

# The Word of Righteousness

## The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (1)

The writings of John occupy the final place in the Holy Scriptures. John's Gospel, written in approximately A.D. 90, is the final word of the Gospels, and his three Epistles, written after his return from exile, are the last of the New Testament Epistles. As the last book of the Bible, Revelation is the conclusion, completion, and consummation of the entire divine revelation, presenting the unique, ultimate revelation of Christ; the particular, consummate testimony of Jesus; and the universal, eternal economy of God (Lee, Recovery Version, Rev. 1:1, note 1). Revelation is the harvest of all the seeds of the truths that were planted in the foregoing books of the divine revelation. Because of this, most of the matters covered in this book are not absolutely new. The church in particular is first mentioned in the Gospels both directly, in parable, and in picture (Matt. 16:18; 18:17; 13:44, 46; John 12:1-3). Following this, the church is produced and spread in the Acts (2:42-47; 9:31; 14:23; 16:5), and it is revealed and built up in the Epistles (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:24; 1 Tim. 3:15). However, it is not until we come to Revelation that we see the final disposition and consummation of the church. The condition and progress of the church—both positively and negatively—are prophetically revealed in chapters 2 and 3 of this book. At the same time, Christ—the shepherding, judging, and refining High Priest who walks in the midst of the churches—calls for some to rise above the degradation of the church for the maintaining of the testimony of Jesus. In each of the seven epistles in these chapters, the testifying Christ and the speaking Spirit unveil the need for and requirements, nature, condition, and reward of the overcomers.

### The Seven Golden Lampstands

Before we enter into the details of the seven epistles, we must deal with several general and preliminary matters. First, we need to see the nature of the churches in the first three chapters of Revelation. Verses 9 through 13 of chapter 1 say,

I John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in spirit on the Lord's Day and heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, saying, What you see write in a scroll and send it to the seven churches: to

Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamos and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. And I turned to see the voice that spoke with me; and when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands One like the Son of Man.

Verse 20 continues, "The mystery of the seven stars which you saw upon My right hand and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

In the New Testament Epistles the church is revealed as the ἐκκλησία, the called-out ones, the congregation, the assembly of those called by God out of the world and sanctified unto Him (1 Cor. 1:2). In a higher sense, the church is the Body of Christ, an organic entity of the divine life, composed of Christ the Head and the regenerated believers as His members to be the fullness, the expression, of the all-filling One (12:12; Eph. 1:22-23). The church is also the new man, the corporate and universal man conceived by Christ on the cross and composed of two peoples, the Jews and the Gentiles (2:15; 4:24; Col. 3:10-11). It is the practical kingdom of God in the present age, composed of all the believers as fellow citizens (Eph. 2:19; Rom. 14:17). It is the house and household of the living God, the dwelling place of God in the believers' human spirit (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:22). As such, it is the temple, the sanctuary, of the Lord indwelt by the Spirit of God (v. 21; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16). The church is the bride of Christ, coming out of Him as her source, having His life and nature, and being built up in love and beautified to be His counterpart (Gen. 2:21-23; Eph. 5:25-27). The church is also the corporate warrior, who is empowered and equipped to deal with God's enemy, the evil forces of darkness (6:11-12).

The ultimate revelation of the church in the present age is that of the golden lampstands. The lampstand in the tabernacle and in the temple (Exo. 25:31-40; 1 Kings 7:49) signifies Christ as the embodiment and expression of the Triune God, shining with the sevenfold life-giving Spirit (Rev. 1:4; 4:5; 5:6; cf. Zech. 4:1-6). The seven lampstands in Revelation signify the local churches as the testimony of Jesus, which have been propagated sevenfold in the divine nature to shine in the dark night of the present age corporately

---

and collectively yet locally in the cities where believers dwell (1:2, 9, 11-12). The consummation and aggregate of all the lampstands in the Scriptures is the New Jerusalem, the ultimate, unique, and eternal golden lampstand, with Christ as the lamp and God as the light shining within Him and through the holy city for the expression of the Triune God in eternity (21:11, 18, 23; 22:5). The revelation of the local churches as the golden lampstands is the Lord's ultimate unveiling concerning the church.

**B**efore Christ turns in His judgment to deal with the negative aspects of each local church, He unveils to John the divine and heavenly nature of the church, as portrayed by the seven shining lampstands of gold. As we review the shortfalls and errors of the churches in chapters 2 and 3, we can recall Jehovah's dealing with the Gentile prophet Balaam in Numbers 22 through 24. When Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse Israel, Balaam could only say, "He [Jehovah] has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, / Nor has He seen trouble in Israel" (23:21). Although in Revelation 2 and 3 Christ exposes the shortcomings of the individual churches with His burning, searching, and divine judgment, He still sees them as golden lampstands, the focus of the divine administration in the present age for the accomplishing of God's eternal purpose. Their nature is golden, and their testimony is shining. To see this vision, we must be in spirit, as John was (1:10; cf. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).

### Understanding the Prophecies of Revelation

Before we proceed further, we also need to understand the nature of Revelation. The seven epistles are addressed to the seven churches in Asia. In its scriptural usage, *Asia* refers to the Roman proconsular province in the western portion of what later came to be called Asia Minor. It included the regions of Mysia, Lydia, Caria, and the adjacent islands to the west, including the small island of Patmos. On his third ministry journey, Paul remained and worked in Ephesus for three years, so that all those dwelling in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:10, 22; 20:31). Neither the Scriptures nor history provides us with an exhaustive list of the churches in Asia, but besides the seven named in Revelation, we know that Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, which was very near to Laodicea, and he ministered to the believers in Troas and Hierapolis, which also were in Asia (Acts 16:8; 20:6-12; 2 Cor. 2:12; 2 Tim. 4:13; Col. 1:2; 2:1; 4:13, 15-16).

In Revelation, however, the Lord addresses only seven churches. Two principles help us to understand the content of this book. First, Revelation is composed mainly of signs, which are symbols with spiritual significance. *Seven*, for example, is used in the Bible to signify completion in God's operation. Revelation begins, "The revelation

of Jesus Christ which God gave to Him to show to His slaves the things that must quickly take place; and He made it known by signs, sending it by His angel to His slave John" (1:1). With one exception, the prophetic use of *make known by signs* (σημαίνω from σημα, "sign") is confined in the New Testament to the writings of John (Alford 546) In Revelation it "suits admirably the symbolic character of the book" (Robertson 284). G. K. Beale writes that the verb denotes

Symbolic communication and not mere general conveyance of information. Therefore, John's choice of σημαίνω over γνωρίζω ("make known") is not haphazard but intentional...A symbolic vision and its interpretation is going to be part of the warp and woof of the means of communication throughout Revelation. (51)

Albert Barnes concurs that the style employed by this book is that of "*pictures or symbols*; for, above all the other books in the Bible, the Apocalypse is characterized by this method of representation, and it may eminently be called a book of symbols" (l ii). It is certainly valid to take certain items and matters literally, when possible, such as the province of Asia, the island of Patmos, and the twelve tribes of Israel (7:4-8). Other items can be taken literally after a simple interpretation is applied, such as the "holy city" and the "beloved city" being Jerusalem (11:2; 20:9) and the "great city" being Rome (17:18). Some items, such as the seven churches, are both historically literal and spiritually significant. A few items are expressly signs, because their interpretations are immediately supplied (1:20), and some items are self-declared to be signs (12:1, 3; 15:1). The great majority of items in this book are signs whose significances are a mystery to be opened through the Lord's unveiling. "Recognizing the predominant symbolic genre of Revelation is crucial as we approach the interpretation of the book" (Beale 52).

