

The Word of Righteousness

The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (3)

As we saw in previous installments of this department, the background of the seven epistles in Revelation 2 and 3 is the degradation of the church, its fall from the vision, revelation, life, and practice of God's New Testament economy embodied in the teaching of the apostles. In this respect there are two groups of seven in the New Testament Epistles (Nee 47: 8). The first group is Paul's Epistles to seven corporate recipients—the churches in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica. These Epistles were written in a time and condition of relative normality, unveiling the gospel of God (Rom. 1:1); the economy of God (Eph. 1:10; 3:9); and the all-inclusive Christ with His unsearchable riches as the wisdom of God, the mystery of God, the deep things of God, the Head of the church, and the life and grace of the believers (1 Cor. 1:30; 2:1, 10; Gal. 6:18; Eph. 1:22; 3:8; Phil. 4:23; Col. 2:2; 3:4, 11; 1 Thes. 5:28; 2 Thes. 3:18). These Epistles also reveal the life-giving Spirit, who is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:45; Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19). They speak of the church as the Body of Christ, the fullness of Christ, the new man, the mystery of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the corporate warrior (Eph. 1:23; 2:15; 3:4; 5:25; 6:10-11; Col. 3:10); and of the local churches as the local expressions of the Body of Christ, under whose feet the God of peace will crush Satan shortly (Rom. 16:16, 20; 1 Cor. 1:2).

The second group of seven is the epistles to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. These were written at the close of the apostolic era, a time of abnormality, unveiling the falling, failing, and degrading condition of the church in its losing of the first love to the Lord; in worldliness; in the teaching of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans; in the teachings, fornication, and idolatry of Jezebel; in deadness; and in lukewarmness (2:4, 14-15, 20; 3:1, 16). The first group of Epistles presents the truth and proper practice of the church in normality; the second group exposes the decline of the church in abnormality. Watchman Nee notes, "Generally speaking, the time from the beginning of the church until now is one age—the age of the church. But the problem is not that simple. The normal and the abnormal must be separated" (47: 9).

The first group of Epistles was written during the formative

years of the church under the teaching and shepherding of the apostles. The second group was written at a time that John calls "the last hour" (1 John 2:18). Thus, for us, at the consummation of the ages, the latter seven epistles are of the utmost importance. Joseph Seiss calls these epistles a "distinct and unique section of sacred literature." He laments,

There is not another portion of Scripture, of equal extent and conspicuity, to which so little attention has been paid. Strange to say, the Church has nowhere included these Epistles in the lessons prescribed to be read in the public services, except in a secondary and very remote manner. (67)

The first three chapters of Revelation show that Christ responds to the degradation of the church with a call for overcomers. Watchman Nee states,

Today if a man really wants to walk in the Lord's way, he must read Revelation 2 and 3. Today the church has problems; therefore, Revelation tells us what to do. If you do not seek the way in Revelation, I do not know how you can be a Christian.

Through these seven epistles the Lord desires to provide us with a guide on how to be overcomers. (47: 8, 92)

Degradation, Tribulation, and the Victorious Resurrection Life

The close of the apostolic age began to manifest the downward trend of the churches, a trend away from the revealed life and practice of God's economy. Speaking of the deteriorated church in its mixed character, Paul says, "In a great house there are not only gold and silver vessels but also wooden and earthen; and some are unto honor, and some unto dishonor" (2 Tim. 2:20). He even declares, "All who are in Asia turned away from me" (1:15), that is, turned away from not only the minister but also the ministry of God's New Testament economy. After Paul's martyrdom and close to the time of his own, Peter warned,

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. And 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. (2 Pet. 2:1-3)

Writing after A.D. 90, John also speaks of antichrists, false prophets, and deceivers who assail the church (1 John 2:18; 4:1, 3; 2 John 7). According to Revelation, the way of recovery in such a time of the church's peril and decline is through the overcomers (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). In the time of abnormality the overcomers are simply those who are not abnormal, who come back to God's original intention and walk in the normal pattern set forth in the teaching of the apostles.

The church at the close of the apostolic age was characterized by its approved works, labor, and endurance, but the Lord Jesus saw in the church the waning of its first love for Him (2:2-4). This, the loss of the first love, became the source and root of every further decline in its condition yet to come. Nevertheless, the spread of the churches and the bright testimony that they still upheld touched and threatened the kingdom of darkness, causing Satan to suffer defeat and lose ground in that part of the world. Because of this, the evil one provoked a severe persecution through the government and people of the Roman Empire for a period of "ten days" (v. 10), from the latter part of the first century to the beginning of the fourth. This is the subject of the epistle to the church in Smyrna. However, the Lord too had His purpose in allowing this time of tribulation to come to the church. Andrew Miller notes, "The Lord meets the declension by sore tribulation" (138). Through the trials of persecution Christ as the High Priest walking among the golden lampstands trimmed the charred and smoking wicks of the lamps, causing them to burn even brighter. The testimony of Christ shone the more intensely in the darkness of devilish wrath, and the number of believers multiplied, revealing the great secret of the divine life, that it is through death that the indestructible, unbroken, resurrection life operates. This truth is expressed in a hymn:

Death cannot hold the resurrection life,
The life of God eternal manifest;
'Tis uncreated, indestructible,
'Tis Christ Himself, unconqu'able, expressed.

Death cannot hold the resurrection life,
Though all its force against it may combine;
Death only gives it opportunity
To show the boundless pow'r of life divine.

Death cannot hold the resurrection life,
The more interred, the more it multiplies;
All kinds of suff'ring only help it grow
And fruits of life abundant realize. (*Hymns*, #639)

Miller concludes,

Thus we see why the bush was not burned, or Israel in Egypt not consumed, or the Church in this world not exterminated: God was in the midst of the bush—He is in the midst of His Church—it is the habitation of God through the Spirit. (181)

Besides this, Miller notes, Christ had plainly said, "Upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18):

Christianity revived; the gold was purified; the saints held fast the Name and the faith of Christ. Thus was Satan defeated; and the Lord so ruled that the Emperors, one after the other, in the most humiliating and mortifying circumstances, publicly confessed their defeat. (182)

The Epistle to the Church in Pergamos

The epistle to the church in Pergamos in Revelation 2:12 through 17 prophetically unveils the condition and progress of the church from the beginning of the fourth century to about the end of the sixth. History shows that this was a time of landmark advances, particularly in the defense and understanding of the truth as defined in the councils of this period, but it was also a time of notable decline in the life and practice of the church. Nee summarizes the progress of the church in this era:

God cares for His children. This is why, when He sees them departing from their first love, He allows persecution to come upon them so that they would not backslide. This goal was accomplished for a brief while, but not long after this, the reviving power of the church was lost again! It degraded again, and the degradation became more severe than before. (4: 369-370)

Because the greatest, protracted persecution of the church was unable to quench the fire of the resurrection life, Satan in his subtlety changed the strategy of his attack against it. From the time of Constantine I, the Roman Empire not only ceased to persecute the church but also embraced Christianity as the predominant religion, bestowed favors and riches upon it, and became involved in its affairs, thus uniting the church and the world. Miller writes,

In the place of persecution from without, there is seduction from within. Under Diocletian [Satan] was the roaring lion; under Constantine he is the deceiving serpent.

