

Revelation — Chapters 2 & 3

The Seven Churches: History and Character of the Christian Profession

An Outline of "The Revelation" — Walter Scott From The Faith and The Flock, 1910–1911

A reference to the Chart in the February issue shews that this section of our book is titled The Things which are. Had those two chapters been omitted from The Revelation, we would have suffered an irreparable loss. In them we have the Spirit's history of the Christian profession from the close of the Apostolic period, right down through the ages, till its rejection. It is, therefore, an exceedingly important section, and one fruitful in lessons both to the Church and individual. The history is necessarily brief—not many particulars are given, but rather the statement of general principles. The down-grade course of the Church from its first point of departure (2:4) till its absolutely Christless condition (3:17, 20) is here sketched by a Divine pen. The history is open to all who have ears to hear.

Will the reader carefully note that we have— Church History in Rev. 2 and 3.

Kingdom History in Matt. 13.

Gentile Political History in Dan. 7.

Jewish National History in Gen. 49.

Governmental History of Israel in Deut. 33.

Ecclesiastical History of Israel in Lev. 23.

In the Chart, the Churches here addressed are separately named, and a brief word or sentence added so as to point out the main characteristics of each. Attention to this will materially assist the reader in the understanding of these Apocalyptic Epistles.

In all, there are seven Churches, which presents the Church as a whole in its totality, its completeness. But the seven are divided into two groups—three and four. In the first three, namely, Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos, the call, "He that hath an ear, let him hear" precedes the address to the overcomer; whereas in the second groups, namely, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, the overcomer is first addressed followed by the call to hear.

Again, the first group presents consecutive periods of history. In the second group the beginnings of history are as distinctly marked as in the first, but their close brings us down in a general way to the coming of the Lord; they overlap each other. In the first group, the

main point is a call to repent and return to the pristine condition of the Church as in Pentecostal youth and beauty. In the second group, the hopeless condition of the Church is shewn, recovery is impossible, hence in each the goal of hope is the Kingdom and the Coming of the Lord.

In all the Churches, mingled praise and blame are meted out in exact proportions to their actual state, save in two—Smyrna and Philadelphia. The former was characterized by suffering, the latter marked by weakness, hence neither is blamed. Their condition rather called for sympathy and support. 1. Ephesus (2:1-7). Paul, 30 years previously, addressed a letter to the Saints in Ephesus. John sends his communications to the angel of the Church in Ephesus. In the former there is intimacy; in the latter there is reserve. We believe the difference can be accounted for. In Paul's time, love was the predominant feature of the Church life of Ephesus. Love is variously mentioned in the Pauline Epistle nearly 20 times. In John's day, love was characteristically absent in the Ephesian assembly, hence he cannot write to the saints directly but to their "star" or representative, i.e., the angel. "Nevertheless I have against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." The word "somewhat," wrongly inserted in our English Bibles, weakens the sense. The absence of first love is a positive and grave cause of complaint, and must on no account be palliated.

Love is the life-breath of the Church and of the Christian. It is the hidden spring of all Christian activity, of all true devotedness, of all service and worship acceptable to God. We cannot do better than beg careful perusal of the Holy Spirit's commentary on love—the first and most enduring of all Christian graces—in 1 Cor. 13. The first step in the Church's downward career is here noted, "Thou hast left thy first love." Where love to Christ is lacking, or but feebly alive in the soul, that Church or Christian that can be justly so charged is in grave danger of making moral shipwreck of faith, of conscience, and even of common morality. God alone can read the heart. If Christ is absent there (Eph. 3:17), you are in gravest peril.

The root of all that is wrong in church-life and personal life is the absence of first love to Christ. Divine love is the kernel of Christianity and the firm maintenance of it in the soul the power of a subjective and practical Christianity.

Praise always precedes blame. Such is the order in the addresses to these Churches; see also I Cor. 1:4-7. Our God delights to own every good in His people, hence the serious indictment against the Ephesian Church (Rev. 2:4) comes after the hearty and unqualified commendation of their practical life as detailed in vv. 2 and 3. How ready we are to find

fault, how slow to appreciate in others what God by His Spirit has produced and what, perhaps, may be lacking in ourselves.

The removal of the Ephesian candlestick (v. 5) has had its solemn counterpart today and through the ages. Many an assembly originally distinguished for zeal, devotedness, service, suffering and firm opposition to all ecclesiastical pretension has fallen under the judgment which befell the Church in Ephesus. Let us never forget that Christ yet walks in the midst of the Churches as the ecclesiastical Judge thereof (v. 1).

