

## Newsletter September 2017

In our newsletter of April 2017, we began a series of studies in the book of the “Revelation of Jesus Christ,” beginning with an exposition of the text contained within Chapter 1. In that chapter, The Apostle John 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 depicted in 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 subsequent newsletters, we discussed Jesus’ messages to each of these seven churches, ending in our August 2017 newsletter with a discussion of Jesus’ messages given to the churches of Philadelphia and Laodicea.

In this series of studies we established a prophetic chronological aspect for the seven churches, each portraying a dominant temporal church existing within a specific historical period. In our August Newsletter, we placed the historic aspect of both of the last two churches, Philadelphia and Laodicea, in a common time-frame having a beginning in the early twentieth century. Their highly contradictory dual dominance overlaps and continues into and beyond the present age in which we live. The loyal church of Philadelphia is seen to depict today’s biblical reformed evangelical churches, which will one day in the future be “caught up” (cf. 1Th. 4:17) into heaven to be with Jesus Christ, while the Laodicean church, which depicts today’s worldly apostate church, will remain behind on earth until it is ultimately destroyed by the minions of the Antichrist (cf. Re.17:16).

Before we begin our study of Revelation Chapter 4, we must first discuss a few preliminary matters. As we concluded our study of Revelation Chapter 3, it is significant to note that the Church is never again mentioned by that specific name within this prophecy. Only after the prophetic section is concluded, does Jesus again relate Himself in a first-century present-tense to the seven temporal churches on earth: “I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star” (Re.22:16).

Beginning with Chapter 4, the Revelation takes on a very distinct Jewish quality in which Jesus is seen as the Messiah – the “root and offspring of David.” Therefore, as we advance into the depths of this prophecy, especially so following Chapter 7, we find that many allusions are made to Old Testament prophecies, practices, places, things and events, which are much more readily understood by the Jewish mind than that of a Gentile Christian. In that regard, this latter portion of the prophecy is directed toward the Jew, and most probably to a sealed Jewish remnant (cf. Re. 7:1-8) living in the last days of this age. This prophecy will enable them to understand the many trials and difficulties they must endure as the kingdom age rapidly approaches. While these Jewish prophecies are available for Christians to read, the latter prophecy contained in Revelation 7 through 20 does not directly pertain to us as members of his faithful Church. That said, all of the Revelation is intended for the edification of Christian believers that they may understand the present and future activities of Jesus Christ in Heaven as they await his return at the culmination of this present age. To the Christian, Jesus is the “bright and morning star” that must appear as a sign before a new day dawns within the Millennial age. Just before that new day begins, He will call down for his Church to exit the earth to join with Him in the firmament above the earth to forever remain with Him (cf. 1Th.4:13-17; 1Co.15:51-57).

Prior to the nineteenth century, the church on earth utilized a generalized system of theology based upon the series of covenants found within the Bible – generally referred to as “covenantalism” in which most all of Revelation is allegorized as being applicable to the present church age. Covenantalism also embraces a “replacement theology” in which the Church is seen as having replaced Israel in the mind of God, thus leaving Israel altogether reprobate – with no hope of future redemption. Consequently, covenantalism does not recognize the existence of a future kingdom age for the Jew on earth following the present church age. Therefore, it cannot view the transport of the true Church off the earth into heaven prior to the beginning of that age. Instead, it sees a general judgment and resurrection taking place with the return of Christ just prior to the beginning of the eternal ages (cf. *CRC Book II*, pages 130-132).

Around 1830 AD, John Nelson Darby, an influential Anglican-Irish Bible teacher among the original Plymouth Brethren and the founder of a subgroup known as the Exclusive Brethren, formulated an innovative system of Bible interpretation in opposition to well-established covenantalism of his day. His systematic theology became known as dispensationalism, which recognized the existence of a future kingdom age (cf. *CRC Book II*, pages 128-130). Darby also put forth a premise in which he stated that Daniel’s seventieth week and the “great tribulation,” of which Jesus spoke in his Olivet Discourse (cf. Mt.24:21), are synonymous –

regardless of the fact that there is no Scriptural evidence for a seven-year period of “great tribulation” to be found anywhere in either the Old or New Testament. As we pointed out in our Newsletter of January 2017, Jesus’ entire Olivet Discourse should be interpreted in a chronological order spanning Daniel’s entire seventieth week. In doing so, we concluded that the “great tribulation” of which He spoke must encompass a relatively short period of time somewhere near the middle of Daniel’s seventieth week.

Darby further proposed that a “secret” timing of the Rapture must take place at the end of a vast unknown span of time existing between the prophetic texts of Chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Revelation; this span is seen to correspond to the gap found between Daniel’s sixty-ninth and seventieth week, which is applicable to the present church age (cf. Newsletter December 2016). However, the Apostle John connects the text at the end of Chapter 3 to the text beginning in chapter 4 with the words “after this,” (cf. Re. 4:1), which does not indicate that any notable event has taken place or length of time has passed by. Darby’s assumption was based upon the fact that the Church is not mentioned by name following Revelation Chapter 3 (cf. comments above regarding Re. 22:16), and that the Rapture as a specific event is not described as such anywhere in the book of Revelation. Nevertheless, there are strong allusions to the Church to be found within the prophecy, especially so in the text of Revelation 7:9-17, wherein John observes a vast multitude of people abruptly appearing in Heaven that no man can number – their robes made white in the blood of the lamb. This appearance could also signify that the Rapture of the Church had just taken place, as we shall discuss in a future study.