**T**he second necessary principle of interpretation is that Revelation is a book of prophecies, composed not only of the things that were present at John's time and the things that he had seen but also "the things which are about to take place after these things" (1:19; cf. 10:11; 19:10; 22:6-7, 10, 18-19). A few authors, such as Henry Alford and W. Graham Scroggie, provide a survey of the prevailing schemes of interpretation of the prophecies in this book, which we briefly summarize here. The "preterist" interpretation, which states that nearly all the prophecies of Revelation have already been fulfilled, found no favor in early Christian writings. "Those who lived near the date of the book itself had no idea that its groups of prophetic imagery were intended merely to describe things then passing, and to be in a few years completed" (Alford 245). That is, in primitive Christianity there was not the thought that these things were transpiring, indicating a weakness in the preterist interpretation.

The “futurist” view regards the greatest part of the prophecies of this book as awaiting fulfillment at the end of this age, denying any historical significance to them and even, in the extreme case, denying even the past existence of the seven churches in Asia. Alford states,

It seems to me indisputable that the book does speak of things past, present, and future: that some of its prophecies are already fulfilled, some are now fulfilling, and others await their fulfillment in the yet unknown future: but to class all together and postpone them to the last age of the world, seems to me very like shrinking from the labours which the Holy Spirit meant us, and invites us, to undertake. (248)

A third approach to interpreting the prophecies is simply to regard them as symbolic and universal, not attempting to look for any particular fulfillment but finding in them whatever points of help are made real to each reader by the Spirit. To be sure, every reader in a proper position is called to take heed to each epistle: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Consequently, beyond what further principle of interpretation may be applied to these epistles, every believer in this age may partake of the nourishment and light in them in a general way as well as receive the Lord’s charge to overcome. Alford states,

In the very epistles to the seven churches themselves, all the promises and sayings of the Lord, though arising out of local circumstances, are of perfectly general application. And in the course of the prophecy, the wide range of objects embraced, the universality of the cautions and encouragements, the vast period of times comprised, leave us no inference but this, that the book was intended for the comfort and profit of every age of the Christian church. (236)

As helpful as this approach is, to view these epistles as unfolding only timeless principles is to emphasize “what is general at the expense of what is specific” (Scroggie 77). The principle of all prophecies in the Scriptures is that they are spoken not merely for the personal inspiration of the hearer but with an actual fulfillment in view. This approach, the “historicist” interpretation, is the most faithful to the Scriptures. Alford concedes, “The first great key to the understanding of the Apocalypse, is, the analogy of Old Testament prophecy” (253). Many Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ were ful-

filled in His first coming through His incarnation, earthly ministry, death, and resurrection (Micah 5:2; Zech. 9:9; Isa. 61:1-3; 53:1-12; Psa. 22:1-22). Others will be fulfilled at His second coming (Zech. 12:10). Certain prophecies concerning Israel were fulfilled in tangible ways in the Old Testament (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10-14), and others are being fulfilled even at the present time (Hosea 3:4). Other prophecies will not be completely fulfilled until the end of this age (Dan. 9:24-27), and some will be fulfilled literally only in the millennium, the age of the kingdom (Isa. 2:2-3; 11:6-9; Hosea 3:5; 6:1-2). All prophecies, therefore, are fulfilled at some time. If the prophecies of the New Testament, particularly those in Revelation, find an analogy to those of the Old Testament, then we must expect that they had, have, and will have identifiable fulfillments.

### A Prophetic View of the Church

C. I. Scofield finds a four-fold application of the messages in Revelation 2 and 3. They are:

(1) Local, to the churches actually addressed; (2) admonitory, to all churches in all time as tests by

which they may discern their true spiritual state in the sight of God; (3) personal, in the exhortations to him “that hath an ear,” and in the promises “to him that overcometh”; (4) prophetic, as disclosing seven phases of the *spiritual* history of the church from, say, A.D. 96 to the end. (Bible 1331)

He adds, “It is incredible that in a prophecy covering the church period there should be no such foreview. These messages must contain that foreview if it is in the book at all” (1331). The New Testament Epistles contain a few prophecies pertinent to the church at the end of this age, as in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-53. However, outside of Revelation there are no specific prophecies related to the church’s ongoing course in the history of this age. We should not believe that the Lord has left us without any prophetic word for the duration of an entire age. There is no revealed characteristic of the church age that exempts it from prophecy, making it distinct in this way from the ages both before and after it. The time when prophecies will be “rendered useless” (1 Cor. 13:8) has not yet come and certainly did not come before the canon of the New Testament was completed by the writings of John. Therefore, we should expect that the Lord has left a divine provision—prophecies related to the present time—for the church (2 Pet. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). Again Scofield writes,

ALTHOUGH IN REVELATION 2 AND 3 CHRIST EXPOSES THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE INDIVIDUAL CHURCHES WITH HIS BURNING, SEARCHING, AND DIVINE JUDGMENT, HE STILL SEES THEM AS GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS, THE FOCUS OF THE DIVINE ADMINISTRATION IN THE PRESENT AGE.

---

The future of the church is revealed from the end of the first century to the end of the church period...

Taken in the order in which they appear in the messages (Rev. 2 and 3), the spiritual state of those churches corresponded exactly to the average spiritual state of the whole professing church as the same would develop historically. The proof of the interpretation which finds in the messages to the seven churches a history in prophetic form of the visible church from the close of the apostolic period to the end, is unanswerable [i.e., uncontested], for it consists of the history which the church has actually made. The church *has* passed through the conditions described in the seven messages. (*Prophets* 127)

Andrew Miller follows this same rule. In the preface and introduction to his church history he states,

I commence with the Lord's revealed purpose concerning His Church in Matthew 16. Other parts of the New Testament have been carefully examined as to the first planting of the Church, but its actual history I have endeavored to trace in the light of the addresses to the seven Churches in Asia. (iii)

We believe [these seven epistles] are not only *historical*, but also *prophetic*...They were intended by Him who knows the end from the beginning, to bear a prophetic meaning, as well as a historical application. They were selected from amongst many, and so arranged and described as to foreshadow what was to come. To limit their application to the seven literal Churches then in Asia, would be to mar the unity of the Apocalypse...The character of the whole book is prophetic and symbolic. The second and third chapters are no exception to this.

