

Newsletter June 2017

In our newsletter of April 2017, we began a series of studies of the book of the “Revelation of Jesus Christ,” 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. These were represented in the Apostle John’s day (near the end of the first century AD) by seven existing churches in Asia minor (Re.1:13,20). In Jesus’ right hand, He held seven messengers (angels/stars) to those churches. In this vision given to John, we find that Jesus is both the creator and the source of light (and life) for all church assemblies



residing upon the earth. Jesus speaks of seven churches in the present tense: “...the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches” (Re.1:20). Those seven churches specifically referred to seven temporal churches located in seven cities of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), and they are identified by the city in which they resided. Those cities are, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos (Pergamum), Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. (see map insert).

Last month we discussed the first-century church at Ephesus – the home church of the Apostle John that had remained firm in doctrinal truth, but in doing so had lost their first love for Christ and for his elect. In this month’s newsletter we shall discuss the first-century churches at Smyrna and Pergamos. Like Ephesus, both of these were important port cities on or very near the Aegean Sea.

The city of Smyrna was located about 35 miles north-west of Ephesus. An ancient Aeolian settlement was founded in 11 BC on a peninsula extending out into the sea and was later developed by the Ionians, who were one of four major Greek tribes. A still later settlement was established nearby by the Romans on the slopes of Mount Pagos. In biblical times Smyrna was a very beautiful port city at the head of the Hermus River with a well-sheltered harbor. It was known as the “crown city” because it had many beautiful public buildings that ringed the summit of Mount Pagos like a crown. The acropolis, a fortified citadel located on Mount Pagos, was encircled with flowers, hedges, and myrtle trees further adding to this description. In addition, Smyrna was the terminus for an important overland trade route from the east.

The word “smyrna” means “myrrh,” a fragrant gum resin obtained from the Commiphora myrrha tree that was produced and marketed by the residents of this city. Myrrh was a very costly substance used by the Egyptians as well as wealthy Jews in embalming their dead. It was effective in both preserving the body and in preventing the foul odor associated with decaying flesh. This costly substance along with gold and frankincense were presented to Jesus by the Magi that had come from the oriental east to worship Him (cf. Mt. 2:1,2,11).

The city of Smyrna was deeply infused with pagan worship – even more so than was Ephesus. The city housed a temple of Zeus, the Greek god of the sky and of thunder (known by the Romans as Jupiter), and a temple of Cybele (also worshiped as Diana, the moon goddess, in Ephesus). Cybele was the supposed mother-goddess of all other gods and of men and was the goddess of primal nature. The city also contained a temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, and a temple of Apollo, the Greek god of the sun and of war. Lastly it contained a temple of Aesculapius (or Asklepios or Asclepius), the Greek god of medicine – Smyrna was famous in the ancient world for its knowledge of medicine.

The later Roman settlement was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 200; both the earlier and later locations of Smyrna are archaeological ruins today. Both are located within the city boundaries of the city of Izmir, in the modern nation of Turkey.

With this information as background, we shall now turn our attention to the text of Jesus’ message to the church at Smyrna. As we shall see, this church received no condemnation from Him.

“And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;” (Re. 2:8)

Jesus identifies himself with the earlier vision of the glorified Christ as “the first and the last” (cf. Re.1:11) and the one who was dead, but is now alive, and He reminds them that He has the keys to the grave and to death itself (cf. Re.1:18). This reminder is most appropriate to this church, which was in the midst of great testing and persecution leading to its martyrdom. Jesus reminds them that although they may need to die for their faith, they will live on in Him for all eternity.

“I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” (Re.2:9)

Jesus acknowledged their good works in holding to sound doctrine. Although poor in material goods, as a consequence of intense persecution, Christians living in Smyrna were very rich spiritually; they not only held tenaciously to the Truth, they had also maintained their great love for Jesus and for each other. Jesus knew about their persecutions that were perpetuated by the Jewish community. The Jews hated Christians because they worshiped Jesus as the Messiah, whom they had rejected. In that sense, they were not truly believing Jews. Moreover, many of these Jews were Greeks that only claimed to be Jews; they were not genuine in any sense. Jesus referred to them collectively as the synagogue of Satan, not the synagogue of Jehovah that they claimed to be; this deceit constituted blasphemy. The Jews were very likely reporting Christians of Smyrna to the Roman authorities as being subversive to the rule of Rome.

“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Re.2:10).

Smyrna was at the center of emperor worship that had begun in AD 25 when the Roman Senate authorized the building of temples to honor Tiberius Caesar. Once a year each citizen was ordered to offer up incense to Caesar. If they refused to do so, they were thrown into prison and given ten days to repent or suffer the pain of death. Most devout Christians in Smyrna would not give in even as a political gesture, which resulted in many of them being martyred – particularly so during the years A.D. 81 to 86 under the reign of the emperor Domitian. Even so, Roman persecution did not end with Domitian; many years later in A.D. 156, Polycarp, the beloved Bishop of the church at Smyrna and an earlier pupil of the Apostle John, was martyred and burned alive in the stadium at Smyrna (cf. *CRC* Book III, page 100).