Pergamos is the scene of Satan's flattering power; he is within the Church. (182-183)

The unholy union of the church with the world wrought a devastation on the church that persecution and opposition were never able to do. Revelation 2:12 and 13 say,

To the messenger of the church in Pergamos write: These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name and have not denied My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

The name *Pergamos* derives from πύργος, meaning "a fortified tower," "a fortified structure rising to a considerable height" (Thayer 558). Seiss also points out its similarity and applicability to γάμος, meaning "marriage," or "wedding." Pergamos was

a Church with a tower of unrighteous assumption in it, and indulgently compliant with the adulterous solicitations and embraces of worldliness...It was a Church...with wicked pretences to loftiness and power on the part of some, and base alliances with what was earthly and Satanic. (71)

Seiss's description is none too harsh if we consider the phrase *where Satan's throne is*. *Satan*, taken directly from Hebrew, means "adversary" (Brown 966), one who opposes and fights determinedly, continuously, and relentlessly. Lucifer, the Daystar, son of the dawn, was one of the earliest angels created by God at the dawn of the universe (Isa. 14:12; Job 38:7; 1:6). As the anointed cherub he was seated upon the holy mountain of God and was appointed by God to be the head of all the angels (Ezek. 28:13-14; Jude 9). However, his heart was lifted up because of his God-given beauty and brightness, and he rebelled against God, seeking in pride to ascend to equality with God (Isa. 14:13-14; Ezek. 28:15, 17). Because of this, God cast him out and judged him (vv. 16-19; Isa. 14:15; Luke 10:18). Nevertheless, God in His wisdom and sovereignty did not immediately execute His judgment on Satan but, rather, allowed him to remain free and even retain the right to enter into the presence of God (Job 1:6). Because of this, Satan, the evil one, is able to deceive and operate from within God's kingdom. This is his role as adversary. "Satan is not only God's enemy outside God's kingdom but also God's adversary within God's kingdom, where he rebels against God" (Lee, Recovery Version, Matt. 4:10, note 1).

When God anointed this archangel to be the head of the pristine physical creation, the authority of the kingdom of the earth was given to him. This is indicated in Satan's temptation of the Lord Jesus in the wilderness. Luke 4:5 and 6 say,

[Satan] led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the inhabited earth in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, To You I will give all this authority and their glory, because to me it has been delivered, and to whomever I want to give it.

Hence, Satan is called "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). *World* here is κόσμος, denoting an order, a set form, an orderly arrangement, "the aggregate of things earthly" (Thayer 356-357). Thus it is the ordered system of the fallen, corrupted world, over which Satan holds authority along with the rebellious, fallen angels as his subordinates. These spirits are "the rulers,...the authorities,...the world-rulers of this darkness" (Eph. 6:12). A "world-ruler" (κοσμοκράτωρ) is a "lord of the world, prince of this age" (356). The principality of the fallen angels over the kingdoms of the world is unmasked in the book of

Daniel. When an angel was sent by God to Daniel, he was withstood by another angel, the "prince of the kingdom of Persia," for twenty-one days, and on departing from Daniel, the angel said that the "prince of Javan" (Greece) was about to come (10:13, 20). *Prince* here is Hebrew *sar*, "chief, ruler, official, captain...esp. of angels" (Brown 978). This indicates that in Satan's *cosmos* the rebellious angels under him watch over, influence, and even rule the Gentile kingdoms of the world, of which Persia and Greece are examples.

Witness Lee writes,

The world is an evil system arranged systematically by Satan. All the things on the earth, especially those related to mankind, and all the things in the air have been systematized by Satan into his kingdom of darkness to occupy people and frustrate them from accomplishing the purpose of God, and to distract them from the enjoyment of God. (Recovery Version, John 12:31, note 2)

Here we can see the evil nature of the church's succumbing to the "adulterous solicitations and embraces of worldliness" (Seiss 71):

According to the Lord's word, Christians and the world should be diametrically opposed to one another...This is

The unholy union of the church with the world wrought a devastation on the church that persecution and opposition were never able to do.

why the Lord said that “in the world you have affliction” (John 16:33). If the believers maintain their stand of being out of the world and against the world, they will enjoy an eternal Smyrna. If the world has not persecuted the Christians, it must be for one of the two following reasons: either the world has become the church, or the church has become the world...We have to admit that the church has joined hands with the world and has married it. Hence, the church has become the world! (Nee 4: 371)

John tells us, “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). “The Bible always puts Satan in opposition to Christ, the flesh in opposition to the Holy Spirit, and the world and mammon in opposition to God the Father” (47: 34). The whole of this anti-God world system lies in Satan, the evil one (1 John 5:19), whom Paul calls “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4). Hence, the place “where Satan’s throne is” is the present world with its riches, ways, affairs, people, nations, kingdoms, and governments. In the early centuries of antiquity, when the church accepted the welcome, approval, protection, patronage, and positions of the world, it became the church “where Satan’s throne is.” Hence, the overcomers must overcome the world and give it no place in the church. This is the purpose of Christ’s critique of and charge to the church in Pergamos.

The Teaching of Balaam

Revelation 2:14 says, “I have a few things against you, that you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat idol sacrifices and to commit fornication.” When the people of Israel passed through Moab, Balak, the king of that land, sought the opportunity to strike them and drive them out. Knowing that he could not prevail militarily or politically, he sent for the Gentile prophet Balaam, offering him “fees for divination,” so that he would curse Israel (Num. 22:1-7). Jehovah forbade Balaam to go, but when Balaam inquired of Him again, God tolerated the greedy and unrestrained prophet to act contrary to His will (vv. 8-32). Nevertheless, Balaam was unable to speak the curses and denunciations urged by Balak but instead blessed Israel four times (chs. 23—24). Apparently, Balak’s scheme was utterly frustrated. However, chapter 25 begins, “While Israel dwelt in Shittim, the people began to commit fornication with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods” (vv. 1-2). This was a serious defeat for Israel, which God’s faithful people never forgot (Josh. 24:9-10; Judg. 11:25; Micah 6:5).

The cause and source of this defeat are not evident until

Numbers 31. Verse 16 says, “It was these [the Moabite women] who caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to act unfaithfully against Jehovah.” Loving the reward and wages of unrighteousness (2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11) but being unable to earn them through divination, Balaam counseled Balak to make a more insidious attack, utilizing the Moabite women to seduce the people of God into fornication and idolatry, thus securing their defeat. This is confirmed by Revelation 2:14, which tells us that it was “Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel.” This is the history that the Lord recalls in His rebuke to the church in Pergamos. Miller notes,

When [Balaam] could not obtain the Lord’s permission to curse His people Israel, he allured them to their ruin by unlawful alliances with the daughters of Moab. As a false prophet he was now in the Church at Pergamos, seducing the saints into unlawful alliance with the world—the place of [Satan’s] throne and authority. (183)

In his first unwilling blessing of Israel, Balaam prophesied, “Here is a people who live alone / And do not reckon themselves among the nations” (Num. 23:9). *Live alone* “indicates that the children of Israel were a holy, sanctified people, a people set apart from the nations. The same is true of the church” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 9, note 1). Watchman Nee further draws out the significance of the account of Balaam for the church in Pergamos:

Through Balaam’s mouth, God told the Israelites that they should dwell alone and should not be reckoned among the nations. Yet Balaam taught the Israelites to remove the wall of partition between them and the nations so that they would be joined to the Midianites and would worship the idols and sin together. Hence, the teaching of Balaam is *the alliance with the world*. The result of this teaching is to take away the church’s qualification as a Nazarite and its zeal in loving the Lord.