...When the number seven is used, not in a literal, but in a symbolic sense, it always signifies completeness. It is evidently thus used in chapters 2 and 3. There were other Churches, we know, besides those named, but seven are selected and associated to present a complete picture of what would afterwards be developed in the Church's history on earth...Thus we have a sevenfold or divinely perfect picture of the successive states of the professing Church during the entire period of her responsibility on the earth. (3-4)

Watchman Nee speaks similarly:

The first thing we must know when coming to read Revelation is what kind of book it is. Everyone knows that it is a book of prophecies...Not only are the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven vials prophetic, but even the seven epistles are prophetic...Since it is a book of prophecy, we must treat it as prophecy and discover the fulfillment of its prophecy...

There are more than seven churches on earth, but these seven are selected as representatives. There are only seven lampstands in heaven, because the history of the seven churches constitutes the complete history of the church. (47: 10)

In this and subsequent installments we will examine the prophetic word in Revelation 2 and 3 with a view to briefly tracing the history of the church, emphasizing the church's departure from God's economy, the warning to believers in the decline of the church, the Lord's call for the overcomers, and the reward to the overcomers. Concerning these things, the Lord says, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things written in it, for the time is near" (1:3).

### The Overcomers in God's Economy

God has an eternal economy (Eph. 1:10; 3:9; 1 Tim. 1:4), an eternal plan, which is to impart Himself into man so that He may be one with man, making man His organism for His eternal expression and dominion in the universe. In order to consummate this plan, God works in four ages in the old creation and through four peoples of His old creation (Lee, *Overcomers* 17). God worked in the first age, the age before law, through the race of Adam, from Adam to Moses (Rom. 5:14). He continued to work in the second age, the age of law, from Moses to Christ's first coming, through the earthly descendants of the race of Abraham (Gen. 13:16). In the third age, the age of grace, from Christ's first coming to His second coming, God is working through the church, composed of the heavenly descendants of the race of Abraham (15:5; Eph. 3:9-11). Finally, He will work to consummate His plan in the fourth age, the age of the kingdom of one thousand years (Rev. 20:4), through the overcomers from the races of Adam and Abraham.

**I**n the first age, Adam fell (Gen. 3:1-7). Moreover, the Adamic race became flesh at the time of the deluge (6:3) and eventually became one with Satan at Babel (11:4-9). Following this, God came in to choose Abraham so that He could have a new race, a called race. However, the Jews, the earthly race of Abraham, also became a failure, forsaking God with His old covenant and choosing Satan with his kingdom (Jer. 2:13; 11:10). Because of this, God turned to the New Testament believers—the spiritual, heavenly descendants of Abraham, who constitute the church. Eventually, though, the great majority of this race has also become defeated, failing in their enjoyment of the Triune God and being corrupted by Satan through sin, self, and the world (Matt. 16:24-26; 1 John 3:8; 2:15).

The created race of Adam became a failure, the chosen race as the earthly descendants of Abraham became a failure, and the majority of the heavenly descendants of

Abraham—the constituents of the church in the present age—also became a failure. This is why the Lord Jesus comes in the book of Revelation to call for overcomers. He calls for overcomers seven times in chapters 2 and 3. It is with this group of people that God initially gains His intention. Because the overcomers stand as representatives of all the believers, the church is not wholly defeated. Hiddenly throughout the centuries, there have always been groups of overcomers standing for the whole to preserve the testimony of Jesus. These overcomers appear in Revelation in several categories, including the martyrs of the Old Testament and the New Testament up to the time before the great tribulation (6:9-11); the man-child caught up to God and to His throne (12:5); the one hundred forty-four thousand living overcomers, the first-fruits, raptured to the heavenly Mount Zion before the great tribulation (14:1-5); and those who stand on the glassy sea, having overcome Antichrist and his worship during the great tribulation (15:2-4). These four categories of overcomers constitute a fifth category, which is the prepared bride of the Lamb (19:7-9) for the consummation of God's economy and the bringing in of His kingdom. The first twenty chapters of Revelation show how the believers are made overcomers by the Lord's abounding and sufficient grace. Chapters 2 and 3 in particular show the nature of the overcomers, what they must overcome in the time of the decline of the church, and the reward that they receive.

### The Decline of the Church

The seven epistles in chapters 2 and 3 are all structured similarly. They each contain an address to the messenger of the church and a description of the One who speaks to the church, according to His attributes and characteristics that most suit the need of that church. Following this (except in the case of Laodicea), there is an acknowledgement and commendation of the virtues of that church. With the words *I know*, Christ speaks of what is positive and faithful in each church (2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:8). In five of the epistles—all but those to Smyrna and Philadelphia—this is followed by an exposure of the church's shortcoming with a rebuke. "But I have one thing against you," the Lord says to Ephesus (2:4); to Pergamos, "But I have a few things against you" (v. 14); to Thyatira, "But I have something against you" (v. 20); to Sardis, "I have found none of your works completed" (3:2); and to Laodicea, "You are...neither hot nor cold" (v. 16). After this there is a charge from the Lord, a call to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, and a promise of reward to him who overcomes.<sup>1</sup>

GOD HAS AN ETERNAL PLAN TO IMPART  
HIMSELF INTO MAN SO THAT HE MAY BE ONE  
WITH MAN FOR HIS ETERNAL EXPRESSION AND  
DOMINION. IN ORDER TO CONSUMMATE THIS PLAN,  
GOD WORKS IN FOUR AGES IN THE OLD CREATION  
AND THROUGH FOUR PEOPLES OF HIS OLD CREATION.

Because the Lord's exposure, rebuke, and correction to the churches occupy a prominent place in these epistles, it is evident that the Lord's word here is primarily to deal with the condition of the churches in a time of abnormality (Nee 47: 8). This condition of decline began near the end of the time of the apostles and worsened in the degradation of the church in the centuries afterward. Philip Schaff, the church historian, notes,

The dream of the spotless purity and perfection of the apostolic church finds no support in the apostolic writings, except as an ideal which is constantly held up before our vision...

We find, in fact, that every Epistle meets some particular difficulty and danger...

The same is true of the churches addressed in the Catholic Epistles, and in the Revelation of John. (450)

C. A. Coates speaks similarly:

Satan, ever active in opposition to the work of God, soon found occasion to corrupt the saints from their simplicity...