Darby’s dispensational system was soon adopted by American fundamentalists as they struggled hard against the highly destructive modernist movement that had infiltrated covenantal churches worldwide (cf. CRC Book III, pages 369, 331). Dispensationalism has now become almost universally accepted by today’s evangelical churches as fully settled doctrine, and elements of it are often found existing within the membership of other churches that continue to support and teach covenantalism from the pulpit.

With these preliminary matters in mind, let us now move on to ascertain what the inspired text of Revelation Chapter 4 tells us, and as much as possible interpret its meaning in proper prophetic context without becoming overly involved in systemic bias and controversy:

**“After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter”** (Re. 4:1).

John had earlier stated that he was “in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (cf. Re.1:9,10). However, before we reached this place in the Revelation prophecy, ending with Chapter 3, the Apostle John had remained firmly anchored, both body and spirit, on the Island of Patmos, where he had seen and recorded many things concerning the glorified Christ judging and ruling over his earthbound temporal church. Everything John had seen thus far had been viewed from an earthly perspective. That perspective was about to change as Chapter 4 begins with the appearance of a door opening into Heaven along with a loud voice that beckoned John to ascend through it in order to be shown things that must happen in the future.

**“And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald”** (Re.4:2, 3)

A complete change in visual aspect from an earthly to a heavenly one took place, as John experienced an instantaneous conveyance into the vast realms of Heaven itself. His journey was unquestionably a spiritual one, as John clearly stated with the words, “And immediately I was in the spirit.” Although John’s body remained on earth, all of his mental faculties were as if he had been physically placed in Heaven. However, John’s spiritual transfer is viewed by dispensationalists as being symbolic of a future physical Rapture of the Church, which as we discussed earlier they expect to take place just prior to the beginning of the seventieth week of Daniel. Jesus’ trumpet shout down out of Heaven for the transport of his Church (cf. 1Th.4:16,17) is seen to correlate well with the text of Revelation 4:1 in which a loud voice from Heaven commanded John to “come up hither.”

Although John had been suddenly transferred to Heaven to view and record things that must occur thereafter, he first needed to become oriented with his heavenly surroundings. Therefore, throughout Chapter 4, we find that John is still recording “things that are,” not yet future events – albeit about things that are in Heaven, not things that are on earth. The first thing that John saw and recorded was the existence of a throne. The fact that this throne was set in Heaven indicates that the divine sovereign ruler of Heaven must sit upon it. Although, John could

discern “One who sat on the throne,” he did not recognize any physical shape – only an intense radiation of brilliant colors. God is a spirit (cf. Jn.4:24) who has no physical form, yet He can unveil his Glory through visible light. The here-mentioned Jasper stone is multicolored with purple predominating, while the sardine stone is fiery red. The rainbow, or halo, surrounding the throne radiated sparkling shades of emerald green. Although God subsists in three persons, such that this Glory could represent the entire Godhead, John’s vision of “One who sat on the throne” most probably identifies God the Father who eternally reigns on this throne in Heaven.

**“And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold” (Re.4:4)**

Later on in the Revelation, angels frequently approach John to explain the meaning of things that he sees, but no such explanation is found here. Apparently, John has no question in his mind about what he is seeing. Nevertheless, there is considerable speculation and controversy among Bible scholars regarding who or even what these twenty-four elders are; some believe that they are supernatural creatures much like, or even in fact, angels. This conjecture comes about from the fact that angels are commonly seen as being dressed in a white vesture as are these elders. However, angels are never referred to as elders anywhere else in Scripture, nor do angels wear crowns of gold, making it highly unlikely that this could be a sole exception.

The primary meaning of “elder” (Greek, *presbuteros*) is a man who has attained dignity, wisdom, and position as a consequence of vast knowledge and experience gained through advanced age. Therefore, John’s use of the word “elder” implies that he recognized them as being elderly men. The white raiment worn by these elders indicates their state of purity and righteousness. The crowns they are wearing are not *diadems*, as are worn by a sovereign ruler, but are *stephanos* in the Greek, which signifies a victor’s crown won by runners of a long foot race. Those crowns were ordinarily a garland made of leaves that must wither with time, but the crowns that the twenty-four elders wear are made of gold, thus signifying the permanence of their victory as those who had persevered in a marathon of life under very trying circumstances for a very long period of time.

It is postulated by dispensationalists that these twenty-four elders represent the entire Church, which has been “caught up” (Greek: *harpazo*; cf. 1Th.4:17) into heaven just prior to or coincident with the text beginning in Revelation 4:1. Obviously, the consummated Church will be composed of a massive throng of people, not just twenty-four individuals. Therefore, the Church as it is viewed here is believed by dispensationalists to be represented by a council of twenty-four elect Christian elders. Jesus’ apostles would immediately come to mind for positions in this council, but the fact that these elders number twenty four excludes the possibility of them being entirely composed of Jesus’ apostles, who numbered but twelve. A few would point out that the apostles possess dual identities both as Jews and as Christians thus accounting for the number twenty-four, but this hardly explains why John saw them as twenty-four individual men.