The world and the church should be separated by a deep gulf. Yet the teaching of Balaam causes Balak to build a floating bridge across it so that the church and the world can be joined together and can love one another. (4: 378)

The teaching of Balaam is an apt, prophetic figure of the failure of the early church in joining itself with the world. This unholy alliance was Satan’s seductive strategy to damage the church, and this is the matter in which the believers, at least some as representatives of the whole, must overcome in order to preserve the church’s purity.

The Age of Constantine

In order to understand the spiritual, prophetically signified

nature of the church in Pergamos, it is necessary to see the historical context of this church.¹ This history follows the state of affairs in the Roman Empire after the destructive crises and civil wars of the third century. Diocletian ascended to the throne in A.D. 284, and to facilitate the rule of the newly reunited empire, he established a Tetrarchy of two *Augusti* (co-emperors), himself over the East and Maximian over the West, each with a *Caesar* (junior emperor) serving under him. As an Augustus vacated his throne, the Caesar rose to the higher rank, and a new Caesar was appointed. The Caesars of the first Tetrarchy were Constantius, the father of Constantine, and Galerius, who along with Maximian was an implacable enemy of Christ. In A.D. 303 Galerius pressed upon Diocletian to renew the persecution against the church, which for the next ten years was carried out with savage cruelty. In Gaul and Britain, however, Christians were mostly spared under the more humane rule of Constantius.

The order of the Tetrarchy soon collapsed under the weight of ambition and rivalries. On the death of Constantius, his troops in York named Constantine as Augustus, although the appointment was not officially recognized. After various revolts and usurpations in the other districts, no fewer than six rulers claimed the title of Augustus, prompting the Civil Wars of the Tetrarchy. By A.D. 312 this clamor pitted Constantine and Licinius (a new Augustus) against Maximinus (a rival Augustus) and Maxentius (a usurper and son of Maximian). Constantine's victory over Maxentius is universally celebrated as a watershed in the history of Western civilization. Constantine won decisive victories in northern Italy, and in October of 312 he prepared to face Maxentius on the Tiber River in the northern outskirts of Rome. The contemporary Christian historian Eusebius chronicles the life of Constantine with energetic praise and hyperbole. He recounts that the emperor considered deeply which of the gods he should invoke for the coming battle. Considering that the one true God had granted his father favor, Constantine earnestly prayed for God to reveal Himself and stretch forth His hand for the difficulties.

While he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven...About noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS [Gr. Τοῦτο Νίκα, Lat. *In Hoc Vinces*]. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and

his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle...

While he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies. ("Life" 490)

Constantine called for his craftsmen, who fashioned the sign as he described it, later called the *labarum*: a vertical spear overlaid with gold and crossed by a transverse bar, upon which was laid a wreath of gold and precious stones with the Greek letters *chi* and *rho* (XP), signifying the name of Christ. Beneath the wreath were medallions bearing portraits of the emperor and his children. "The emperor constantly made use of this sign of salvation as a safeguard against every adverse and hostile power, and commanded that others similar to it should be carried at the head of all his armies" (491). Armed thus, and assuming God as his patron and Christ as his preserver and aid, he enjoined the battle at the Milvian Bridge on October 28. When Constantine's smaller forces proved superior, the Maxentian forces retreated across the river on a temporary bridge. Maxentius also attempted to flee, but "the hand of the Lord prevailed," and Maxentius drowned in the Tiber (Lactantius 318). Constantine entered Rome the following day to great acclamations of joy and was named the sole emperor of the West.

When the church accepted the welcome, approval, protection, patronage, and positions of the world, it became the church "where Satan's throne is."

The Edict of Milan and the Emperor of the World

Galerius, on his deathbed and in dire need of prayer, issued an edict of toleration in A.D. 311, legalizing the meetings and worship of the "deluded Christians" and officially ending the Diocletianic persecution (Gibbon 2: 72), but after the death of Galerius, Maximinus renewed the persecutions in the eastern territories under his control. In February of 313, after Constantine's victory over Maxentius, Constantine and Licinius met in Milan to strengthen their bond and declare their policy toward Christians. The result, in the form of a letter, is known as the Edict of Milan, a liberal expression of the free practice of religion. It reads in part,

When we, Constantine and Licinius, emperors, had an interview at Milan, and conferred together with respect

to the good and security of the commonweal, it seemed to us that, amongst those things that are profitable to mankind in general, the reverence paid to the Divinity merited our first and chief attention, and that it was proper that the Christians and all others should have liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best; so that that God, who is seated in heaven, might be benign and propitious to us, and to every one under our government. And therefore we judged it a salutary measure, and one highly consonant to right reason, that no man should be denied leave of attaching himself to the rites of the Christians, or to whatever other religion his mind directed him, that thus the supreme Divinity, to whose worship we freely devote ourselves, might continue to vouchsafe His favour and beneficence to us. And accordingly we give you to know that, without regard to any provisos in our former orders to you concerning the Christians, all who choose that religion are to be permitted, freely and absolutely, to remain in it, and not to be disturbed in any ways, or molested. (Lactantius 320)

The letter, or Edict, also provided for the return, without cost, of confiscated properties to Christians and their churches.

In April of the same year Licinius conquered the armies of Maximinus, who not long afterward died terribly by his own hand (321), leaving the rule of the East to Licinius. However, jealousy, love of power, and ambition again overrode the new peace, and in A.D. 314 a series of wars broke out between the two remaining Augusti, Constantine and Licinius. The wars this time took on an added religious character, because Licinius sought the aid of the pagan priests and put to death many of the bishops who favored his rival. Eusebius tells us that before the final battle at Chrysopolis on September 18, 324, Constantine surrounded himself with Christian priests, and Licinius, with Egyptian diviners and soothsayers (“Life” 501). Once in the heat of battle, the labarum—“the salutary trophy”—advanced from one bearer to the next “like some triumphant charm against disasters,” seeming to render its bearers invulnerable and bringing a divine-like inspiration to the soldiers under it but fear and dread to the enemy (502). Accompanied by such alleged marvels, Constantine gained the final, decisive victory, establishing him as the absolute sovereign of the Roman Empire, in which position he continued until his death in A.D. 337.²

A Dreadful and Frightful Beast

The divine view and evaluation of the Roman Empire is expressed in the books of Daniel and Revelation. Daniel saw a dream with a vision of four great beasts. Daniel 7:3-6 says,

Four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other. The first was like a lion and had the wings of an eagle...And there was another beast, a second one, resembling a bear. And it was raised up on one side, and three ribs were in its mouth between its teeth...And there was another beast, like a leopard; and it had four wings of a bird on its back; and the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it.

The beasts of Daniel’s vision represent the kings that would arise from the earth (v. 17), the human governments that were at that time and were to come afterward.³ The first beast signifies Babylon with its king, Nebuchadnezzar—fierce, cruel, and of Satan, the ruler of the air (“wings of an eagle,” Eph. 2:2). The second beast signifies Medo-Persia, which devoured Babylon, Asia Minor, and Egypt (“three ribs”). The third beast represents Greece, with its king, Alexander the Great, which was divided among Alexander’s four generals (“four heads”) and was given authority to rule over the nations. Daniel 7:7 continues,

After this I watched in the night visions, and there was a fourth beast, dreadful and frightful and exceedingly strong; and it had large iron teeth; it devoured and crushed and trampled down the remainder with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns.