When we come to the epistles what do we find? That one was written because the assemblies in Galatia were turning their backs upon Christ and going in for ritualism and law-keeping; that another was written because the assembly at Corinth was becoming a scene of licentiousness and sectarianism; that a third was written because the saints at Colosse were in danger of being drawn away by philosophy and vain deceit; in that to the Philippians, Paul had to say that all sought their own things, and not the things of Jesus Christ; and in that to Timothy he spoke of all in Asia having turned away from him. (4-5)

Coates summarizes, saying, "The prophetic future of the church, viewed as in responsibility upon earth, instead of being bright with increasing spiritual prosperity, is dark with abounding evil and final apostasy" (1). This view follows that of J. N. Darby, who states that John's written ministry began only after the church fell into "universal declension and ruin" (490). The church, he says, no longer retains its Pauline character but is now in outward form only and in a state of decay:

The assembly has failed; the Gentiles, grafted in by faith, have not continued in God's goodness...God's patience would be shewn towards the assembly as it had been

---

towards Israel; but the assembly would not maintain God's testimony in the world any more than Israel had. (493)

### The Main Source of the Decline Being Teachings That Differ from God's Economy

To some extent, the difficulties faced by the churches in the New Testament are characterized by the condition of young believers in need of growth. The Epistles frequently deal with many of these issues. Paul, as a wise master builder, adjusted the fleshly and partisan Corinthians, solving all their problems by feeding them with Christ and ministering His cross (1 Cor. 3:2-3, 10; 1:23). Paul dealt with the works of the flesh and the living of the old man by ministering the Spirit to the believers' spirit with the rich word of Christ (Rom. 8:2-6; Gal. 5:16-25; Eph. 4:17-24, 30; 5:3-5, 18-19; Col. 3:5-11, 16), and he settled points of order in the church by instructing his co-workers concerning the appointment of overseers and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-16; Titus 1:5-9).

However, the Epistles, especially the later ones, also speak of certain difficulties that go beyond those faced by normal growing churches. These are not mere struggles with moral faults, wrong practices, spiritual immaturity, or questions of order. Rather, they are deeper and darker matters that forebode the worsening decline of the church. The most outstanding source of this decline is the teachings that differ from the unique teaching of God's New Testament economy as conveyed by the apostles. These differing teachings issue first in the decline of the church and ultimately in apostasy and outright heresies (1 Tim. 1:3-4; 6:3-5, 20-21).

In Romans Paul tells the church to "mark those who make divisions and causes of stumbling contrary to the teaching which you have learned, and turn away from them. For such men do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own stomach, and through smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple" (16:17-18). In 1 Corinthians we see the seed of divisions in the church and the work of those who destroy the church (1:10-12; 3:17), referring to certain Jewish believers who attempted to build the church with elements of Judaism and to certain Greek believers who endeavored to bring philosophical elements into the building. Using any doctrine that differs from the fundamental teachings of the apostles or any ways and efforts that contradict God's nature, Christ's redemptive work, and the Spirit's transforming work (signified by "gold, silver, precious stones," v. 12) is to corrupt, ruin, mar, and destroy the church of God. In 2 Corinthians Paul is forced to vindicate himself because of the vague and clouded situation in the church caused by the false, Judaistic apostles, whose teaching and assertion of what they were distracted the Corinthian believers from the

fundamental teachings of the authentic apostles (11:11-15). These "super-apostles," in actuality ministers of Satan, preached "another Jesus" and a "different gospel," corrupting the thoughts of the Corinthians from the simplicity and the purity toward Christ (vv. 3-5, 14-15; 12:11).

Similarly, in Galatians Paul marvels that the believers were removing themselves from Christ to a "different gospel," the perverted gospel of the Judaic observance of the law, preached by false brothers who stole in secretly to spy out the freedom of the believers in Christ Jesus, thus nullifying the grace of God, to the extent that not only the common believers became foolish and bewitched but those who seemed to be pillars of the church also were carried away in hypocrisy (1:6-7; 2:4, 9-13, 21; 3:1). In Philippians Paul says that those who opposed him and his ministry preached Christ out of envy and strife, factiousness, and partisanship (1:15). These were those who announced Christ out of selfish ambition, endeavoring to make Paul's bonds press him more heavily by depreciating him and his ministry while he was outwardly laid aside from his preaching (v. 17). Such were "dogs," evil workers, and the concision, of whom the Philippians should be wary with a watchful eye (3:2). In Colossians Paul warns the believers against those who delude others with persuasive speech and eloquence through their philosophy and empty deceit, in order to carry off the saints as spoil, to defraud them, and to deprive them of the enjoyment of Christ (2:4, 8, 18). These puffed-up, heretical teachers distracted the saints from holding Christ as the Head and thus damaged the Body of Christ, but the apostle Paul's revelation uplifted Christ and caused the Body to be safeguarded and built up (v. 19).

In 1 Timothy Paul exhorts his companion to charge certain ones not to teach different things rather than God's economy (1:3-4). Such ones misaimed in their teachings and turned aside to vain talking, and as the decline of the church advanced, they would go further to speak lies in hypocrisy (vv. 6-7; 4:1-2). The Spirit said expressly that in later times some would depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons by means of the hypocrisy of men who speak lies (vv. 1-2). In 2 Timothy, written approximately two years after the first Epistle, Paul strengthens his co-worker with the divine provisions—a pure conscience, unfeigned faith, the divine gift, a strong spirit, eternal grace, incorruptible life, the healthy word, and the indwelling Spirit—as an inoculation against the growing decline of the church (1:3, 5-7, 9-10, 13-14), the basic factor of which was the forsaking of the apostle and his ministry (v. 15). In the Epistle to Titus, Paul warns of unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who were teachers of myths and the commandments of men who turn away from the truth (1:10-16). Such false teachers were not merely unlearned ones in need of growth and perfection.

Rather, they were defiled and unbelieving, professing to know God but by their works denying Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disapproved. Paul's exhortation to Titus was to stop the mouths of such ones by means of severe reproof. As for himself, Titus should speak the things which are fitting to the healthy teaching according to the truth of the faith, the contents of which are the teaching of the apostles according to the New Testament economy of God (2:1). Such a teaching

not only ministers the life supply to the believers and heals the spiritual diseases, but in so doing it also brings the church into a sound condition with a good order. Hence, it is very much stressed in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, books dealing with the disorder and decline of the church." (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 1, note 1)

### False Prophets, Destructive Heresies, and Many Antichrists

Peter wrote his second Epistle around A.D. 69, probably after Paul's martyrdom and before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and close to the time of his own martyrdom (1:14; cf. 3:15-16).

The contents of chapter 2 in particular indicate that this was a time of the church's degradation and apostasy, which form the background for his Epistle. Peter's burden, like that of Paul in his final Epistle,

was to inoculate the believers against the poison of apostasy...The apostasy distracted the believers from the economy of God by leading them into the human logic of puzzling philosophies...In his healing Epistle, the apostle prescribed the divine power as the strongest and most effective antidote. This provides the believers with all things related to the generating and supplying divine life...and the God-expressing godliness...This rich divine provision, which is covered in detail in the succeeding verses (to v. 11), is more than sufficient to enable the believers to live a proper Christian life and overcome the satanic apostasy. (Lee, Recovery Version, 2 Pet. 1:3, note 1)

Peter says, "There arose also false prophets among the people, as also among you there will be false teachers, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction" (2:1). *Secretly bring in*, used only here in the New Testament, is to bring in alongside, to bring in sideways as if by smuggling, thus "to introduce or bring in secretly or craftily" (Thayer 487). It is to "introduce a new subject for which the hearers are not prepared.