There was much to commend in the Church in the close of the first century, but its characteristic defect was a waning love for the Lord Jesus Christ. 2. Smyrna (2:8-11). In order to recover the Church, fast drifting away from devotedness and love to Christ, God threw His people into the fires of persecution. The pagan imperial powers of Rome were His instruments. For about 250 years, successive periods of suffering culminating in the Diocletian persecution of ten years—the worst of all—overtook the Church (v. 10). Satan got the dross.

God had the gold. Faith shone brilliantly. Love triumphed, and the eighth of Romans (35-39) was verified to the very letter. “The Synagogue of Satan” (v. 9) points—not to individual effort as before to ruin the Church by the introduction of Judaism in principle and practice (Phil. 3:2)—but to a collective and established system within the Church itself determined to wreck and ruin the Church as the vessel of God’s grace in the world.

To the suffering Church, Christ presents Himself in the grand and consolatory titles taken from chap. 1:17, 18. How fitting the titles to the conditions of His people exposed to suffering, and death in its cruelest forms. The “Crown of Life” (v. 10) and immunity from Divine judgment (v. 11) are the promised rewards of the Smyranean overcomer.

The witnessing company of Heb. 11 is complete. The overcoming company of Rev. 2 and 3 is in process of formation. May reader and writer be found amongst the completed number of overcomers to receive each for himself the Lord's own personal approval in the day of His and our glory. 3. Pergamos (2:12-17). Diocletian, the last of the Pagan Emperors, and Constantine, the first of the Christian Emperors, are set in sharp contrast in the writings of the historians. The former is sternly denounced; the latter is warmly praised. Yet, strange to say, the Church flourished under Diocletian and sank under Constantine.

The judgment of the world as to these things is very different from that of the enlightened Christian. The world regards the era of Constantine as the triumph of Christianity, whereas its public downfall as to strangership with Christ, and of separation

from the world, dates from that period. Constantine patronized Christianity, forced its adoption upon his heathen subjects at the point of the sword in various instances, raised prominent Christians to positions in the State, used the gorgeous temples of Paganism for the celebration of Christian worship, and effected the union of Church and State, the results of which continue to this day. The unholy alliance of the Church and world had a dazzling effect upon mankind. It was Satan's masterpiece. The Church sat down in the presence of Satan's throne (v. 13). Yet amidst it all a few maintained intact the faith of God's elect and resisted even unto death the ungodly alliance (v. 13). The Church lived in gorgeous splendor, walked in golden slippers, that was her ruin. In scripture the world and the Church are in principle and practice diametrically opposed.

Paul the Apostle of faith (2 Cor. 6:14-18), Peter, the apostle of hope (1 Pet. 4), James, the apostle of works (James 4:4), and John, the apostle of love (1 John 2:15-17) all declare the impossibility of walking with God whilst cultivating the friendship of the world. May we lay the lesson to heart. Add to this the Lord's emphatic declaration, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:14, 16). 4. Thyatira (2:18-29). In the circumstances connected with this Church, we are transported into the dark or middle ages when the Papacy reigned supreme. The hopeless condition of the Church is here shown inasmuch as its one and only hope is the Personal Coming of the Lord and the establishment of the Kingdom here presented for the first time in these addresses. Thyatira is the first of the second group of these Churches, and in its character and what is related of it, runs down to the end. It is the longest address of any of the seven, that to Smyrna being the briefest. The blending of what is personal (v. 28) with public glory (vv. 26, 27) is exceedingly fine.

The first part of the descriptive glory of Jesus, "the Son of God" (v. 18) is not found in the Revelation of Him as in chap. 1, there it is in the characteristic glory of Son of Man. Here He takes that very character on which the Church is built (Matt. 16:16-18)—the confession of Himself as Son of the living God.

There are four women referred to in The Revelation, but these do not represent persons but systems. Thus Jezebel (v. 20), stands for the Papacy; a woman invested with the fulness of governmental authority (12:1) represents Israel; the woman and whore sets forth the Apostate Church (17); while the bride and wife signify the Church in eternal association with Christ (19).

The Papacy has been the curse of Christendom. It withers and blights everything it touches. The rule of the priest is inimical to material progress, to national prosperity. It is an

absolute impossibility for any nation or people to progress under Papacy.

Take Spain and the South of Ireland as examples.