The fourth beast signifies the Roman Empire, which had great power to “devour the whole earth and tread it down and crush it” (v. 23). Moreover, the ten horns of the beast represent ten kings (v. 24; Rev. 17:12-13), among whom a different king will rise up: Antichrist, the last Caesar of the revived Roman Empire, the “beast coming up out of the sea,” who will be given power, a throne, and great authority by the dragon, Satan (13:1-2). Unlike the three before it, the fourth beast of Daniel 7 has no name or comparison among the great natural predators. It is simply a beast—dreadful, frightful, exceedingly strong, and “different.” This indicates that human government, which had its beginning at Babel under Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-10), reached its highest unnamable, unspeakable form in the Roman Empire, which will consummate at the end of the age with the kingdom of Antichrist. This is the great, dreadful kingdom of the Augusti and Caesars, of which Constantine became head. To be sure, the church of God has no concord or fellowship with such a beast, the dreadful incarnation of God’s enemy, Satan (2 Cor. 6:15). This should indicate to us how ruinous the Roman Empire’s embrace of Christianity was to the church in antiquity.

The First Emperor to Embrace Christianity

The appearance of the celestial sign to Constantine is

loosely and incorrectly said to signal his conversion to Christianity. History provides us with no certain point in time for Constantine's genuine, unambiguous repentance, acceptance of the gospel, and regeneration, and many aspects of his life justly allow us to suspect that such a conversion may never have happened at all. Of Constantine's preference for and devotion to Christianity, Miller notes,

The Emperor evidently felt that he was indebted to the God of the Christians and to the sacred symbol of the cross for his victories. And this, we dare say, was the extent of his Christianity at that time. As a *man* he had not felt his need of it, if ever he did; as a warrior he embraced it earnestly. Afterwards, as a statesman, he owned and valued Christianity; but God only knows whether as a lost sinner he ever embraced the Saviour. (187)

It was only in A.D. 337, the last year of his life and at the end of his career, that Constantine yielded to be baptized. Thus, rather than call him the first Christian emperor, it is safer to say that he was the first emperor to embrace Christianity as a religion. In his analytical biography of Constantine, Paul Stephenson states that making war was always the most important duty of a Roman emperor. Thus, Christianity to the emperor was simply the religion of victory:

He saw the god of the Christians as the bringer of victory, the 'greatest god' (in Latin, the *summus deus*) who had hitherto been misidentified as Zeus or Jupiter, or as the Sun. Constantine's militant interpretation of Christianity was founded on the Roman understanding of the interactions between faith and power. (13)

Again Miller writes,

If we read the mind of Constantine aright, we should have no hesitation in saying, that at this time he was a heathen in heart, and a Christian only from military motives. It was only as a superstitious soldier that he had embraced Christianity. At that moment he was ready to welcome the assistance of any tutelary divinity in his struggles for universal empire. We can see no trace of Christianity, far less any trace of the zeal of a new convert: but we can easily trace the old superstition of heathenism in the new dress of Christianity. (190)

Constantine's claim to be the instrument of God, particularly His military instrument, was according to the

"Roman theology of victory as he understood it" (Stephenson 156). Indeed, after his victory at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine took the name *Invictus*—"Unconquered," or "Unconquerable"—an ambiguous reference both to himself as the conqueror under the Christians' God and also to Sol Invictus, the "Unconquerable Sun," his former patron. Constantine's references to God were consistently vague and remote. To him, God was simply the *summus deus*—the "Supreme God," the "Supreme Being," the "Supreme Saviour" in battle, "Divine Providence" (Eusebius, "Life" 502, 506, 516).

Constantine self-consciously saw himself as the new instrument of God, "a divine vehicle and channel for grace" (Stephenson 216), for the carrying out of God's will as it pertained to the greater good of the empire, over which he was now the shepherd. The emperor himself states,

At this present time, we may see by still more manifest proofs, and still more decisive instances, both how unreasonable it were to question this truth, and how mighty is the power of the Supreme God: since it appears that they who

faithfully observe His holy laws, and shrink from the transgression of His commandments, are rewarded with abundant blessings, and are endued with well-grounded hope as well as ample power for the accomplishment of their undertakings...I myself, then, was the instrument whose services He chose, and esteemed suited for the accomplishment of his will. (qtd. in Eusebius, "Life" 506-507)

The will of God that Constantine championed was no more than the secondary effect of God's hand that had brought prosperity to his empire. Although Constantine throughout his life retained the title of *Pontifex Maximus*—chief priest of all the Roman religions and cults—it was the new Christian vocabulary that suggested to him an apt title for his beneficent role as emperor: that of *bishop*, not of the church per se but for the good of the church.⁴ The admiring Eusebius records,

It was not without reason that once, on the occasion of his entertaining a company of bishops, he let fall the expression, "that he himself too was a bishop," addressing them in my hearing in the following words: "You are bishops whose jurisdiction is within the Church: I also am a bishop, ordained by God to overlook whatever is external to the Church." And truly his measures corresponded with his words; for he watched over his subjects with an

Human government,
which had its beginning
at Babel, will consummate
at the end of the age
with the kingdom of Antichrist.

episcopal care, and exhorted them as far as in him lay to follow a godly life. (546).

Eusebius writes further of Constantine's role in the synods of bishops,

He exercised a peculiar care over the church of God...He, like some general bishop constituted by God, convened synods of his ministers. Nor did he disdain to be present and sit with them in their assembly, but bore a share in their deliberations, ministering to all that pertained to the peace of God. (494)

Edward Gibbon adds, "The Greeks, who celebrate the festival of the Imperial saint, seldom mention the name of Constantine without adding the title of *equal to the Apostles*" (2: 274). The foregoing brief portrait sets before us the person of Constantine—Roman emperor and *Pontifex Maximus* of the pagans, yet "general bishop" of the church and an "equal" of the apostles. It was to his empire, and to him as its head, that the church in antiquity joined itself in an unholy matrimony.

The Mistress of the World

Before the evil instigations of Galerius at the turn of the fourth century, Christians had enjoyed a temporary, "treacherous calm," a fifty-year respite from persecution (Gibbon 2: 73). However, the effects of this respite proved spiritually unhealthy. Miller recounts,

During this period Christians had attained an unexamined degree of prosperity; but it was only outward; they had deeply declined from the purity and simplicity of the Gospel of Christ.

Churches had arisen in most of the cities of the empire, and with some display of architectural splendour. Vestments and sacred vessels of silver and gold began to be used. Converts flocked in from all ranks of society... Christians held high offices in the state, and in the imperial household. They occupied positions of distinction and even of supreme authority, in the provinces and in the army. But, alas, this long period of outward prosperity had produced its usual consequences. Faith and love decayed; pride and ambition crept in...The peace of fifty years had corrupted the whole Christian atmosphere. (173)

Gibbon records that even in the time of Diocletian, Christians were found in positions of power, to the detriment of the purity of their faith:

The church still continued to increase its outward splendour as it lost its internal purity; and, in the reign of Diocletian, the palace, the courts of justice, and even the army, concealed a multitude of Christians, who endeav-

oured to reconcile the interests of the present with those of a future life. (1: 563)

Not long afterward, as the first emperor who publicly professed the Christian religion, Constantine established a more lasting peace for the believers. From the first moment of his accession, he declared himself the protector of the church. "Every victory of Constantine was productive of some relief or benefit to the church," at least outwardly (2: 69).⁵ We must not minimize that the end of two and a half centuries of persecution was a victory and relief from the hand of the Lord. As the first effect of the emperor's patronage, prisons were opened, Christian slaves were released from the mines, families were reunited, meeting places were restored, possessions were returned, and safety was ensured for the believers and the churches throughout the empire. There is no doubt that this great blessing did not come from the hand of the worldly emperor alone. Rather, it was a vindication of the sovereignty and power of the Christ who rules from the heavens. "The miracle thus wrought by the ascended Christ needs no aid from the supposed 'vision of Constantine' to make it a supernatural exhibition of His glory who is 'King of kings and Lord of lords'" (Coxe 4).

