

## Newsletter April 2017

In last month's newsletter of March 2017, we presented an extensive introduction to the book of the Revelation, wherein we concluded that the date of this writing was just a few years prior to the end of the first century AD. We examined the document's authenticity as the inspired word of God and its rightful place within the canon of Holy Scripture, and we discussed its human authorship confirming that the human writer was undoubtedly John, the Apostle of Jesus Christ.

As the first century AD was coming to a close, John, the last living Apostle, would soon no longer be present on earth to oversee the churches in his charge, leaving the church without any direct apostolic guidance. However, when John departed through natural death, in addition to his Gospel and his three epistles, he left behind a very unique prophetic document – the very last book of our Bible. We discussed the rigid chronology and the quality of this text, which consists of a series of heavenly visions given to John the Apostle, which he wrote down in an allegorical format using inspired metaphors to aid our understanding of things that are beyond any human means of visual perception. John received this divinely inspired vision while he was exiled on the very rugged thirteen square mile island of Patmos, located about sixty miles southwest of Ephesus in the Aegean Sea.

We also considered various contemporary methods of interpreting the document, concluding that only a straight-forward literal sense of the text within a future-prophetic context serves to preserve its holy intent and purpose. All other interpretations require a great amount of manipulation of the text, which deviates from its original intent to the extent that it effectively adds to or takes away from the words of the prophecy – all of which we are severely warned never to do (cf. Re. 22:18,19). Keeping that admonition firmly in mind, we shall now begin a careful exposition of the prophetic text of this document from beginning to end starting within this newsletter and continuing on within a series of future newsletters:

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw” (Re. 1:1,2). The first five words of this first verse gives us the proper title of the document: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word translated “revelation” is *apokalupsis* in the Greek, which means a “disclosing” or “unveiling” of things previously hidden from view. The stated purpose of this document is to inform all of the Lord's servants of things to come at the time surrounding His second advent. The revelation originates with God, the Father, is delivered through Jesus Christ, explained by angelic beings to John, who in turn provides it to all of the Lord's servants through this written record. John used the words “to show,” which refers to the many “allegorical word pictures” he uses in describing the visions that make up this document. These “word pictures” include symbols given to John by angels, which John in turn used as metaphors to represent real things, persons, and events that must take place. The word “shortly” found in the text is *tachos* in the Greek, which means that all things must occur within a very brief span of time, that is, “quickly” or “speedily” once they begin. It does not imply an immediate beginning of events within a matter of hours, days, weeks, or even years.

We find the profound blessing we spoke of last month in verse 3: “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand” (Re. 1:3). The words of this prophecy are intended to be read and spoken aloud that others may hear, such that they may hold the words of this prophecy within their minds and hearts. The Greek word used for “at hand” in this verse is *eggus* which means “near” in the sense that all has been made ready to occur at a time appointed. Again, this does not imply immediacy such that it would be fulfilled in the lifetimes of Jesus' apostles, as today's Preterist has falsely assumed (cf. Newsletter March 2017).

Next, John greets the churches to which this document was initially intended: “John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne” (Re. 1:4). Asia in this verse is what we refer to today as Asia Minor and specifically the nation of Turkey. These churches were all overseen by John from the central church located in Ephesus, in which he was also its pastor. The seven spirits represent the Holy Spirit in all his unity, perfection, and completeness, who empowers the churches by indwelling seven elect

messengers – to be discussed later. As we noted last month, the number seven in Scripture designates fullness or completeness and is used throughout the Revelation in which all things reach a complete state of fulfillment.

John extends his personal greeting as also coming from Jesus Christ: “And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (Re.1:5-6). Here John identifies the Lord with seven forms of address: (1) The faithful witness, (2) First begotten of the dead, (3) The prince of the kings of the Earth, (4) Him who loves us, (5) He who washed us of our Sins, (6) He who made us a kingdom of priests unto God, and (7) Him whose glory and dominion is eternal.

“Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him even so, Amen” (Re.1:7). This verse refers to the physical return of Jesus Christ to judge the earth, not to the time of the heaven-bound transport (Rapture) of his Church. The exodus of the Church is initiated by a direct call of Jesus from out of Heaven to his chosen – both the living and dead. There will be no visible appearance of the Lord at that time. Only the redeemed will hear his voice, and they will be immediately changed into an immortal state and heed his call to rise up to gather with Him in the air. This exodus will occur just prior to his return to judge the earth in a period known in Scripture as the “Day of the LORD.” Those that remain on earth following this heavenly transport will be the hypocrite and the reprobate who have hated and rejected Him and are therefore ripe for judgment. Upon his future physical return, every eye shall see Him, both Jew and Gentile that have cursed and rejected Him.