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death” (Re. 2:11).

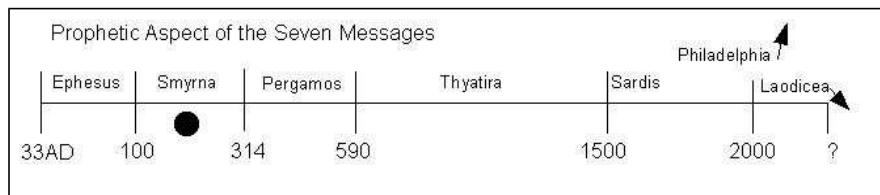
Again, Jesus is speaking directly to his elect that have an ear to hear that they take close notice of what He is saying to the seven churches, in order that they may be able to withstand the evil all about them and remain sound in their faith. While they indeed may need to suffer the separation from their bodies for the sake of Christ through mortal death, they would never suffer the second death, which is the separation of men’s souls from a compassionate and loving God throughout eternity in a state of everlasting torment.

The church of Smyrna is representative of many churches today that are hated and persecuted for the innocent faithfulness of their firm belief. While some few of these churches exist in the United States, they exist in abundance throughout the world – particularly so within Islamic nations. Not many if any pseudo-Christians fill the pews of these churches. They have already deserted because they are no longer interested in being persecuted for a cause that was not truly their own. In times of persecution, the false professor always flees. Those that remain behind are proved genuine and continue to experience severe trials of their faith by their persecutors for their abiding love of Jesus Christ and the eternal rewards that await them.

That type of faithful church, no longer held together with the wealth and influence of its worldly members, commonly finds itself in extreme poverty. Yet, that impoverished church also finds itself purged of the make-believer and are therefore filled with the Spirit of mutual hope. Although they are poor, yet they are rich: not in the wealth of this world, but in heavenly treasures and in their spiritual strength. They fear none of the things that they suffer in love, since they eagerly look forward to a “crown of life” that is promised to all who believe on the name of Jesus. Blessed are those believers, for although many have been put to death over the years for their persistent faith they shall never taste of eternal death.

The church at Smyrna can also be seen to represent the dominant type of church that existed about AD 100 to 314 (cf. timeline below). The church in that age was heavily persecuted by the Roman Empire until an “edict of toleration” was issued in A.D. 313 by the Roman emperor Constantine. By that time, their ranks had been thinned

of many precious souls that had gone on to be with Christ. Ten waves of persecution had been predicted by Jesus



when He said, “and ye shall have tribulation ten days” (Re.2:10). Those “ten days” of persecution are exemplified later by ten periods in which the church was persecuted by the Roman Empire between the years AD 64 and

314. By the time the message to Smyrna was written, two of those periods had already passed into history. Below is a chronological list of ten periods of persecutions designated by the Roman Emperor that had initiated them:

1. Nero AD 64–68 (the Apostle Paul beheaded; cf. *CRC Book III*, page 62)
2. Domitian AD 95–96 (John exiled to Patmos; cf. *CRC Book III*, page 65)
3. Trajan AD 104–117 (Ignatius burned at the stake; cf. *CRC Book III*, pages 96 and 114)
4. Marcus Aurelius AD 161–180 (Polycarp martyred; cf. *CRC Book III*, page 100)
5. Severus AD 200–211, (Irenaeus and Clement martyred; cf. *CRC Book III*, page 125)
6. Maximinius AD 235–237 (cf. *CRC Book III*, page 125)
7. Decius AD 250–253 (cf. *CRC Book III*, page 126)
8. Valerian AD 257–260 (cf. *CRC Book III*, page 126)
9. Aurelian AD 270–275 (cf. *CRC Book III*, page 126)
10. Diocletian AD 303–313 (most intense persecution of all; cf. *CRC Book III*, page 128)

Having discussed the church at Smyrna, we shall now turn our attention to the church at Pergamos (aka Pergamon, Pergamum). Pergamos existed as a settlement prior to 400 BC. In biblical times, it was a city of Mysia located on a promontory near the River Selinus (or Ciacus) – about 18 miles inland from the Aegean Sea and around 50 miles north-east of Smyrna. It was both a beautiful and very wealthy city, which produced a much sought after parchment known by the Greeks as Pergamene – so named after the city. Pergamos boasted a great library which contained over two hundred thousand volumes of scrolls. Mark Anthony later gave this collection to Cleopatra who had the volumes carried off to Alexandria in Egypt to be placed in the much-revered library there. Pergamos grew in prominence under Roman rule, its population expanding to as many as 200,000 residents. For a time, it was designated as the Roman capital of Asia until the capital was later moved to Ephesus.

Pergamum was a center for ancient Babylonian Sol (sun god) worship, and it also had an altar to the Greek god Zeus as well as several temples dedicated to Roman emperor worship. A sanctuary was constructed in a valley at Pergamum, which was dedicated to Aesculapius, (or Asklepios or Asclepius) the Greek God of medicine and healing. An occult-science developed, in which satanic healing purportedly took place through the symbol of the serpent. Those who were stricken of infirmities would bathe in a spring located there, during which Aesculapius would allegedly appear to them in a dream with a remedy for their condition. At its peak, the sanctuary grounds were overrun with thousands of mostly non-poisonous snakes. This sanctuary was later expanded into a lavish Roman spa, wherein it retained its earlier notoriety as a therapeutic healing center.