Many see the twenty-four elders as being made up of two groups of twelve – although we must note that this text does not validate that conclusion. If Jesus’ apostles only make up half of this heavenly council, it would then become necessary to speculate about the identity of the remaining twelve elders. Some scholars attempt to undertake this highly controversial task by identifying them with various notable Christian men from various periods of church history unto our present day. This process would be fraught with error and lack of certainty.

Although the preponderance of Bible scholars persists that these twenty-four elders must in some way represent the Church, we must note that the word “elder” is not exclusively used as titles for church leaders; for example, in Hebrews 11:2, *presbuteros*, is directly applied to the ancient forefathers of Israel. Therefore, dispensational doctrine aside, all or part of these elders could very well be prominent men chosen by God out of the Old Covenant era. We shall examine this possibility further as we gain additional information regarding these elders in Revelation Chapter 5. Therefore, we shall reserve additional comment concerning their identities until we encounter them again in that study.

**“And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God” (Re; 4:5).**

The lightnings and thundering emanating from the throne are reminiscent of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai (cf. Ex.19:16, 20:18). The voices can be seen to represent the internal council of God, from which He speaks his pronouncements to the twenty-four elders, and from which He also spoke the Ten Commandments of the Law to Moses. The seven lamps of fire representing the seven Spirits of God are the fervent eyes of Jesus Christ (cf. Re.1:4), which is the Holy Spirit sent forth into the world: “And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the

throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth” (Re. 5:6).

**“And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind”** (Re.4:6).

The crystal clear sea which John defined as “glass” before and around the throne represents an extent of separation from everything else that is about the throne in keeping with the absolute purity and Holiness of God (cf. Mt.5:8; He.12:14). The four “beasts” (Greek: *zoa*) are eternal living creatures having eyes to see the past, present, and future as one. They are always alert and highly aware of their surroundings with righteous zeal. “*Zoon*,” the singular form of “*zoa*” from which we get our English word “zoo,” differentiates them from fanatical unrestrained beasts (Greek: *therion*), which we shall encounter later on in the book of Revelation as representing evil men and beings. These four creatures somewhat resemble other living creatures like Isaiah’s seraphim and Ezekiel’s cherubim described in the Old Testament (cf. Is. 6:2,3; Ez.1:5-25; 10:1-22).

**“And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle”** (Re.4:7).

We note that these creatures can be seen to represent the creatures that God earlier created and then saved in the ark at the time of the great flood. Each represents the head of its kind; the lion represents wild animals, the calf (or ox) represents domestic animals, the creature with a face of a man represents Noah and his family, and the eagle represents birds and other flying creatures. Of noted absence are fish and sea creatures, which had remained in their natural element outside of the ark. These four creatures can also be seen as representing God’s voracious power, tremendous strength, infinite mercy, and swiftness in all his activities. In addition, these four faces can be seen to represent the four Gospels. As the lion is viewed as the king of the animal kingdom, the Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the eternal King of mankind. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is seen as the servant of mankind represented by the calf (or ox), a beast of burden who patiently transports and carries on its back man’s tremendous load. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is presented as the perfect man who is sinless and undefiled, while in the Gospel of John, Jesus is presented as absolute deity – the infinite eternal God.

**“And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come”** (Re.4:8).

Each of the four living creatures had six wings with which they steadily hovered in place. Their many eyes within indicate their constant personal introspection to assure that they never fail in their divine purpose. They do not ever rest or sleep, but stay awake and alert in order that they may continuously praise God’s holiness. With their many eyes behind, within, and before, they see and declare the holiness of God who ever was, the holiness of God who is, and the infinite holiness of God who will subsist in the future and forever. The three “holies” can also be interpreted to represent the Triune quality of the Godhead, which forever subsists as the eternal Father in Heaven; the God-man, Jesus Christ, who died on earth for man’s sin and who arose again for their justification; and the Holy Spirit who infilled Jesus while on earth and presently remains here on earth to convict men of their sin and to indwell and guide the redeemed.

**“And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created”** (Re.4:9-10).

Whenever the four living creatures give “glory and honor and thanks” to the eternal God who sits on the throne, the twenty-four elders fall upon their faces and cast their crowns before Him, for they live and exist only at his pleasure. As they do so, they echo the praise of the four living creatures with their own anthem saying, “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power.” The anthem that the twenty-four elders sing is a creation hymn: “For thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”

Men were not created for themselves, that they may glorify themselves, but for God’s divine pleasure in doing so; we exist only to glorify God. As sinful fallen creatures, the only way we can do so is through God’s beloved Son: sent to earth to be the perfect man, Jesus Christ, who alone could and would restore mankind to its holy calling through suffering an atoning death for them on the cross of Calvary. © Arthur J. Smith, September 2017