Here it denotes the false teachers' bringing in and introducing their false teachings alongside the true ones" (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 1, note 2). *Heresies* denotes "one's chosen opinion, tenet" (Thayer 16), choices of opinion different from that usually accepted, "self-chosen doctrines, alien from the truth" (Alford 402). Such doctrines cause division and produce sects (αἵρεσις, the same Greek word in Acts 5:17; 15:5; Gal. 5:20 for *heresy*). The false teachers "denied both the person of the Lord as the Master and His redemption, by which the Lord purchased the believers (Lee, Recovery Version, 2 Pet. 2:1, note 4). Peter continues, "Many will follow their licentiousness, because of whom the way of the truth will be reviled. And in covetousness, with fabricated words, they will make merchandise of you, for whom the judgment of old is not idle, and their destruction does not slumber" (vv. 2-3). In verses 10 through 22 he goes on to describe the evils of the

false teachers and their punishment under God's judgment.

Paul and Peter's ministries were damaged by the apostasy preceding and following their martyrdom. About two decades after Peter's Epistles were written, around A.D. 90, John's writings came forth. John's

ministry was not only to mend the broken ministry of Paul but also to consummate the entire divine revelation of both the Old and New Testaments, of both the Gospels and the Epistles. John unveils the mysteries of the person and work of the Lord Jesus, the fellowship of the divine life, and Christ as the life supply to God's children for His expression and as the center of the universal administration of the Triune God. In his first Epistle, he reveals the eternal Word as the manifestation of the eternal life (1 John 1:1-2) as an antidote to inoculate the believers against the heresy that said that Christ did not come in the flesh. John speaks of the confessing of sins as a condition of the divine fellowship (vv. 6-10), inoculating the believers against the heretical teaching of the Antinomians, who taught that we are free from the obligation of the moral law and said that believers can live in sin and at the same time have fellowship with God.<sup>2</sup> In speaking of the "blood of Jesus" (v. 7), John counters the heresy that insisted on the divinity of the Lord by denying His humanity, and in saying, "Jesus His Son," a name of the Deity, he counters the heresy that insisted on the humanity of the Lord by denying His divinity.

John also tells us that even now many antichrists have come in the spirit of deception, denying Christ's deity, that "Jesus is the Christ, that is, denying the Father and the Son by denying that Jesus is the Son of God...not

IN SPEAKING OF THE "BLOOD OF JESUS," JOHN COUNTERS THE HERESY THAT INSISTED ON THE DIVINITY OF THE LORD BY DENYING HIS HUMANITY, AND IN SAYING, "JESUS HIS SON," HE COUNTERS THE HERESY THAT INSISTED ON THE HUMANITY OF THE LORD BY DENYING HIS DIVINITY.

confessing that He has come in the flesh through the divine conception of the Holy Spirit” (Lee, Recovery Version, 2:18, note 2, cf. 22-23; 4:2-3, 6). At John’s time many such heresies were taught by the Gnostics; the Cerinthians—followers of Cerinthus, a first century Syrian of Jewish descent educated at Alexandria, who taught a mixture of Judaism, Gnosticism, and Christianity, and the Docetists—those who taught that Jesus Christ was not a real man, a man in human flesh, but simply appeared to be, thus denying not only the person of the Lord but also His work of suffering, death, and resurrection (2 John 7). “These antichrists were not born of God and were not in the fellowship of the apostles and the believers (1 John 1:3); hence, they were not of the church, that is, of the Body of Christ” (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 John 2:19, note 1). Because of these false prophets who have gone out into the world, we are called to not believe every spirit but to prove the spirits whether they are of God (4:1-3). Those who do not abide in the Lord but are led astray by these heretical teachings will be put to shame from Christ at His coming (2:28).

**A**lthough the foregoing review of the New Testament Epistles emphasizes the negative factors in the development of the churches, this view is necessary in order to demonstrate the background of the epistles in Revelation 2 and 3, the backdrop of the decline and degradation of the church. The Lord Jesus prophesied, “Upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). “This word of the Lord’s indicates also that Satan’s power of darkness will attack the church. Hence, there is a spiritual warfare between Satan’s power, which is his kingdom, and the church, which is God’s kingdom” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 18, note 6). The foregoing review reveals the decline, degradation, and deterioration already brought in at the time of the apostles mainly through the teachings that differ from the unique teaching of God’s eternal economy. Even toward the end of Paul’s life he could already say, “All who are in Asia turned away from me” (2 Tim. 1:15). In a general sense, everyone in Asia turned away from Paul’s ministry, a ministry that was focused on God’s economy. It is now a fact of history that in the centuries following the time of the first apostles, the church suffered a worsening of its decline and deterioration. It is this general failure of the church that forms the background for the Lord’s call for overcomers in Revelation 2 and 3.

### The Epistle to the Church in Ephesus

The first epistle in Revelation 2 is to the church in Ephesus. Paul established the church in Ephesus on his second ministry journey (Acts 18:19-21), and on his third journey he remained with the church for three years, teaching in the synagogue and in the school of Tyrannus, so that all who were in the province of Asia heard the word

of the Lord, which grew mightily and prevailed (19:8-20; 20:31). Later, on his returning south from Macedonia, Paul wished to sail past Asia, but he was constrained to meet with the elders of Ephesus at Miletus (vv. 16-38), demonstrating that his ministry to this church was thorough and his care for it was intimate. Tychicus and Trophimus, who accompanied Paul and remained faithful to him through all his afflictions, were from Ephesus (v. 4; 21:29; Eph. 6:21; Miller 92). The New Testament Epistle of Ephesians, written during Paul’s imprisonment in Rome, is one of the highest compositions in the Bible, indicating that Paul found there a willing and capable audience for the profound revelations in that Epistle. After his first imprisonment, Paul wrote to his co-worker Timothy, commissioning him in a particular way to remain in Ephesus to guard and ensure the healthy teaching of God’s economy in that church (1 Tim. 1:3-4). The apostle John in his later years also ministered to the church in Ephesus, from where he wrote his Epistles, and is thought to have remained there until his death. Truly this was a church dear to the Lord Jesus!

Prophetically, the epistle to Ephesus

provides a picture of the end of the initial church, the church in the first stage, during the latter part of the first century...The names of the seven churches are full of significance, each name exactly matching the spiritual condition of the church in that particular city...*Ephesus* in Greek means desirable.<sup>3</sup> This signifies that the initial church at its end was still desirable to the Lord and that the Lord still had much expectation in her. (Lee, Recovery Version, Rev. 2:1, notes 1 and 2)

**R**evelation 2:1 says, “To the messenger of the church in Ephesus write: These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, He who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.” The Lord holds in His hand “the messengers of the churches, the spiritual ones, signified by the shining stars, who bear the testimony of Jesus” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 1, note 4). Moreover, the priestly Son of Man walks in the midst of the churches to care for them. Verse 2 continues, “I know your works and your labor and your endurance and that you cannot bear evil men; and you have tried those who call themselves apostles and are not, and have found them to be false.” As we saw above, the evil men, the false apostles who bring in teachings that differ from the unique teaching of God’s eternal economy, are the main source of the church’s decline, degradation, and deterioration. When Paul met with the elders in Ephesus, he warned them that after his departure “fierce wolves” would come in among them, not sparing the flock, and that from among them men would rise up, speaking “perverted things” to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:29-30). *Perverted things* denotes something distorted, thoroughly twisted, and altered into a

new shape. Such speakings tear down God's building and annul God's economy. For this reason, Paul told Timothy to remain in Ephesus that he might charge certain ones not to teach different things (1 Tim. 1:3). To overcome in such a situation is to war the good warfare against the different teachings of the dissenters and to carry out God's economy according to the ministry of the genuine New Testament apostles (vv. 18, 4).