However, "The world's favour begins to be the trial of faith, as its hatred before" (3). Constantine not only restored to Christians the civil and religious rights of which they had been deprived, but he also showed great favor to them, particularly the leaders among them, surrounding himself with them in his palace, on his journeys, and on the battlefield. He restored the meeting places and estates of the Christians that had been confiscated and then enriched and multiplied them by his generous gifts. He encouraged the reception of Christianity and showed preference to those who seemed to embrace it. He became interested in the affairs of the church, convened councils, and attended them with great interest. Most of all he took upon himself the duty of peacekeeper in the church, intervening in its disputes and strifes. In all these ways Constantine "seated Christianity on the throne of the Roman world" (Gibbon 2: 274):

The grateful applause of the clergy has consecrated the memory of a prince who indulged their passions and promoted their interest. Constantine gave to them security, wealth, honours, and revenge; and the support of the orthodox faith was considered as the most sacred and important duty of the civil magistrate. (295)

As the pure, enlightened, and divinely breathed faith of Christ became transmuted into a great religion with the most intimate connection to the seat of human empire, "Christianity leaped from the sands of the arena to the

throne of the Caesars and became the mistress of the world” (Hains 14). Paul told the Corinthians, “I am jealous over you with a jealousy of God; for I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2). Christ, the Bridegroom, “loved the church and gave Himself up for her...that He might present the church to Himself glorious, not having spot or wrinkle or any such things, but that she would be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25, 27). At the end of this age the over-coming saints as the bride of Christ will be rewarded with the marriage dinner of the Lamb, and in eternity future the New Jerusalem as the constitution of all God’s people will be the wife of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9; 21:9). Therefore, for the church to leave the simplicity and purity of its first love to the Lord is to commit spiritual fornication. How much more is this the case when the church joins itself to the world in order to enjoy the patronage and favors of the head of a human empire. Miller says truly that the church accepted the protection of the Roman empire “at the cost of her fidelity to Christ” (189):

Much may be said, we admit, as to the great blessing of impartial toleration, and of the great advantages to society of the legal suppression of all wicked customs; but court favour has always been ruinous to the true prosperity of the Church of God. It is a great mercy to be unmolested, but it is a greater mercy to be unpatronised by princes...It was better for Christianity when Christians were suffering at the stake for Christ, than when they were feasted in king’s palaces and covered with royal favours. (192)

Tares Sown among the Wheat

Constantine gave preferential treatment to those officials and persons of authority that embraced Christianity, and he rewarded with privileges and gifts the cities that most zealously tore down their pagan temples. Although he never officially mandated Christianity, he endeavored to make it attractive by promising positions and honors to the upper classes and donations to the lower class. In this way the zeal of the newly received religion, and the greed for its temporal rewards, quickly spread. Gibbon relates,

As the lower ranks of society are governed by imitation, the conversion of those who possessed any eminence of birth, of power, or of riches, was soon followed by dependent multitudes. The salvation of the common people was purchased at an easy rate, if it be true that, in one year, twelve thousand men were baptised at Rome,

besides a proportionable number of women and children, and that a white garment, with twenty pieces of gold, had been promised by the emperor to every convert. (2: 274-275)

This latter outcome was the worsening of the devilish activity prophesied by the Lord in the parable of the tares:

The kingdom of the heavens has become like a man sowing good seed in his field. But while the men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares in the midst of the wheat and went away. And when the blade sprouted and produced fruit, then the tares appeared also. (Matt. 13:24-26)

The church is the Body of Christ, His pure and spotless bride, composed of the true believers, who are redeemed through genuine faith in Christ, regenerated by His indwelling divine life, and joined to Him organically by partaking of His divine nature. The wheat signifies these believers, the genuine constituents of the kingdom of the heavens. The tares are the false believers, whom the devil sows among the true ones. The tares grow together with the wheat in the “field,” the world, causing the church to be artificially enlarged into a mere appearance of the kingdom. This evil process, which began after the formation of the church on the day of Pentecost, achieved its most rapid and audacious progress during the time of Constantine.

The Headship of the Church

The encroachments of the Roman emperor into the affairs of the church would not have tainted the church if those who bore responsibility in it had not been willing to accept them. Accepting what was offered was the church’s downfall. Miller asks, “What has the Church to expect from a world that crucified her Lord? Or rather, what would she accept from it?” (192). The leading ones among the believers saw this momentous turn of history as a great boon to the formerly persecuted and suffering church, a help granted to them by God Himself. To be sure, God gave His people merciful and life-preserving relief from the outward attacks of His enemy. At this point, though, much wisdom and discernment was needed but evidently not present in sufficient form and quantity. The leaders who found themselves in the emperor’s favor made many concessions and compromises to receive him, at least in appearance, into the flock of the

Christians who found themselves in the emperor’s favor made many concessions and compromises to receive him, at least in appearance, into the flock of the church.

church. Gibbon notes, “The gratitude of the church has exalted the virtues and excused the failings of a generous patron, who seated Christianity on the throne of the Roman world” (2: 274).

The severe rules of discipline which the prudence of the bishops had instituted were relaxed by the same prudence in favour of an Imperial proselyte, whom it was so important to allure, by every gentle condescension, into the pale of the church; and Constantine was permitted, at least by a tacit dispensation, to enjoy *most* of the privileges, before he had contracted *any* of the obligations, of a Christian. (270-271)

It was inevitable that the emperor of the greatest human government in the world would see himself as no common proselyte:

It was long since established as a fundamental maxim of the Roman constitution,...that the care of religion was the right as well as the duty of the civil magistrate. Constantine and his successors could not easily persuade themselves that they had forfeited, by their conversion, any branch of the Imperial prerogatives, or that they were incapable of giving laws to a religion which they had protected and embraced. The emperors still continued to exercise a supreme jurisdiction over the ecclesiastical order. (277)

It was by Constantine’s authority, power, and sovereignty that the church enjoyed not only relief but also favor and affluence. In addition, he was not indifferent to the esoteric knowledge and practical governance of the church but rather took a certain interest in these matters. Accordingly, he “publicly declared himself, not only a partaker, but in some measure, a priest and hierophant of the Christian mysteries” (271), and the leaders of the church indulged him in his pretenses. The bishops appeared as regular attendants at his court, and they began to turn to him as “the final arbiter of their disputes and as the enforcer of their decisions” (Stephenson 275).

It was in the resolution of disputes that Constantine made his greatest intrusion into the church. Above all, he was the shepherd of the empire, and he realized that the schisms of the ever more influential church would lead to unrest in his borders. He himself states,

I consider it by no means right that contentions and altercations of this kind should be hidden from me, by which, perchance, God may be moved not only against the human race, but also against me myself, to whose care, by His heavenly Decree, He has entrusted the direction of all human affairs. (qtd. in Optatus 387)

He therefore, “in the character of a minister of peace,”

felt that it was his duty to convene councils of church leaders, whom he viewed as his subordinates, to resolve the theological and practical issues of the day (Eusebius, “Life” 516).

