

Newsletter July 2017

In our newsletter of April 2017, we began a series of studies of the book of the “Revelation of Jesus Christ,” beginning with an exposition of the text contained within Chapter 1. In that chapter, we saw a vision of the glorified Christ as He stood in the midst of seven candlesticks representing a totality of his Church on earth. The Church was represented in the Apostle John’s day (near the end of the first century AD) by seven churches existing in what is present-day Asia minor (cf. Re.1:13,20). In our most recent newsletters of May and June 2017 we discussed Jesus’ messages to the first three of these seven churches, which were located in the cities of



Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamos; they were all port cities situated on or near the Aegean Sea. In this newsletter, we shall move eastward and inland from Pergamos to discuss Jesus’ messages to two of the remaining four churches – those located within the cities of Thyatira and Sardis.

The city of Thyatira was located about 50 miles from the Aegean Sea, and about 45 miles east of Pergamos. In 290 BC, it was a Greek city known by the name of Pelopia. It was later renamed Thyatira by king Seleucus Nicator in honor of his newborn daughter (in Greek, “thyatira” means “daughter”). It was not a very great city, being the smallest of the seven cities we are studying, but it was located along an important inland trade route and was deeply engaged in commerce. It came under Roman rule about 133 BC. In Roman times, the city was well fortified, disregarding the fact that it

was located in an open valley, inasmuch as an elite contingent of the Roman guard was stationed there.

Thyatira was noted for its network of many worker guilds or labor unions, which were engaged in producing various quality products including wool and linen goods and apparel, as well as pottery, bronzework, tanned hides, and leather goods. Pergamos was quite famous for its weaving industry and for the dyeing of cloth. The dye that was known as “turkey red,” obtained from the madder root, was particularly popular in making robes for the aristocrat and the wealthy. This dye although exceedingly red was distributed by Lydia who was referred to as a “seller of purple” (cf. Ac. 16:14). The Apostle Paul met Lydia in Philippi while on his second missionary journey, and she was miraculously converted to the Christian faith.

The primary deity of Pergamos was Tyrimnos who was worshiped as the sun god. However, the worship of Apollo (the god of prophecy, music, medicine, and poetry who was alternately worshiped as the god of the sun), and Artemis (the moon goddess sister of Apollo – variously referred to as Diana) was also quite prevalent. In addition, each of the many worker guilds had their own patron god or goddess, who was worshiped through various festivals and feasts, frequently attended by sexual revelries. There is no indication of a Jewish population.

It is not known how the Gospel of Jesus Christ first reached Thyatira; it could have come about through the evangelical efforts of believers sent from Ephesus (cf. Ac. 19:10), or perhaps Lydia and her associates carried it there soon after her conversion. Although it is not impossible that Paul and Silas could have briefly passed through Thyatira with the Gospel message on Paul’s second or third missionary journey, there is no Scriptural evidence to support that supposition.

Today, the ruins of the ancient city of Thyatira are located at the city of Akhisar, which is located south of Istanbul in the modern nation of Turkey.

With all of this given as background information, we shall now turn to Jesus’ message given to the church that resided in Thyatira. Although this is the smallest of the seven cities, this message is the longest of the seven messages:

“And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass;” (Re.2:18)

Jesus identifies himself to the messenger as the Son of God and then goes on to say that He has eyes that are as a flame of fire and his feet as fine brass burning in a furnace (cf. Re.1:14,15). This associates well with the

fiery red dye produced in the city. Jesus' eyes of fire indicates his righteous indignation against evil, and his feet of burnished brass expresses his holy determination to judge rightly.

“I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.” (Re.2:19)

First of all, Jesus makes clear that He fully understands their acts of charity, service, faith, and patience. Furthermore, he sees that those efforts have greatly increased such that they are now even greater than they were at first. All of those works would be to the good except that their efforts have become seriously flawed as Jesus states in his next sentence.

“Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.” (Re. 2:20–23)

Jezebel of the Old Testament was the Canaanite wife of Israel's evil king Ahab (cf. 1Ki.16:30,31). She had led Ahab to worship Baal as well as leading large numbers of others in Israel astray due to her high position. This Jezebel of Thyatira calls herself a prophetess, which means she was an occult diviner, and she had been elevated to a high position in the church. Her teaching was most likely analogous to that of the Nicolaitans and the Balaamites. She had led many members of the church to commit fornication as well as eat polluted foods that had been offered as a sacrifice to idols. This most likely took place within a sensual ceremony similar to the orgies of Cybele, although it could also have been connected to emperor worship.