“I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty” (Re.1:8). Note in this verse that the word “Lord” is not the Jehovah of the old testament who is referred to in Old Testament Scripture as the “LORD” (all caps). The Alpha and Omega is Jesus the eternal one who is the Son of the living God. His physical return will signal a time of great anguish and fear in the earth-dwellers that remain because of the inevitable wrath that is to come upon them for their rejection of Him.

“I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Re. 1:9). In this verse, John the Apostle fully identifies himself to his brothers in Christ, who were also suffering from the great persecution that had been imposed by the Roman emperor, Domitian. John had been imprisoned on the island of Patmos because he spoke the Word of God openly and had faithfully testified of the divine person of Jesus Christ.

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, what thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea” (Re. 1:10,11). When John said he was in the Spirit, he meant that he was conferring with the Holy Spirit. Jesus had said to his Apostles, “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come” (Jn.16:12-13). Here the Holy Spirit was prepared to show John things to come in a prolonged series of visions. They were preceded by a loud trumpet-like voice coming from behind John announcing that He was the beginning and the ending – the eternal One. The voice instructed John to write down what he was about to see in a book and to send it to seven above named churches which are in Asia. These were the seven churches that John had greeted at the beginning of this document, which are named here as Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (cf. Map insert below).

“And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks” (Re. 1:12). These candlesticks remind us of the golden lamp-stand in the tabernacle that had seven branches, but here the lamp-stand is presented as seven burning lamps branching out from Christ as its center support. “And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle” (Re. 1:13). “Son of man” was a title that Jesus commonly ascribed to himself as He conversed with his disciples here on earth. This is a title of his deity as the incarnate

Christ, which was earlier revealed to the prophet Daniel: “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed” (Da.7:13,14). The Son of man’s white garment was similar to that of the high priest who served in an earthly temple of the Old Covenant (cf. Ex. 28:2-4). The golden girdle, which was a sash worn across his chest, was worn by Levitical priests of the Old Covenant (cf. Ex.28:4), and here speaks of Christ as our great heavenly high priest who ever intercedes for his own (cf. He.4:14).

“His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters” (Re. 1:14,15). His white hair speaks of dignity gained by vast age or in this instance, an ancient heritage of days without end – the ancient of days (cf. Da. 7:9). His fiery eyes penetrates into the depths of men’s minds and hearts, seeing as well into the endless future. His feet as of red hot brass speaks of his judgment as He will one day trample his enemies beneath his feet. His voice had the power and volume that far exceeded the sound of the greatest waterfall found on earth. This is the great shout of the Lord exhibiting the power of an archangel and the trump of God that will one day call down for his Church (cf. 1Th.4:16). “And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength” (Re. 1:16). The seven stars in his right hand suggest his power over the heavenly host of the infinite universe that He rules over, but here they represent seven angels, or subordinate messengers, that aid Him in his rule over his church (cf. Re. 1:20). The two-edged sword extending from his mouth represents the Word of God, which is sharper than any two edged sword such that it is able to sever the soul from the spirit (cf. He.4:12). The Word of God has the power to judge, as well as the power to justify those who heed his voice. Jesus’ personal visage was as bright and blinding as the noon-day sun at full brilliance.

“And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last” (Re. 1:17). From the time that John was little older than a young boy, he had been a close companion of Jesus as He walked on the earth during his earthly ministry. John, as a young man, was at the cross when Jesus was crucified (cf. Jn 19:26,27), and he saw Him after his resurrection before He had ascended to his Father. None of this prepared him to look upon the glorified Christ; John was stunned into the likeness of death as he fell to Jesus’ feet. As the prophet Malachi asked, “... who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap” (Mal.3:2). John saw not the gentle Jesus as he had known Him when He walked and talked with his apostles prior to his crucifixion; he was now viewing deity in the person of Jesus Christ who had been exceedingly glorified and transfigured. He saw glory and power beyond human comprehension. So much so, that John fell down at his feet as if he were dead (Re.1:17). A like vision had the same effect on the prophet Ezekiel when the heavens opened up by the river Chebar and he saw the incredible glory of God. There, Ezekiel also fell on his face (cf. Ez.1:4–28). Then, Jesus placed his right hand upon John and spoke the familiar words that He had so often spoken to his apostles when He was here upon earth, “fear not,” to which He added that He was the first and the last – the eternal Christ. “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell [Hades] and of death” (Re. 1:18). Through his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that He had obtained complete power over the grave and of death itself.