Constantine considered the bishops another group of subordinates, whose spiritual and pragmatic authority was not qualitatively different to his own, just less abundant. As a general,...[he] understood that loyalty to the commander-in-chief was achieved not through consultation but through the chain of command...So it would be with the Christian Church and its generals, the bishops, who were his imperial subjects. (Stephenson 258)

As a general, as well as “general bishop,” he convened synods of bishops and deacons, causing the internal dissensions of the church to become affairs of state. The first of these was at Arles in A.D. 314 to deal with the Donatist schism in Carthage. The second major council, and the greatest that he convened, was at Nicaea in 325. The execution of the council owed much to Constantine’s own effort and expense. Eusebius writes, “Nor was this merely the issuing of a bare command, but the emperor’s good will contributed much to its being carried into effect” (“Life” 521).

In order to make the journey to Nicaea possible to some, and at least easier to others, the Emperor placed the public conveyances and the beasts of burden belonging to the Government at the disposal of the bishops; and while the Council lasted, he provided abundantly for the entertainment of its members. (Hefele 270)

Eusebius records the arrival of the emperor, who served as an honorary president of the council:

All rising at the signal which indicated the emperor’s entrance, at last he himself proceeded through the midst of the assembly, like some heavenly messenger of God, clothed in raiment which glittered as it were with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe, and adorned with the brilliant splendor of gold and precious stones...For the rest of his personal excellencies, he surpassed all present in height of stature and beauty of form, as well as in majestic dignity of mien, and invincible strength and vigor...As soon as he had advanced to the upper end of the seats, at first he remained standing, and when a low chair of wrought gold had been set for him, he waited until the bishops had beckoned to him, and then sat down, and after him the whole assembly did the same. (“Life” 522)

Constantine—the ruler of the world—listened attentively, acted as a mediator, engaged in persuasions, and at all times encouraged unity. Since the council ended on the twentieth anniversary of his coming to power, he

celebrated with the bishops at his palace at Nicomedia and sent them away with gifts and generous donations of cash for their churches.⁶

It is clear that Constantine claimed—and the church condescended to agree—that his place in the church was no less than the “bishop” of its external affairs—its overseer, caretaker, peacekeeper, arbitrator, patron, protector, and preserver. He acted as such, and the church came to depend on him for this. Even in the councils of the church the weight of the emperor was felt, and his vote on the great issues under consideration could sway that of others:

As those princes presumed to extend their despotism over the faith, as well as over the lives and fortunes of their subjects, the weight of their suffrage sometimes inclined the ecclesiastical balance: and the prerogatives of the King of Heaven were settled, or changed, or modified, in the cabinet of an earthly monarch. (Gibbon 2: 322)

Miller concludes,

The Church, doubtless, lost much by her **union with the State**. She no longer existed as a separate community, and was no longer governed exclusively by the will of Christ. She had surrendered her independence, lost her Heavenly character, and become inseparably identified with the passions and interests of the ruling power. (206)

This was a great fall away from Christ the unique Head, whose right and position was altogether usurped by an earthly emperor with the consent of a worldly church. Ephesians 1:20-23 says that God caused His great power to operate in Christ

in raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in the heavenlies, far above all rule and authority and power and lordship and every name that is named not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and He subjected all things under His feet and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church, which is His Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all.

God has given to the ascended, transcendent Christ the headship of the church, and He shares that heavenly position with no one. God’s economy is to head up all things in Christ (v. 10). Christ is the Head of the church, to whom the church is subject (5:23-24), the Head of all rule and authority (Col. 2:10), the Head of the Body corporately (1:18; 2:19), and the head of every man

individually in the divine government (1 Cor. 11:3). The church holds the Head, submits to the Head, is joined to the Head, and organically grows into the Head (Eph. 4:15). Only that which truly takes Christ as the Head is the genuine church. We have pointed out that in a time of abnormality, the overcomers come back to God’s original intention and walk in the normal pattern set forth in the teaching of the apostles. To walk in this way is to love the Lord with the first love, hold Him as the unique Head, and grow into Him in all things. This is what the Lord needs in the midst of a church that has embraced the world and been embraced by it.

The Teaching of the Nicolaitans

Christ, as the High Priest walking in the midst of the lampstands, says to the church in Pergamos, “I have a few things against you, that you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam...In the same way you also have some who hold in like manner the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev. 2:14-15). In the epistle to the church in Ephesus the Lord speaks of the works (ἔργα) of the Nicolaitans. Now to Pergamos He speaks of the teaching (διδασχῆ) of the Nicolaitans. Formerly the principle of the Nicolaitans was practiced by some but hated both by the Lord and by the faithful church. Now in Pergamos this principle is not only universally practiced, but it is also taught as a precept and prescription. This truly indicates a degradation in the early church. The word *Nicolaitans* comes from the Greek for *conquer* (νικάω) and for *the common people* (λαός); 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’” (Scofield 1332).⁷ This “priestly assumption” (1332) compounded with the teaching of Balaam to work a twofold damage to the church. Witness Lee writes,

The worldly and degraded church holds not only the teaching of Balaam but also the teaching of the Nicolaitans. The teaching of Balaam distracts believers from the person of Christ to idolatry and from the enjoyment of Christ to spiritual fornication, whereas the teaching of the Nicolaitans destroys the function of the believers as members of the Body of Christ, thus annulling the Lord’s Body as His expression. The former teaching disregards the Head, and the latter destroys the Body. (Recovery Version, Rev. 2:15, note 1)

In the New Testament, God has returned to His original intention according to His economy, in that He has made

It was by Constantine’s authority, power, and sovereignty that the church enjoyed not only relief but also favor and affluence.

all believers in Christ priests (1:6; 5:10; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). But at the end of the initial church, even in the first century, the Nicolaitans intervened as the mediatorial class to spoil God's economy...In the proper church life there should be neither clergy nor laity; all believers should be priests of God. Because the mediatorial class destroys the universal priesthood in God's economy, the Lord hates it. (Recovery Version, Rev. 2:6, note 1)

The Ascent of the Bishops

A proper understanding of the teaching of the Nicolaitans requires a proper understanding of the term *bishop*. *Bishop* is an Anglicization of the Greek ἐπίσκοπος, meaning "overseer" (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:25). In the usage of the New Testament, an overseer is simply an elder in a local church. The two terms are synonymous, *elder* (πρεσβύτερος, "presbyter"), emphasizing maturity, and *overseer*, denoting function. In the Acts and the Epistles, the more common word, *elder*, is consistently used in the plural, denoting a fellowship of relatively more mature brothers who care for and oversee the condition of the church in their own locality.⁸

As early as the beginning of the second century, a new order and new terms for this order began to form. One of the elders in a church began to be recognized as a leading one among leading ones, as if he were the president among a senate, and as this practice became common, this office took on its own name. "It was under these circumstances that the lofty title of Bishop began to raise itself above the humble appellation of Presbyter," or *elder* (Gibbon 1: 534). In the first decade of the second century, Ignatius speaks of bishops as clearly distinct from elders, or presbyters:

See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles...Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid...It is well to reverence both God and the bishop. He who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; he who does anything without the knowledge of the bishop, does [in reality] serve the devil. (89-90, portions in brackets are part of the translation)

bishop, whom he conflates with the Old Testament chief priest:

It remains to put you in mind also of the due observance of giving and receiving baptism. Of giving it, the chief priest (who is the bishop) has the right: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons, yet not without the bishop's authority. (677)

Both Ignatius and Tertullian use the term *bishop* in the singular number—"the bishop"—in a way not intended by the New Testament. In his strong polemics on the church, Cyprian adds much to the teaching that uplifts the bishop. He writes, "The Church is founded upon the bishops, and every act of the Church is controlled by these same rulers" ("Epistles" 305). He contends that the oneness of the church is kept only where there is union with and obedience to the bishop, whom he also calls the "priest":

They are the Church who are a people united to the priest, and the flock which adheres to its pastor. Whence you ought to know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop; and if anyone be not with the bishop, he is not in the Church...The Church, which is Catholic and one, is not cut nor divided, but is indeed connected and bound together by the cement of priests who cohere with one another. (374-375)

"The Church in the bishop" (*"Ecclesia in Episcopo"*) is Cyprian's formula for church unity and order.