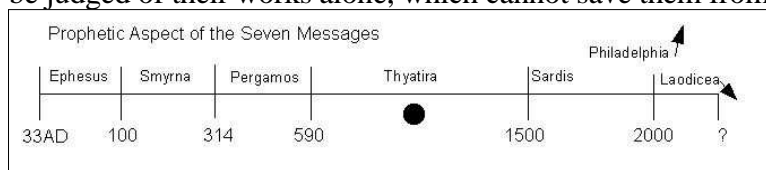
Jesus warns this church that He will greatly increase the tribulation of those that commit adultery with her, and that those who follow her (i.e. her children) will be killed (perhaps with venereal disease). Jesus had long given this woman the opportunity to repent, but she had not done so. Through her exposure in this message, the other six churches will come to realize that Jesus knows their most secret thoughts and activities and He will recompense them according to what they do.

“But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.” (Re.2:24,25)

Could a faithful remnant exist even there — even within this occult-filled church? It would appear that even there some had kept themselves separate from error, yet they were still in constant danger of giving in to it through association. Jesus promises those that had not held to those satanic doctrines, that no additional burden would be placed on them, having survived thus far against that falsehood, but that they should nevertheless “hold fast till I come.”

“And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” (Re.3:26–29)

Many of today's contemporary cults can be compared to the church of Thyatira, who had followed the false prophetess referred to as Jezebel. Many modern-day cults have been founded by women and have women members that work very arduously for the perpetuation of their “church.” Outwardly, they have warm love for one another and patiently and faithfully strive to convert others to their way. Yet, they have gone astray regarding sound biblical doctrine and the Truth that comes forth from it. None of the zeal that has been mentioned can compensate for their wayward relationship with God and his Word. Their extreme doctrines carry along with them their own consequences: true repentance cannot come, and falsehood breeds still more error. Those who are caught up in this spiritual whirlpool will find himself or herself within a downward spiral to oblivion. They must be judged of their works alone, which cannot save them from God's fierce wrath.



Prophetically, the church of Thyatira can be seen to represent the dominance of Romanism at its peak during the period of A.D. 590 to 1500

(cf. *CRC Book III*, pages 179-206). As a result of paganism having invaded the remnant of the martyred church, militant Romanism became firmly established. Christianity was overwhelmed by various pagan practices and cultic philosophies. This is an era that the Romanist often refers to as the “golden age of the church,” but which historians commonly refer to as the “dark ages” because of its intellectual depravity. That was also a dark time for the Gospel, as the Roman church reigned supreme in awful splendor – placing worship of its traditions and ordinances above the simple Gospel message of salvation by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Protestants do not ordinarily consider the Roman Catholic Church, as it exists today, a cult because we have much in common regarding many essential core doctrines. Even so, most early occult errors still exist in Roman church tradition such as the veneration of Mary as a divine intercessor (if not in fact deity), the veneration of saints and of the Pope, the clerical priesthood, the use of statuary in worship, the use of a talisman for protection, the occult mysticism involved in the “sacrifice” of the Lord’s Supper etcetera. Much of that occultism may not be outwardly apparent to those living in the United States, but in various other countries, occult paganism and mysticism is quite visible. Roman catholicism puts on many faces as it attempts to adapt itself to its locality.

Having discussed the church at Thyatira, we now turn our attention to the church at Sardis. Sardis was an inland city located about thirty miles south of Thyatira and sixty miles northeast of Smyrna (cf. map above). The city was located on the northern slope of Mount Tmolus, overlooking the fertile plain of Hermus along the Pactolus River.

Sardis was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and later became the seat of a Roman proconsul exercising the authority of the Roman Empire in the region. It became a notable commercial city commanding an important trade route to and from the Aegean Sea into the interior of the Asian Continent. It was quite famous for its many skilled artisans and craftsmen. The art of dyeing wool is believed to have been invented there, and it was the first city known to have mass produced coins to be used as currency. The city contained a mint that produced high quality coins made of gold and silver. Silver was readily mined nearby, and gold was obtained in abundance from the Pactolus River.

Much like other cities about them, Sardis contained a temple to Apollo, but it was most notable for its temple of Artemis (or Cynthia – closely associated with Cybele and Diana), who was the primary goddess of the city. The temple’s construction had begun in 334 BC, but due to its considerable size and complexity it was never fully completed. Nevertheless, this ambitious Greek temple was one of the seven largest ever conceived – being twice the size of the Parthenon, a temple built in Athens, Greece. The city of Sardis was also noted for its nearby necropolis, a large cemetery that contained a sizable number of burial sites. Today, this necropolis is referred to as Bin Tepe or “Thousand Mounds,” because of the great number of earthen mounds in which the city’s kings and nobles had been entombed along with much of their wealth.