The rod of Aesculapius has been carried down to the medical profession of our times as a staff entwined with a serpent. Another somewhat less objectionable origin of this medical emblem is suggested from Numbers 21:6-9. This symbol is often confused with the caduceus, which is the rod of Hermes having two serpents entwining around it. Strangely, Hermes was the Greek god of cunning and theft. Inasmuch as the caduceus is also associated with Mercury, the Greek god of speed, wings are often added to this symbol. Variations of those two symbols have over time become nearly interchangeable as emblems used within the modern medical profession.

The city of Pergamos was severely damaged by an earthquake in AD 262, and it was thoroughly pillaged by the Goths shortly thereafter. Today, the city is but a ruin located just northwest of the modern city of Bergama, which is within the Izmir province of Turkey.

With this information as background, we shall now turn to Jesus’ message to the church of Pergamos.

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges” (Re.2:12);

Jesus identifies himself to the messenger of the church at Pergamos as He whose words are as a two-edged sword (Re.1:16). This was a word of warning. The two-edged sword was a powerful weapon in those days inasmuch as it cut on both the fore stroke and the back stroke. Perhaps Jesus was pointing out that when he

attacked his enemies in their city, they too could be cut down by the back stroke if they allied themselves in any way with them by engaging in fornication, sacrificing to idols, or accepting the doctrine of Balaam. (cf. Re.2:16)

“I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth” (Re.2:13).

Jesus knew all about their struggle against evil since they lived where Satan had his headquarters and was worshiped through the idol of the serpent. Nevertheless, they had held fast to Jesus’ name, continuing to call themselves Christians when it was extremely dangerous to do so. Even in the midst of severe persecution they had held fast to the true faith. Nothing is known about Antipas mentioned in this verse except that his name means “against all” and that he was martyred by the pagans of the city because of his faithful witnessing of Jesus.

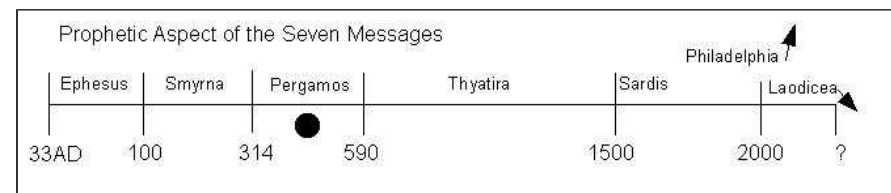
“But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Re.2:14–16).

Jesus was very disturbed because they had allowed men that adhered to the doctrine of Baalam in their congregation. Such men desired wealth more than the faith, which caused them to put stumbling blocks in the way of the maturity of believers. They advocated idol worship, and committing fornication either literally or by marrying outside their faith. This was in accord with the epicurean practices of the Nicolaitans that we discussed earlier when we studied the message to the church at Smyrna. If they did not repent from such ungodly compromise, Jesus said He would come against them with the sharp sword of his own Word.

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it” (Re.2:17).

Jesus offered to feed individual believers, who would seek to overcome error and corruption, with hidden food (manna). The purity of the food He offers contrasts greatly with putrefied food that was offered to idols. Furthermore, He would give him a place within the Temple of God. A “white stone” with his own special name on it awaits the over-comer in that heavenly house; he will be acquitted of any wrongdoing with which he may have been unwittingly entangled that was not of his own making or approval.

The church in Pergamos is representative of many temporal churches today that are founded in corrupt worldly surroundings. While they steadfastly adhere to the name of Jesus and do not outwardly deny his name, they compromise with the evil around them by giving in to satanic doctrines and to the acceptance of vile professors within their ranks. This corruption is seen today in churches that accept error in order to perpetuate their institutional existence. As did the church at Pergamos, many churches place an undue emphasis upon Jesus’ acts of physical healing over the all-essential spiritual healing to which it pointed (cf. Lu.5:20-25). Compromise and error are deadly enemies of Truth, eventually rendering those that accept it totally empty of true faith.



Prophetically, the church at Pergamos can be seen to represent the dominant temporal church existing during the period AD 314 to 590. During that time, Roman persecution of the true church was exchanged for a

satanic embrace as through the activities of the Emperor Constantine, the Roman Empire took absolute control over the operation of the temporal church from within (cf. *CRC Book III*, pages 134-136). As multitudes of unsaved heathen were later forced into the Roman church by the Emperor Theodosius (cf. *CRC Book III*, pages 141-143), church worship and practice became infused with paganism and worldliness; Roman institutionalization thus began to enclose the true church within a corrupt and monstrous political structure. As a consequence, biblical Truth was repeatedly compromised to political whims and expediencies. Over time, many of those corruptions became established Roman church traditions, which ultimately gained dominance over the authority of Holy Scripture, thus adversely affecting all matters of faith and even Truth itself.