual and eat things sacrificed to idols [partake of idolatrous feasts, such as Christmas and Easter!]” (Rev.2:18-21).

Jesus said to Thyatira, “But that which ye have already *hold fast TILL I COME*” (Rev.2:25). It also is obviously *in existence when Christ returns*, as it is commanded to “hold fast” TILL He returns!

The fifth church, Sardis, is also warned: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are DEAD. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God” (Rev.3:1-2). Jesus Christ warns this church branch, “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*” (Rev.3:3). Again, those final words indicate clearly that this church also exists *at the end-time*, when Christ returns!

Similarly, the sixth church, Philadelphia also exists at the time of the end. It is told: “Behold, *I come quickly*: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown” (Rev.3:11).

Finally, the seventh church, the church of Laodicea, is in the worst spiritual condition of all the seven churches. It is told: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are LUKEWARM, and neither cold nor hot, I WILL VOMIT YOU OUT OF MY MOUTH. Because you SAY [this church has a “BIG mouth” and even “talks back” to Christ!], ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’ -- and do not know that you are [really] *wretched, miserable, poor [spiritually], blind, and naked*” (Rev.3:14-17).

Christ says to this church, “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” (Rev.3:18). *Here is reference to the end-time Great Tribulation* just ahead of us, which this “division” or “segment” or “remnant” of the Church of God must go through, in order to be made white and worthy!

“Seven Divisions”

These seven “churches” of Revelation stand for and represent SEVEN MAJOR DIVISIONS OR INDEPENDENT GROUPS which worship God and “keep His commandments,” and believe in Christ as the Messiah, to the extent that God still considers them

HIS Church! But they obviously have many, many major problems, which earn most of them the wrath and anger of God, if they don't "repent"!

This indicates that during these last days, the "true church of God" has over the centuries divided up into SEVEN major or minor "branches" -- each different, yet each enough alike to be part of the SAME TREE. Each has the SAME Spirit, but each has unique differences. Pergamum has a problem with paganism creeping in (Rev.2:14). Smyrna is rich in love -- and gives its life in persecution and martyrdom (Rev.2:9-10). Thyatira has a problem with the teachings of "Jezebel" -- a type of the great false church (Rev.2:18-21).

The most degenerate of all the churches, of course, is the LAODICEAN church (Rev.3:13-22). It seems to describe not only the Worldwide Church of God, which is very rapidly becoming "Protestant," but also its major offshoots, in these end times, which are also BLIND and "naked" spiritually!

How Final UNITY Will Be Achieved

How is true "unity" really created? With human nature being what it is, and human beings being prone to independence, and a universal dislike of "authority," how can the various "churches of God" ever become truly "ONE"? How can they be truly "UNITED"?

Is it not through the fires of trials and tests and tribulation? Some are more hard-headed than others, and need stronger testing and trials in order to mature spiritually.

Notice! Many, in this final age, will have to go through, and then come out of, "great tribulation," in which they "have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the lamb" (Rev.7:14). Their robes are obviously dirty -- but the waters and bloodshed of Great Tribulation will give them the means to "wash" their robes, that they may become white -- righteous -- in God's sight.

Daniel speaks of this same purification process, which will BRING US TOGETHER, and get rid of the dross, impurities, flimflam, dishonesty, and foolishness, which we see in the church and many members, today. Daniel was told, "And some of them of understanding shall FALL, to TRY them, and to PURGE, and to MAKE THEM WHITE, even to the *time of the end*" (Dan.11:35).

Although the church is "divided" into segments, and has many problems, today, these problems will in most cases be eliminated by the FIRES OF TRIBULATION and final testing. Christ is going to present the church to himself "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph.5:27). In the coming months and years, Christ is going to CLEAN THE CHURCH UP! He is going to purge and purify every "element," every group, every true segment, and get rid of all the dirt, grime, grease and filth, until it is squeaky clean, spotless and shining!

Therefore, WHEN Christ returns, we read, "The marriage of the Lamb is come, and his WIFE *hath made herself ready*" (Rev.19:7). She is not ready, today. She is not yet purified,

purged, and made white. But she will be in time for the wedding! “And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints” (Rev.19:8).