That each church had at most one bishop over the presbyters is clearly demonstrated by the numerous lists of the succession of bishops in the church history of Eusebius ("History" 176, 221). We find this practice codified in none other than the Canons of the Council of Nicaea, in A.D. 325. Canon 8 instructs concerning the way to deal with bishops of the Cathari sect who returned to the proper church. If they come into a jurisdiction where there is already a bishop, they are to be demoted to be presbyters, at the discretion of the existing bishop:

If they come over where there is a bishop or presbyter of the Catholic Church, it is manifest that the Bishop of the Church must have the bishop's dignity [i.e., position]; and he who was named bishop by those who are called Cathari shall have the rank of presbyter, unless it shall seem fit to the Bishop to admit him to partake in the honour of the title. Or, if this should not be satisfactory, then shall the bishop provide for him a place as Chorepiscopus, or presbyter, in order that he may be evidently seen to be of the clergy, and that there may not be two bishops in the city. ("Nice" 20)

A century later Tertullian also exalts the position of the

This formula is based on two assumptions: that a bishop

of a divisive sect is inferior to one of the “catholic” church and that there cannot arise a situation in which two bishops serve in the same jurisdiction.⁹ In this way, “priestly domination began to exercise its...powers, and the bishop to assume the language and the authority of the vicegerent of God” (Miller 173). The maxim “*Nulla ecclesia sine episcopo*” (“There is no church apart from the bishop”) was absorbed into Christianity both in practice and in teaching. It is to the great detriment of the church and to the ruin of the Body of Christ that this unscriptural, hierarchical form of government came so early in its history and was accepted so widely that it now appears to have the sanction of antiquity and custom.¹⁰

Synods, Metropolitans, and Superior Metropolitans

In the time of the apostles the churches existed distinctly in their respective localities and cared for their own affairs, but they also freely lent and accepted the spiritual and material help of one another mutually (Acts 15:22-23; 11:29-30; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-3; Col. 4:16). It is important to note that in the Acts and the Epistles, this aspect of universal fellowship among the churches required no regional administrative offices other than the service of the apostles with the cooperation of the local elders. This is the clear testimony and example of the New Testament. Gibbon observes that in their pristine condition, “the [church] societies which were instituted in the cities of the Roman empire were united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution” (1: 533). This remained the condition of the churches throughout the Roman world until the middle of the third century. Cyprian, who argued so strongly for the role of the bishop, still believed in the equality and universal fellowship of the bishops. He clearly states,

Neither does any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience; since every bishop, according to the allowance of his liberty and power, has his own proper right of judgment, and can no more be judged by another than he himself can judge another. (“Council” 565)

Nevertheless, another false structure in the church was under development. It is normal that new churches that were raised up, especially in rural areas, at first fell under the care of the churches in the nearby larger cities.

This arrangement, however, degraded into the concept of a *diocese*, a policy and term borrowed directly from the Roman government. In the ecclesiastical diocese the bishop of a larger city claimed the right of appointing bishops in the rural churches close to it. This formed a new class of bishop, superior to the presbyters but inferior to the diocesan bishop who had appointed them. More and more, the hierarchical arrangement of the church followed the pattern of the government of the outward empire.

At this time the bishops of Greece and Asia began to meet twice a year in provincial synods, borrowing the custom from the representative councils of the secular government, a practice that soon spread to the whole empire. The decrees of the synods, known as *canons*, regulated the important matters of faith and practice. To facilitate the synods and ensure order, a president was appointed, who was usually the bishop of the capital city of the corresponding Roman province. This officer was called the *metropolitan*, or *primate*. Again we find this codified in the Canons of the Council of Nicaea. Canon 6 states,

The universal fellowship among the churches required no regional administrative offices other than the service of the apostles with the cooperation of the local elders.

Let the ancient customs in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis prevail, that the Bishop of Alexandria have jurisdiction in all these, since the like is customary for the Bishop of Rome also...And this is to be universally understood, that if any one be made bishop without the consent of the Metropolitan, the great Synod has declared that such a man ought not to be a bishop. (“Nice” 15).

This decree establishes the bishop of Alexandria as metropolitan, the superior bishop, over the entire Egyptian diocese, based both on existing practice and the example of the metropolitan of Rome, who apparently also enjoyed the same kind of superior position. Again we see an ancient custom (the “works” of the Nicolaitans—Rev. 2:6) becoming canon (the “teaching” of the Nicolaitans—v. 15). The historian Charles Hefele demonstrates that the provinces governed by Alexandria each had their own metropolitan, making the office in Alexandria that of superior metropolitan over ordinary metropolitans, adding yet another level to the growing hierarchy of church government (389-391). One metropolitan, therefore, could claim greater influence over others according to the greatness of the province that he represented, a greatness gauged by considerations such as

the temporal honours and advantages of the city over which he presided; the numbers and opulence of the Christians who were subject to their pastoral care; the

saints and martyrs who had arisen among them; and the purity with which they preserved the tradition of the faith as it had been transmitted through a series of orthodox bishops from the apostle or apostolic disciple to whom the foundation of their church was ascribed. (Gibbon I: 539)

The Ordering of the Clergy and the Laity

In the time of Pergamos the distinction between the clergy and the laity as separate orders in the church was cemented and formalized. The “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles” is a compilation of writings intended as a practical manual of instruction, worship, and policy. In simplistic terms it prescribes the various hierarchical orders in the church:

A bishop blesses, but does not receive the blessing. He lays on hands, ordains, offers, receives the blessing from bishops, but by no means from presbyters...A presbyter blesses, but does not receive the blessing; yet does he receive the blessing from the bishop or a fellow-presbyter. In like manner does he give it to a fellow-presbyter. He lays on hands, but does not ordain...A deacon does not bless, does not give the blessing, but receives it from the bishop and presbyter: he does not baptize, he does not offer; but when a bishop or presbyter has offered, he distributes to the people, not as a priest, but as one that ministers to the priests. But it is not lawful for any one of the other clergy to do the work of a deacon. (493-494)

It is evident that the terms *clergy* and *clergyman* were now in common use to denote a class of professionals and specialists in the service of God, distinct from the laity, or layman, the common members of the church. The “Constitutions” describe the plan of a proper meeting place and the situating of the various orders, using the analogy of a great ship commanded by the bishop:

Let the building be long, with its head to the east, with its vestries on both sides at the east end, and so it will be like a ship. In the middle let the bishop’s throne be placed, and on each side of him let the presbytery sit down; and let the deacons stand near at hand, in close and small girt garments, for they are like the mariners and managers of the ship: with regard to these, let the laity sit on the other side, with all quietness and good order. (421)

Such a gathering would be entirely unrecognizable to the apostle Paul. Paul told the Corinthians, “Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor. 14:26). *Has*, mentioned five times in this verse, is ἔχει, meaning “to hold, possess, keep, have in store and readiness, have as a faculty or means” (Thayer 266-267):

When we come to the church meeting, we should have something of the Lord to share with others, whether a psalm to praise the Lord, a teaching (of the teacher) to minister the riches of Christ to edify and nourish others, a revelation (of the prophet, v. 30) to give visions of God’s eternal purpose concerning Christ as God’s mystery and the church as Christ’s mystery, a tongue for a sign to the unbelievers (v. 22) that they may know and accept Christ, or an interpretation to make a tongue concerning Christ and His Body understandable. (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 26, note 1).