Jesus then revealed his express purpose for appearing to John. John is directed to “write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter” (Re. 1:19). In this verse we find three major divisions of the prophecy. The Church-age from its creation on the day of Pentecost until the hour of its future transport off the earth constitutes the things “that are” within John’s lifetime – and within the current age in which we presently live here on earth. A cross-section representing the Church-age on earth as it presently exists is revealed to us in chapters 2 and 3 of this prophecy. Jesus’ heavenly domain is revealed in Chapter 4, and the express authority granted Him to direct future events on earth to its ultimate culmination is received from God the Father in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6 we begin to see “the things that shall be hereafter” as Jesus Christ sets world events into motion to finally bring to an end this present age in a series of severe judgments, thus making way for his physical return to gather the nations into a Kingdom-age upon the earth.

The first division contains the things that John had already seen, which was first and foremost Jesus Christ in all of his heavenly glory. Although this first division represents a small portion of this entire book within the first Chapter, it is extremely significant inasmuch as it sets the full agenda for the remainder of the book. The book of the Revelation is a fully Christ-centered prophecy, which begins with the unveiling of Jesus' personal deity, and continues on with an unveiling of both his heavenly domain, the great work that He is carrying out now as the sole head of his Church, and his absolute authority over all things in the future.

“The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches” (Re. 1:20). The seven stars that Jesus held in his right hand represent seven messengers that He had appointed to oversee those seven churches. Within the vision of the glorified Christ, we saw that Jesus stood in the midst of seven candlesticks representing the totality of all churches (Re.1:13,20). In his right hand, He held the messengers (angels/stars) to the churches. These represent the elect that cannot be plucked from his hand (cf. Jn.10:28,29). The light of Truth, which comes forth from those messengers, is the fire-filled light of God's perfect glory; the oil that fuels them is the Holy Spirit. In all of this, we find that Jesus is both the creator and source of light for all the church assemblies that reside upon the earth. The validity of today's temporal churches exists only in their close relationship with Christ through their elect Church members who illuminate them from within. When that relationship is lost or rejected, and men attempt to usurp Jesus' authority for themselves, He removes that temporal church from his presence as its light is extinguished (cf. Re.2:5).

In verse 20, Jesus speaks of the seven churches in the present tense: “...the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.” John writes of the “things that are” as they relate to the present church age in Chapters 2 and 3 of the Revelation, which we will begin to explore next month. There we will find seven brief messages dictated to seven churches, each in turn. Those seven churches were located in seven cities of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey; see map insert below). Jesus made no mention of the missionary church at Antioch of Syria or of any of the many other churches, such as Paul's beloved church at Philippi that he established during his missionary journeys. It is likely that the church at Jerusalem had been dispersed before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but many other temporal churches still existed that are not mentioned. Therefore, we must conclude that Jesus specifically chose the seven that remained under John's direct apostolic oversight to represent a cross-section or microcosm of all of Christianity as it existed on earth near the end of the first century.



The seven churches were early-institutionalized temporal churches. Therefore, we must realize that Jesus did not address his elect alone, but addressed the temporal assemblies of professed believers in each of seven cities of Asia Minor that claimed his Name at the time that John wrote the book of the Revelation. Inasmuch as each of these churches exhibited uniquely different characteristics from the others, we know that there was already a lack of unity in the Christian faith in both an understanding of the Truth, and in their religious practices. We find that fact clearly revealed in Jesus' own words, which are recorded in these seven brief messages.

Inasmuch as each of those messages are part of the larger document that would ultimately be read by all churches, we find that each of the individual messages were also intended to edify all churches upon earth. Commendations were given to be encouragements to those churches who strive for perfection in the faith, while warnings were to those that had fallen away that they should repent. Mixed reviews were given to those churches who, though yet sound in the faith, were nonetheless still in danger of sliding into the open abyss of apostasy if they did not hold fast to the Truth. We cannot merely assume that those brief messages were written for the sole purpose of encouraging and warning the churches of the first century, inasmuch as they have been carefully preserved in Scripture that we may also read them and readily compare them with our own assemblies today. Next month we shall begin a series of discussions concerning each of these churches, their environs, and the content of the messages that Jesus gave to them. ©Arthur J. Smith, April 2017