### Overcoming the Leaving of the First Love

The Lord further commends the church in Ephesus: "You have endurance and have borne all things because of My name and have not grown weary" (Rev. 2:3). Then He says, "I have one thing against you, that you have left your first love" (v. 9). *Left* is a strong word, meaning to forsake, abandon, neglect, give up, desert, send away, and divorce (Thayer 88-89). Although the believers labored and endured for the Lord and because of His name, the Lord was able to look into their inner being and point out a very serious matter that they needed to overcome.

The Bible reveals that God is our Husband.

Isaiah 54:5 says, "Your Maker is your Husband; / Jehovah of hosts is His name." Jehovah God considers Himself a Husband to His beloved elect, and they a wife to Him (Jer. 2:32; 3:1, 14; 31:32; Isa. 62:5; Ezek. 16:8; Hosea 2:19; Matt. 9:15; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2). Song of Songs 1:2-4, as a portrayal in poetic figure of the relationship between the Lord and His seeker, says,

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! / For your love is better than wine. / Your anointing oils have a pleasant fragrance; / Your name is like ointment poured forth; / Therefore the virgins love you. / Draw me; we will run after you.

Jeremiah 2:2 says,

Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus says Jehovah: / I remember concerning you the kindness of your youth, / The love of your bridal days, / When you followed after Me in the wilderness, / In a land that was not sown.

The love between God and His people unfolded in the Bible is primarily like the affectionate love between a man and a woman...the entire Bible is a divine romance, a record of how God courts His chosen people and eventually marries them. (Lee, Recovery Version, Exo. 20:6,

note 2, cf. Gen. 2:21-24; Eph. 5:25-32; Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9-10; 22:17).

Thus, the first love to the Lord is the sweet, affectionate, intimate love of a divine and human married couple.

In Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, love is strongly emphasized. In this book the phrase *in love*, which is rich in feeling, is used repeatedly. In a condition and atmosphere of love, we are saturated with God to be holy and without blemish, just as He is (1:4). Because of His great, abundant love, God is rich in mercy to save us out of our wretched position into a condition that is suitable for His love (2:4). When we are rooted and grounded in Christ's love, we grow and are built up in His life and know His immeasurable, knowledge-surpassing love (3:17-19). The Body builds itself up in love—the love

of God in Christ, which becomes the love of Christ in us, by which we love Christ and the fellow members of His Body (4:16). Love is the inner substance of God, and the goal of Ephesians is to bring us into God's inner substance that we may enjoy God as love and walk in love (5:2, 25). Finally, in 6:24 Paul

says, "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in incorruptibility." *Incorruptibility* here refers to all the crucial things revealed and taught in the six chapters of this Epistle, all of which are incorruptible.<sup>4</sup>

The incorruptibility of our love for the Lord Jesus implies that it is a love in the new creation, a love in resurrection. Revelation 2:4 speaks of the "first" love. *First* means first in time, place, rank, influence, honor, and quality (Thayer 554-555). It is the same word for *best* in Luke 15:22: "Bring out quickly the best robe and put it on him." Hence, the first love, that is, the best love, is the love that is God Himself. God is love (1 John 4:8, 16); love is the nature of God's essence. When love as the substance of God's inner being is wrought into us, it becomes the love with which we love Him and every member of the Body of Christ. Therefore, we must open ourselves to Him, allowing Him to infuse and impart His inner substance into our being until we respond to Him with the best love of the highest quality, the love that is God Himself. Romans 5:5 says, "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Truly, we love the Lord because He first loved us, infusing His loving essence into us and generating within us the love with which we love Him (1 John 4:19).

To love the Lord Jesus with the first love is to give Him

WE MUST OPEN OURSELVES TO HIM,  
ALLOWING HIM TO INFUSE AND IMPART  
HIS INNER SUBSTANCE INTO OUR BEING  
UNTIL WE RESPOND TO HIM  
WITH THE BEST LOVE OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY,  
THE LOVE THAT IS GOD HIMSELF.

---

the first place, the preeminence, in all things, regarding Him as the first in all things and as everything in our life (Col. 1:18; 3:11). To love Him with the first love is to not love anyone or anything above Him, even our own life. Jesus said, “He who loves father or mother above Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter above Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:37-39). Revelation 12:11 says of the overcomers, “They overcame [Satan] because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they loved not their soul-life even unto death.” Our love for the Lord must be absolute; we should love nothing above Him. Moreover, we need to develop our love for the Lord in a personal, affectionate, and intimate relationship with Him.

Only love keeps us in a proper relationship with the Lord. First Corinthians 2:9 says, “Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard and which have not come up in man’s heart; things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” Witness Lee’s note on this verse has been a help to thousands of seeking believers. He writes,

To realize and participate in the deep and hidden things God has ordained and prepared for us requires us not only to believe in Him but also to love Him. To fear God, to worship God, and to believe in God (that is, to receive God) are all inadequate; to love Him is the indispensable requirement. To love God means to set our entire being—spirit, soul, and body, with the heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30)—absolutely on Him, that is, to let our entire being be occupied by Him and lost in Him, so that He becomes everything to us and we are one with Him practically in our daily life. In this way we have the closest and most intimate fellowship with God, and we are able to enter into His heart and apprehend all its secrets (Psa. 73:25; 25:14). Thus, we not only realize but also experience, enjoy, and fully participate in these deep and hidden things of God. (Recovery Version, note 3)

Overcomers are vessels open to the Lord, loving Him, receiving Him, being filled with Him, and letting Him be everything to them and do everything in them, through them, and for them. If we would be overcomers, therefore, we must recover, maintain, and develop our first love toward the Lord. However, Revelation 2 tells us that the church at the end of the time of the early apostles left, abandoned, and forsook the first, best love for the Lord. Apparently, the work, labor, endurance, and discernment of the church was commendable, but the Lord can see into the heart. The loss of the first love in the intrinsic heart of the believers was manifested in the outward expressions of degradation. The failure in the believers’ love to the Lord is the source of and main reason for the failure of the church throughout the ages. It is the source of all the degradation in the succeeding stages of the church.