An acropolis with very steep walls was located on a 950 foot high crag of Mount Tmolus, which allowed it to serve as a bastion in time of attack or siege by an enemy. On the north side of the acropolis, overlooking the valley of Hermus, was a theater nearly 400 feet in diameter, which was in turn attached to a stadium capable of seating around 1000. Sardis was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17, but it was rebuilt with a large amount of monetary aid provided by the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Finally, in the year AD 616, the city of Sardis’ came to an abrupt end when a powerful Persian army, having penetrated Roman defenses, sacked the city leaving it totally devastated. So severe was this destruction that no serious effort was ever made to restore the city. Sardis’ ancient ruins, known today as Sert-Kalessi, are located near the present-day Turkish village of Sart.

Having considered the history of the ancient city of Sardis, we turn now to Holy Scripture to consider the message that Jesus gave to the messenger of the church that was located at Sardis near the end of the first century AD:

“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars;” (Re.3:1a)

Here Jesus identifies himself to the messenger as He who has the seven spirits that are before the throne (cf. Re.1:4), and He who holds the seven stars in his right hand (cf. Re.1:16,20). If the church of Sardis is to remain alive at all it is only because He maintains one of his seven Spirits there.

“I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.” (Re.3:1b–2)

Although they claim to be a robust Christian church that is full of life, they are actually as spiritually dead as are the bodies of those who lie in their great cemetery under huge mounds of earth. To those in whom the breath of life yet remains, He warns to strengthen the little faith they have left, inasmuch as He has not found their religious activities to be fruitful.

“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.” (Re.3:3)

They had long forgotten the sound doctrines that they had once received, but now they are admonished to wake up and remember them anew. If they do not repent from their slumber and carefully watch, He will come upon them suddenly as does a thief in the night in an unguarded hour to take away everything that remains.

“Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.” (Re.3:4)

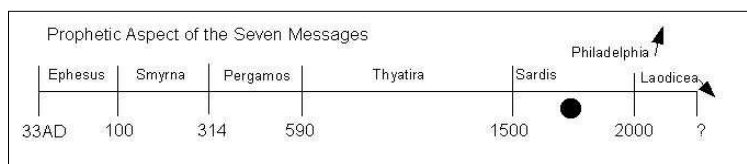
Even here, a small remnant of the elect existed in their midst. Even in the coldest and most dead of all churches a spark of light still remained; God has never left any church without a witness even if they will not hear.

“He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” (Re. 3:5,6)

To the over-comers existing within the seven churches, Jesus promises to “dress them in white raiment” and not to blot out their names from the book of life along with others who have denied Him, but rather that He will acknowledge their name before his Father and before his angels in Heaven.

Far worse than the cold orthodoxy of the church of Ephesus, which had driven out divine love, was the sad state of the church of Sardis. Sardis is representative of many of the cold and highly formal churches today. Like Sardis they are a dying or already dead church, because they have neither genuine orthodoxy nor spiritual fervor born of divine love. They just continue onward in rigid unthinking formalism. They go through rote rituals and ceremonies with automaton-like consistency. In doing that, they exhibit activity without genuine spiritual impulse. Its members no longer remember the Truth that called them together, and they take no notice of the love of Christ that should bind them together into one body. When the hour comes that they shall be visited, they will most certainly not be ready – unless they repent.

Prophetically, the church at Sardis can be seen to represent the Roman Catholic Church at the beginning and



during the early Protestant reform movement. (cf. *CRC Book III*, pages 214-270). Like the church at Sardis, the Roman church had pridefully made a name for itself laying claim to being the living church, but it was dead; it was alive politically, but

totally dead spiritually. Nevertheless, out of that dead Roman church came forth a faithful remnant who had repented, and by embracing what Truth had remained behind, they rejected unfruitful dead works through biblical reform. Among these were men such as Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Huldreich Zwingli, Desiderius Erasmus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many others whom God had specifically chosen for the difficult task ahead (the diligent efforts of these men are discussed in *CRC Book III*, Chapters 18.1 and 18.2). Although the yoke of Rome was slowly being thrown off throughout Europe, most of its populace viewed the reform effort as a political movement rather than a spiritual one, as the parallel secular Renaissance moved onward in great force. Unfortunately, as intellectual darkness abated, many professing Christians of that day became quite willing to toss out sound spiritual and biblical Truth along with Roman churchianity with its many superstitious errors.

State churches were afterwards formed in emerging nation-states that held to many of the same traditional trappings and even much of the rank paganism that had existed in the corrupt Roman church. Much of the worship services continued on in those “reformed” churches without modification and without true biblical enlightenment. As we have repeatedly asserted in this work, biblical reform was not accomplished over night nor for that matter was it ever truly completed; yet, the spark of light that had been struck during that time among God’s elect, whose names are securely affixed in the Lamb’s book of life, continues on in the foundation documents of many Protestant churches today – if not adhered to in actual practice. © Arthur J. Smith, July 2017