WHY the Church Is DIVIDED, Today!

Thus, the Church of God, today, is “divided” -- as a result of Satan's wiles, human nature, human greed and slackness and lethargy, and human error. The fault is not Christ's or God's. The blame rests with erring and sinning human leaders, who in far too many cases are simply not close enough to God and His Word, and don't tremble before His Word (Isaiah 66:2).

The Church today is divided -- SIN has wormed its way in. Much purging and purifying must be done. ERROR has contaminated the Church, and even grown and spread. That is why certain ones MUST go into the Great Tribulation to be purged and cleansed, as their final “testing.” They will pay the ultimate price -- their lives. They will suffer martyrdom, imprisonment, even torture in some cases, and death. It will not be pretty. But thank God He gives us a chance to repent now, and to respond to His Truth, and to come out of sin and error. The hard-headed ones and “blinded” ones who refuse to admit the truth now will simply have to suffer the consequences, but they are not “lost.” They can still redeem their lives by repenting and turning to God, in heart and spirit, during the time of great tribulation.

When we look at the “Christian” world today, we see many false, counterfeit churches which masquerade as churches of God (II Cor.11:13-15). But we also see a few very sincere evangelical churches (at least some of the ministers, and members are sincere and devout). There are Messianic Jewish synagogues, Seventh Day Churches of God, Seventh Day Baptists, and similar groups, which strive to get back to the original faith. Many of them show evidence of true love and real “works” and spiritual devotion in their lives, which in God's sight is far more important than mere “head knowledge” and factual understanding. The apostle Paul declared, “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity [love] edifieth” (I Cor.8:1).

As Paul also said, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and *all knowledge*; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity [love], I am nothing” (I Cor.13:2).

Today, the professing “Christian world” is a shambles of confusion and chaos. Most of the sects, cults, denominations are now merely “store-front religion” – “market share ministries” – which are really empty spiritual facades created and controlled by Satan the devil. But there are a *few* -- perhaps literally “seven” main divisions -- who do represent the true Church of God, in all its faults, foibles, and blemishes, as they exist, today! Some of these remnant groups of the true Church of God could include segments of the Seventh Day Adventist Church; others could include various evangelical groups. Others would be churches that came out of Worldwide Church of God -- each with much truth, but each with serious error.

Many of these people are SINCERE. I would not hesitate to call them “Christian.” But they are in serious jeopardy – under judgment – because of their sins, false teachings, and doctrinal errors! Some we can help, now, with God's help, and strive to reach out to them with

His truth! Perhaps some will, as we reach out to them, repent and turn from their sins NOW, but others will not respond until God deals directly with them in great tribulation. Ultimately, however, all those who become part of the BRIDE of Christ will have to “pass the test” -- God's test. Or they simply won't be there.

Of course, God knows and sees all, and He knows the hearts and minds of men, and He is testing each one of us. He knows those who are His. As Paul wrote, “Nevertheless, the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord *knoweth them that are his*. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore PURGE HIMSELF from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work” (II Tim.2:19-21).

"Underground Christians"

There are “underground” Christians today, suffering persecution around the world. Many suffer incredible persecution in North Korea, Vietnam, China -- many have been imprisoned, others have been tortured, and some have been martyred. Many of these are our brethren, even if they don't see all the truth some of us have been privileged to know and understand!

Jesus will judge each one fairly, as we read so plainly in the Scriptures: “And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that *knew not*, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of them they will ask the more” (Luke 12:48). Each will be judged fairly, according to what they have done with what God gave to them, including the amount of knowledge and understanding they received (see Matt.25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27).

Jesus plainly told His disciples, “And *other sheep* I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there SHALL [ultimately] be one fold, and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Therefore, it really is not our need or concern to try to sort out who belongs to Christ, and who doesn't. Many will be there, and we might be surprised who they are! On the other hand, we might be surprised to see who is NOT there! Some of the self-righteous, who are careless, and think they will be there, may not make it at all. Jesus said the poor publican, who would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but smote his breast, saying, “God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13) will be justified -- that is, be in God's kingdom -- rather than the smug, self-righteous Pharisee who had confidence in his own righteousness (Luke 18:11-14).