The Lord says, “Remember therefore where you have fallen from and repent and do the first works; but if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent” (v. 5). There is no need to consider what happened to the historical church in Ephesus in the subsequent centuries, as if the existence or discontinuance of the church there proves whether or not it repented. What the Lord said He would take away is the lampstand, that is, the shining testimony of Jesus. If a church loses its first love for the Lord, it may continue to exist, function, and carry out good works, but the brightness of the expression of Christ will be absent from it. In the Lord’s eyes that gathering will no longer be a golden lampstand; “the assembly ceases to be God’s light-bearer in the world” (Darby 505).

### *Hating the Works of the Nicolaitans*

The Lord turns one last time to commend the church in Ephesus. He says, “This you have, that you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (v. 6). Some have conjectured the existence of a sect or heresy corresponding to the name *Nicolaitans*, alluding even to the Nicolas of Acts 6:5 (Hippolytus 115; Beale 251), but there is no historical attestation for this. This name must be understood according to the principle of interpretation that we have already established, that is, that Revelation is a book of signs, symbols with spiritual significance. Just as the names of the seven churches are signs in themselves, the significance of *Nicolaitans* is found in its etymology. The word means “conquering the common people, being victorious over the laity.” Scofield writes,

From *nikao*, “to conquer,” and *laos*, “the people,” or “laity.” There is no ancient authority for a *sect* of the Nicolaitanes. If the word is symbolic it refers to the earliest form of the notion of a priestly order, or “clergy,” which later divided an equal brotherhood (Matt. 23:8) into “priests” and “laity.” What in Ephesus was “deeds” ([Rev.] 2:6) had become in Pergamos a “doctrine” (Rev. 2:15). (Bible 1332)

*Nicolaitans* refers to a group of people who esteem themselves higher than common believers, as did Diotrephes, who loved to be first in the church (3 John 9). This goes against the words of the Lord in Matthew 20:25-27:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you shall be your slave.

This word keeps all the believers on the same level, that of brothers (23:8-11).

God in His economy intends that all His people be priests serving Him directly. In Exodus 19:6 He said, “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” God ordained all the children of Israel to be a kingdom of priests. However, because they worshipped the golden calf (32:1-6), they lost the priesthood, and only the tribe of Levi, because of its faithfulness to God in separating itself from the idolatrous people, was chosen to replace the whole nation of Israel as priests to God (vv. 25-29; Deut. 33:8-10). From this time forward there was a mediatorial class between God and the children of Israel, which became a strong system in Judaism and one of its pillars. If anyone wished to contact God and make an offering to Him, they needed to go through this mediatorial class. However, this was not God’s original intention.

In the New Testament, God has returned to His original intention according to His economy, in that He has made all the believers in Christ priests, even a kingdom of priests, a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10). However, at the end of the initial church, even in the first century, some—denoted by the symbolic name *Nicolaitans*—intervened as a mediatorial class to spoil God’s economy. According to church history, this seminal practice later developed and became formalized as the clergy-laity system, which was adopted by the Roman Catholic Church and has been retained by the Protestant churches. Because this system destroys the universal priesthood in God’s economy, the Lord hates it (2:6), and He calls us also to hate it.

### *A Two-sided Responsibility for the Works of the Nicolaitans*

In the early church the “works” of the Nicolaitans—not yet the actual teaching (v. 15)—must have crept in as an unconscious custom among the believers. On the one hand, this practice came in through the self-exaltation of those who deemed themselves to be more qualified among the saints. On the other hand, this practice would not have persisted without the passive acceptance of those who were willing to neglect their priestly function and be “at ease in Zion” (Amos 6:1). Thus, the problem of the works of the Nicolaitans is two-sided, proceeding both from those who usurp the Lord’s headship in the church by presuming to act as clergy and from those who neglect their portion in the universal priesthood and fall into the role of the laity. The latter tendency can be seen figuratively in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. Here Jesus said,

The kingdom of the heavens is just like a man about to go abroad, who called his own slaves and delivered to them his possessions. To one he gave five talents, and to another two, and to another one, each according to his own ability. And he went abroad. (vv. 14-15)

“The man here signifies Christ, who was about to go abroad, into the heavens,” “slaves signify believers viewed from the aspect of service (1 Cor. 7:22-23; 2 Pet. 1:1; James 1:1; Rom. 1:1),” “*His possessions* signifies the church... with all the believers,” His household, and the talents signify the differing spiritual gifts given to the Lord’s disciples that they may be equipped to accomplish what the Lord intends (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:4; 2 Tim. 1:6; 1 Pet. 4:10) (Lee, Recovery Version, Matt. 25:14, notes 2-4; v. 15, note 1). Jesus continued,

Immediately he who had received the five talents went and traded with them and gained another five. Similarly, he who had received the two gained another two. But he who had received the one went off and dug in the earth and hid his master’s money. (Matt. 25:16-18)

OVERCOMERS ARE VESSELS  
OPEN TO THE LORD, LOVING HIM,  
RECEIVING HIM, BEING FILLED WITH HIM,  
AND LETTING HIM BE EVERYTHING TO THEM  
AND DO EVERYTHING IN THEM,  
THROUGH THEM, AND FOR THEM.

To trade with the talents signifies the use of the gift that the Lord has given us to save people and to minister His riches to them. The slave who traded with five talents and the one who traded with two signify the use of the Lord’s gift to the fullest extent, without any loss or waste. To hide the master’s money, however, signifies “rendering the Lord’s gift useless, letting it lie waste under the cloak of certain earthly excuses... This is always the danger with the one-talented ones, those who consider their gift to be the smallest” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 18, note 3). Watchman Nee says similarly,

The church is built upon one-talented ones. We do not have to stir up five- and two-talented ones; they rise up by themselves; they do not want to hide their talents. Only the one-talented ones have a danger of hiding their talents. (61: 214)

Verse 19 says, “Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.” When the Lord descends to the air at the end of this age (1 Thes. 4:16), all His slaves will be called to give an account to Him at His judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10). Those who have “traded” with their talents will enter into the joy of the Lord in the coming kingdom, in which they will be set over many things (Matt. 25:21, 23), but those who have buried their talent will be cast outside the bright

---

glory of the kingdom during the millennial age (v. 30). Watchman Nee admonishes,

It is not my desire that even one brother from among us would go out and fail to lead the brothers and sisters to serve but would replace them instead...If you must use the five-talented ones to suppress the two-talented ones and the two-talented ones to suppress the one-talented ones, you are not the Lord's servant...You must cause all the five-talented ones to rise up and serve and all the two-talented ones to rise up and serve, and you must also cause all the one-talented ones to rise up and serve. You must also cause those whom you think are not useful to rise up and serve. Thus, the glorious church will appear. (51: 56-57)

The one-talented slaves “trade” with their talent by carrying out the New Testament priesthood of the gospel, offering up saved sinners to God as acceptable sacrifices and leading them to present themselves to God as living sacrifices (Rom. 15:16; 12:1). They also admonish and teach every man in all wisdom to present each one full-grown in Christ for the organic building up of the Body of Christ (Col. 1:27-29; 2:19). As God-given gifts to the Body, they perfect the saints to make them living, active, and functioning members of the Body unto its building up in love (Eph. 4:11-16). Again, Nee says, “What is the church? The church is all the one-talented ones functioning” (57: 96).