A remnant—separated from the mass—is now formally recognized (v. 24), and yet one other interesting feature, there was and is in the midst of that system—the most wicked and anti-Christian—that which the Lord heartily commends (v. 19). May we have grace to do so likewise. 5. Sardis (3:1-6). In the previous church, we have in word and symbol the Papacy pictured. Here, we have the Reformation and Protestantism brought before us. Jezebel—the Papacy—exercised sway over Europe for a thousand years, but God in mercy interposed, and the voice and pen of Luther and the printed Bible broke in upon the scene of death, superstition, and gross corruption characteristic of medieval times. Europe awoke as from a nightmare, and to a large extent threw off the Papal yoke. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was a Divine movement so far as it went. The grandest work of that period was an open Bible—not as before confined to Bishop and Priest, many of whom were so ignorant that they could not read, but the Bible was publicly read in Church, Chapel and Assembly, and the doctrines of grace expounded openly and in the hearing of all. But the Reformers came short, “I have not found thy works perfect (or complete) before God” (v. 2). The distinguishing truth of Justification by Faith in opposition to works as developed in Paul’s epistles to the Romans and Galatians, was substantially the limit of biblical attainment by the Reformers. Their struggles with the Papal authorities left them but little time for enlarged study of the Word.

What succeeded the Reformation was Protestantism as a system.

The Church as developed in 1 Cor., Eph. and Col. was almost utterly unknown. Hence, the leaders in Protestantism began to make Churches instead of recognizing that God’s Church consisting of all the saved is on the earth. God’s assembly is a divine thing on the earth. It was established at Pentecost, and has existed ever since in divine unity. But Protestantism with its numerous sects smothers the scriptural idea of the Church, and has sunk down into a state of deadness and powerlessness, hence the frequent use of the word “name” and “names” (vv. 1, 4, 5). Protestantism simply lives on tradition—on what it was and did. It is lifeless, and utterly powerless to stem the advancing inroads of its old and bitter enemy the Papacy. It awaits the judgment of God (v. 3.) 6. Philadelphia (3:7-13). We have had the Papacy in Thyatira with, however, a remnant recognized, such as the Albigenses and Waldenses of the thirteenth century. Thus in Sardis we have what might have proved a magnificent work for God and man. The Reformation did much, but it did not

go far enough. It stopped short, and instead of a complete recovery of long neglected and unknown truth, buried from soon after the close of the first century, a system was established in opposition to the Papacy. The life, the vitality of Christianity is absent in Protestantism, hence another Reformation was needed.

Philadelphia contemplates a state of things which had their origin in the early part of the 19th century. Three things characterized the movement: the revival of genuine Godliness, the true nature of the Church as the body of Christ, and consequently our vital associations with Christ in heaven; and the Personal Return of the Lord from heaven as the true Christian Hope; and the study of the prophetic word. All this forms the true complement to the work of the Reformation. The Reformation of the 19th century is just as important as the Reformation of the 16th century.

There is no word of blame addressed to the Angel of the Church in Philadelphia, but there is unstinted praise and promise to the overcomer (v. 8-12). The rewards and promises here are peculiarly rich and full. The revived testimony of the Lord had been maintained in much weakness in Philadelphia—Christ's word, name, patience and coming. Here too the Philadelphian saints are cheered by another blessed announcement, "Behold, I come quickly" (v. 11).

Philadelphian state and conditions spring from personal associations with Christ. In this address, He is everything. In Laodicea He is outside, and the Church boasts in unbounded self-satisfaction. Here Christ is clung to, and His word prized beyond all else. 7. Laodicea (3:14-22). We have here a clearly defined picture of Christless profession. Christ is rejected by the mass, and so He is here seen outside, and entreating for individual fellowship (v. 20).

We do not hesitate to assert that the Laodicean state characteristic of today is the most appalling of any Church condition. The greater number of so-called Christian people are unsaved—destitute of Divine righteousness for God—"gold tried in the fire." The practical righteousness of saints before the world, "white raiment" is also wanting. Neither is there perception of need—no spiritual discernment—no "eye-salve" (v. 18). Laodicea is self-satisfied and boasts largely and loudly of her wealth, but Christ is outside. What does the Lord think of all this? How does He regard this Church and her boasting and material wealth? Let verse seventeen answer.

Fellowship with the Lord is becoming intensely individual. The corporate conditions await judgment—there is no remedy, no hope (v. 16). Thus "the things which are"—the second great division of our book—closes up in judgment, our hope is to be caught up (1

Thess. 4:15-17).