Jesus put it plainly on another occasion. He declared: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint, and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Matt.23:23).

The “bottom line” is that God knows who belongs to Him. He will judge each individual. That includes those men of old who died in flames for having translated the Bible into the common tongue, such as Wycliff, and Tyndale. That includes such men of faith and humility as George Mueller, of the Plymouth Brethren, of the nineteenth century, who served God in an amazing way, building up many orphanages merely by faith and trust in God, through fervent, intercessory prayer. It was his great work of faith that Herbert W. Armstrong originally patterned the Worldwide Church of God after, when it was known as the "Radio Church of God."

Personally, I believe no one can read George Mueller's Autobiography, or biographical accounts about this man's dealings with the Lord, and his life of faith and obedience, and come away without being mightily impressed with the depth of his conversion, love of God, and faithfulness under extreme trial and duress! He was, in my opinion, a very faithful and humble man of God of his century -- a man who looked upon himself as a “poor, unworthy servant of the Lord.” He was a Sunday observer.

Persecution Growing Around World

In Cuba, a Christian from the Dominican Republic was caught by police, who burned his legs with cigarettes and put electrical shocks to his teeth. A group of forty Christians who brought Bibles to Cuba from Jamaica were all arrested at their hotel, many were robbed by the police, and escorted back to the plane.

In the Philippines, a man who gave up a good job to preach the gospel of Christ, was warned three times by the New People's Army, a militant wing of the Communists, to desist. Two men who belonged to his church were killed by the Communists only two weeks after becoming Christians.

A Pakistani believer in Christ was shot and killed by his Muslim accusers, after having been released from prison in Lahore, Pakistan. This man read his Bible every day.

In China a Christian was sentenced to five years for preaching the gospel, when he would not abandon his faith, which authorities called “the poison of imperialism.” He was beaten, but while they beat him a supernatural joy filled him. He felt the Holy Spirit surround him, and the Reds could obtain no retraction. While in prison, he was given another ten years for preaching in the slave labor camp! One winter a severe disease epidemic broke out, and of 1300 prisoners, 1035 died. He himself was considered dead, and taken to the morgue. When he prayed, he saw an angel dressed in white whose face shone with God's glory and who blew upon him. Immediately he felt better and the sickness left him, he knelt, gave thanks to God, and *left the morgue!* The prison doctor, seeing him, thought he was a ghost! He told the physician, “Don't be afraid. . . God restored me to health. He sent me to show you the way of God.” The doctor knelt, and said, “Your God is a reality.”

After he left the prison, after serving 15 years, he told the authorities, "Suffering did not diminish my faith but only intensified my relationship with Jesus." This man, Mizhong Miao,

worked another 18 years in the underground church, secretly, until he finished his course.

Are such men truly men of God? I shout from the top of my lungs, YES! YES, INDEED! *They are my brothers in Christ! GOD BLESS THEM, and their witness for the Truth which they have been given to understand!*

“Condemn Not”

Too many of God’s people in this age, especially ministers and elders I have known, tend to be very judgmental, and look down their noses at others who do not belong to the same group as they do. Too many are proud, lifted up, and act like the Pharisee who thanked God that he was “not like other men.” Too many are prone to “judge their brother” because of doctrinal errors on minor points (or what some might call “major points”), when they themselves have major problems with attitude, hidden sins, and a wrong spirit.

Jesus Christ said, in this regard, to those who are prone to sit in judgment of others: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matt.7:1-5).

Paul also warned us about the SIN of judging one another, over issues that shouldn’t really matter. He wrote: “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. . . Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand” (Rom.14:1-4, NRSV).

Does this mean that I would knowingly endorse, or accept error? Of course not! But I will accept as a “brother” in Christ one who does not have the same understanding as I do, even on points of God’s Law, or understanding the nature of the “Godhead,” although I will not compromise with him in either obedience to God, myself, or in understanding! I will simply accept such as they are -- weaker brothers in Christ who have not been gifted with the knowledge and understanding God has given us. Of course, any “brother” who is dishonest, immoral, breaks the commandments, steals sheep, lies and bears false witness, and falsely accuses others, I would not consider a true “brother” at all, but an imposter -- a Satan implant, a “tare” amongst the wheat! Jesus said of such, plainly, “You shall know them *by their fruits*” (Matt.7:16, 20).