In order for the church to be built up, the one-talented ones have to rise up...When all the one-talented ones rise up, the church will be manifested. Once the church is manifested, the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (61: 214)

The church is not a conglomeration of five-talented ones; it is not a corporation of two-talented ones. It is a Body composed mainly of one-talented ones. When men like you and I come together to serve, we have the church. When all the one-talented ones are coordinated together, that will be a potent force. Only by serving this way will we have a strong church. (62: 270)

### *Eating of the Tree of Life*

The Lord ended His word to the church in Ephesus, saying, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7). We must have a proper ear to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[Revelation] 1 emphasizes seeing and chs. 2 and 3 emphasize hearing...The writer of this book first heard the voice (1:10) and then saw the vision (1:12). If our ears are dull

and cannot hear, then we cannot see (Isa. 6:9-10)...The Lord always wants to open our ears to hear His voice (Job 33:14-16; Isa. 50:4-5; Exo. 21:6) that we may see things according to His economy...As the Spirit is speaking to the churches, we all need an opened, circumcised, cleansed, and anointed ear to hear the Spirit's speaking. (Lee, Recovery Version, Rev. 2:7, note 1)

In the epistle to the church in Ephesus, to overcome is to recover, maintain, and develop our first love toward the Lord and to hate the works of the Nicolaitans, the hierarchy—explicit or implicit—that the Lord hates. Those who overcome in this way will enjoy the Lord as the tree of life in the kingdom of one thousand years (Gen. 2:8-9, 16; John 6:57; 1 Cor. 10:3; Rev. 20:4).

In the epistle to the church in Pergamos, the Lord promised the overcomer that he would eat of the hidden manna (v. 17), which refers to the eating of manna by the children of Israel in the wilderness (Exo. 16:14-16, 31). And in the epistle to the church in Laodicea, the Lord promised to dine with the one who opens the door to Him. To dine is to eat not merely one kind of food but the riches of a feast. This may refer to the eating of the rich produce of the good land of Canaan by the children of Israel (Josh. 5:10-12). This indicates that the Lord desires to recover the eating of the proper food by God's people, the food ordained by God and typified by the tree of life, the manna, and the produce of the good land, all of which are types of the various aspects of Christ as food to us. (Lee, Recovery Version, Rev. 2:7, note 5)

The tree of life in particular signifies Christ as the embodiment of all the riches of God for our food (Col. 2:9; Rev. 22:2, 14, 19). *Tree* in 2:7 means “wood,” as in 1 Peter 2:24, where it denotes the cross. Life implies resurrection (John 11:25). Thus, the tree of life is the crucified and resurrected Christ—God in Christ as life to man—for the nourishment and enjoyment of God's people. However, due to the degradation of the church, most of the Lord's children have been distracted from the simple, pure, and God-ordained eating of Christ as their life supply. Hence, the eating of Christ in the coming kingdom age is set forth as an incentive and a reward for the overcomers in the church age.

The Lord in His wisdom made the enjoyment of Himself in the coming kingdom a reward in order to encourage His believers to overcome...and return to the enjoyment of Himself as the life supply in the church life today for the accomplishing of God's economy.

Eating the tree of life, that is, enjoying Christ as our life supply, should be the primary matter in the church life. The content of the church life depends on the enjoyment of Christ. The more we enjoy Him, the richer the content

will be. But to enjoy Christ requires us to love Him with the first love. If we leave our first love toward the Lord, we will miss the enjoyment of Christ and lose the testimony of Jesus; consequently the lampstand will be removed from us. These three things—loving the Lord, enjoying the Lord, and being the testimony of the Lord—go together. (Recovery Version, Rev. 2:7, note 6).

Like the New Testament priesthood, the enjoyment of the Lord as the tree of life was ordained by God for all the believers in the church age. However, because of the decline and degradation of the church, both the eating of Christ and the proper priesthood have been lost to a great number of God's genuine children. For this reason, the Lord calls for a remnant of His people, a minority, to stand in the place of the whole church to experience, enjoy, carry out, and practice their God-ordained portion in this age for the building up of the Body of Christ and the preparation of the bride of Christ. Then in the coming age, the millennial age of the kingdom, those who lost the enjoyment of Christ in the forsaking of their first love to Him and those who forfeited their New Testament priesthood through passivity and neglect will be denied a place in the joy and bright glory of the kingdom. However, those who answer the Lord's call for the overcomers in the church today will enjoy, in that day, a fuller portion of what they have enjoyed in the present age. They will enter into the joy of their Master and will enjoy their beloved Bridegroom at His wedding feast (Matt. 25:21, 23; Rev. 19:7-9).

by John Campbell

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In the first three epistles the charge to hear what the Spirit says to the churches is given first, followed by a promise to the overcomers. In the last four, this order is reversed. This small, divine arrangement divides the seven epistles into two groups. We will see more about this in the following installments of this department.

<sup>2</sup>This summary of John's writings draws from the following footnotes by Witness Lee in the Recovery Version of the Bible: note 1 on 1 John 1:1, note 2 on verse 2, and note 4 on verse 6.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Seiss also suggests ἔψησις ("boiling" 70) as the meaning of *Ephesus*, referring to its zeal in the things of the Lord (Rev. 2:2).

<sup>4</sup>This summary of *love* in Ephesians draws from the following footnotes by Witness Lee in the Recovery Version of the

Bible: note 7 on Ephesians 1:4, note 2 on 2:4, note 4 on 3:17, note 2 on 4:15, note 1 on 5:25, and note 3 on 6:24.

## Works Cited

- Alford, Henry. *Alford's Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980. Print.
- Barnes, Albert. *Notes on the New Testament: Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980. Print.
- Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. Print.
- Coates, C. A. *The Mystery of Iniquity and the Testimony of God*. Wheaton: Bibles, etc., n.d. Print.
- Darby, J. N. *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*. Vol. 5. Addison: Bible Truth Publishers, 1980. Print.
- Hippolytus. "The Refutation of All Heresies." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 5. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. Print.
- Lee, Witness. *Footnotes and Outlines*. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003. Print.
- . *The Overcomers*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1992. Print.
- Miller, Andrew. *Miller's Church History*. London: Pickering & Inglis, 1976. Print.
- Nee, Watchman. *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*. 62 Vols. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1992. Print.
- Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol. 6. Nashville: Broadman, 1933. Print.
- Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Scofield, C. I. ed. *Scofield Reference Bible*. New York: Oxford UP, 1945. Print.
- . *What Do the Prophets Say?* Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1918. Print.
- Scroggie, W. Graham. *The Great Unveiling*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979. Print.
- Seiss, Joseph A. *The Apocalypse: Exposition of the Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1987. Print.
- Thayer, Joseph H. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003. Print.