The Real Bottom Line

In the months and years ahead, severe persecution such as we have never seen, is going to break out against all minority groups and tiny religious churches, which will be termed “cults” and “bizarre sects” by the mass media, under the control of government propagandists. True Christians will be persecuted with a vengeance – even *before* the “Great Tribulation” ever arrives!

Notice! Jesus gave a sequence of prophetic events which must occur before He returns.

In verse 21, He mentions the coming of Great Tribulation. However, long before this event occurs, Jesus mentioned in verse, “For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows” (vs.7-8).

Here He is talking about the BEGINNING of the End Time -- years before the final “Great Tribulation”! And notice! Right after this “beginning,” He declares: “*THEN shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall KILL you; and ye shall be hated of ALL NATIONS for my name's sake.* And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall HATE one another. And many false prophets shall arise, and shall DECEIVE MANY [those who are sleeping through the Apocalyptic Times, not close to God, not busily overcoming, praying, and “watching”]. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved” (Matt.24:9-13).

This persecution occurs *BEFORE* the Great Tribulation. *It is the very NEXT thing prophesied -- on the prophetic calendar!* Knowing this, isn't it high time we draw close to one another, begin to LOVE one another, and show by our attitudes and actions that we really are the children of God and servants of Christ? Isn't it high time we quit “judging” one another, or others who are proving their loyalty and devotion to Christ by their intense suffering, by accusing them of being “blinded,” or not really “Christian” because they don't understand certain things we do?

For shame! Jesus plainly said to His disciples -- and I hope that includes you: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, *if ye have love one to another*” (John 13:35).

In the coming years, those who truly belong to Jesus Christ/Yeshuah the Messiah, are going to be “tried” and “tested” to prepare them for entrance into God's Kingdom (Matt.5:48). Those who are wicked, who are tares, and goats, and who do not really belong to Him, will be discovered and found out -- their works, words and “fruits” will eventually, when the “heat” comes, betray them. David wrote in the Psalms: “The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven: his eyes behold, his gaze examines humankind. The Lord *tests the righteous* and the wicked, and his soul hates the lover of violence. On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulfur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face” (Psalm 11:4-7, NRSV).

Rather than worry about others, or sitting in judgment of them, let each of us examine HIMSELF or HERSELF before the Word of God! As Paul wrote, “*Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. TEST yourselves*” (II Cor.13:5).

Paul also wrote: “For no other foundation can any lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire [Tribulation]” (I Cor.3:11-15, NKJV).

Rather than judge other people, or other groups, let's focus on doing GOD'S WORK – and trust Him to sort everything else out, in His time, according to His will!

And what is God's "work"? That we LOVE one another. The apostle Paul shows us that judging and condemning each other is not of God. Comparing ourselves among ourselves is not wise (II Cor.11:4). We all have faults and problems and character flaws which we need to work on. What should we do then?

Yeshua sums it all up for us – will we heed His words? "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt.22:37-40, NRSV).

As Paul put it, "Owe no man anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10).

I know there are many who sit in judgment of me, who criticize this, that or the other doctrine, belief, teaching, or whatever. It is sad to see them do such a thing. For Christ is the final True Judge. The apostle Paul was also judged by other ministers and Church members in his day. He replied, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore, judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God" (I Cor.4:3-5, NKJV).

Rather than sitting in judgment of one another, as individuals, should we not "avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening"? Paul added, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth" (II Timothy 2:14-15, NRSV).

Let's study and examine closely the lessons of the seven churches of Revelation. And let us build on the tried and true foundation, which is the Word of God, with gold, silver, and precious stones! We are "citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Ephesians 2:19-22, NRSV).

Let's be about our Father's business, with all our hearts, minds, and strength! And let's love one another! Then we may sparkle and shine forever as brilliant stars in God's wonderful Kingdom (Dan.12:3)!