Such a meeting requires that all the members, without exception and apart from any consideration of a special class, pursue Christ in their daily life, experience and enjoy Him, and partake of Him through His living word and in fellowship with Him in prayer. “Thus the meeting will be an exhibition of Christ in His riches and will be a mutual enjoyment of Christ shared by all the attendants before God and with God for the building up of the saints and the church” (Note 1). Any concept or system that annuls, suppresses, or quenches the function of any member is foreign and damaging to the church as the organic Body of Christ.

The church in the Acts and Epistles is the church of God (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), not of any person, practice, or doctrine. It is the church in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thes. 1:1), who is its Head, sole authority, Preserver, and Protector. It is the church of “all the saints in Christ Jesus...with the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). Witness Lee observes,

Here it is not “the saints...and the overseers and deacons”; rather, it is “the saints...with the overseers and deacons.” This is highly significant in that it indicates that in the local church the saints, the overseers, and the deacons are not three groups. The church has only one group, composed of all the saints (including the overseers and deacons), who are the components of a local church. (Recovery Version, v. 1, note 2)

The system of clergy and laity that came into the church and was formalized by the fourth century is entirely contrary to the genuine church revealed and exemplified in the New Testament. This great evil is Satan’s strategy against the church to kill the function of the members of Christ’s Body, and it is hated by the Lord (Rev. 2:6).

“The Wages of Unrighteousness”

It was in the epoch of Pergamos that the clergy also began to receive salaries from the state treasury, and the income of a bishop rose in proportion to the status and opulence of the city that he governed. The revenue of each diocese was divided into four parts: one for the bishop, one for

the inferior clergy, one for the poor, and one for public worship. Clerics also enjoyed other advantages and benefits in society:

The whole body of the catholic clergy, more numerous, perhaps, than the legions, was exempted by the emperors from all service, private or public, all municipal offices, and all personal taxes and contributions, which pressed on their fellow-citizens with intolerable weight; and the duties of their holy profession were accepted as a full discharge of the obligations to the republic. (Gibbon 2: 283)

As the social advantages of the clerical trade became more attractive, more offices and functions were then invented:

The cathedrals of Constantinople and Carthage maintained their peculiar establishment of five hundred ecclesiastical ministers. Their ranks and numbers were insensibly multiplied by the superstition of the times, which introduced into the church the splendid ceremonies of a Jewish or Pagan temple; and a long train of priests, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers, singers, and doorkeepers contributed, in their respective stations, to swell the pomp and harmony of religious worship. (284)

At this time in history the Nicolaitan principle, which was formerly only a wrong practice in the church, became an elaborate, official, hierarchical system of professions, titles, and privileges both in the church and in the state. For many, the service to the Lord and to His Body was reduced to a mere trade, bound to the world by the desire not only for position but also for “base gain” (Titus 1:11). Here again we see the teaching of Balaam, which is closely united with the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Balaam is the first person recorded in the Bible to earn wages for spiritual service. Second Peter 2:15 tells us that Balaam “loved the wages of unrighteousness.” This is in stark contrast to the ministers of the gospel, who on behalf of the Lord’s name went out, taking nothing from the Gentiles (3 John 7). “If anyone who works for God’s New Testament economy receives help for God’s work, especially financial support, from the unbelievers, this is a shame and even an insult to God” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 7, note 2). In the time of the apostle John, the brothers who worked for God took nothing from the pagans. Jesus told His disciples,

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; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25-28)

How different is the pure church of the Son of Man from the great, hierarchical, worldly, and ambition-promoting church in the time of Constantine! It is clear that by the fourth century the church fell into a state only remotely comparable to the church revealed and exemplified in the New Testament. Ministry within the church was now equal to position in society with all its secular advantages, and pride, arrogance, luxury, and assumed dignity accompanied the formerly humble title of shepherd of the flock.

To the worldly church, Christ, “He who has the sharp two-edged sword,” speaks, “Repent therefore; but if not, I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war with them with the sword of My mouth” (Rev. 2:12, 16). *Coming to you quickly* refers not to the Lord’s coming back in the future but to His coming to war with the Nicolaitan teachers in the degraded church. If a church that is caught up in the worldly, pagan practice of the clergy-laity system does not repent, the Lord will judge the source of the evil with the slaying word out of His mouth. The Roman Empire opposed the church in Smyrna with a sword, but now it is the Lord Himself who wields the sword against the teachers in the church in Pergamos, those who “utilize their evil teachings to support their walk with the world and cover their evil deeds with false holiness” (Nee 4: 373).

Song of Songs 5:16 says of the Lord that “His mouth is sweetness itself,” and Luke 4:22 speaks of “words of grace proceeding out of His mouth.” In Revelation 1 and 2, however, a sharp two-edged sword proceeds out of His mouth.

This is Christ’s discerning, judging, and slaying word (Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17). The words of grace are for His supply of grace to His favored ones, whereas the sharp two-edged sword is for His dealing with negative persons and things. (Lee, Recovery Version, Rev. 1:16, note 2)

Whether the Lord’s word is a sweet nourishment to the church or a killing sword depends on whether the church takes the pure way of the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament or the corrupted and corrupting way of the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

The church is the church of God, not of any person, practice, or doctrine. It is the church in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is its Head, sole authority, Preserver, and Protector.

Eating the Hidden Manna

In Revelation 2:17 the Lord said, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give of the hidden manna.” Although the church in Pergamos was a particular church in Asia, in the literal sense, and represents the church in antiquity, in the prophetic sense, Christ’s speaking is to all the churches and thus to all believers.

The promise to those who overcome the degradation of the worldly church—the church’s union with the world, the teaching of idolatry and fornication, and the teaching of hierarchy—is that they will eat the hidden manna. For forty years God sustained His Old Testament people with manna from heaven, enabling them to follow Him in the wilderness. Thus, manna is a type of Christ as the heavenly food that enables God’s New Testament people to go His way. As a memorial of the experience of manna, Jehovah commanded that an omerful—one person’s daily portion—be preserved in a golden pot before Jehovah within the Ark of the Testimony in the Holy of Holies (Exo. 16:16, 32-34; Heb. 9:3-4). That the manna preserved in the Ark was equal to one person’s daily portion signifies that the portion of Christ that we daily eat, enjoy, and assimilate into our being is the portion that we preserve as an eternal memorial.

The arrangement of the tabernacle with its furniture portrays the believers’ experience of Christ. The bronze altar and laver in the outer court signify the experience of the redemption of Christ and the cleansing of the Spirit based on Christ’s redemption. The table of the bread of the Presence, the lampstand, and the incense altar signify our experience of Christ as our life supply, the shining light, and our acceptance in Christ to God. These experiences are deeper and more inward than the experiences of the outer court. However, the experience typified by the Ark in the Holy of Holies is the deepest and most inward of all. The three sections of the tabernacle also signify the three parts of man—the body, the outward part; the soul, the inward, psychological part; and the spirit, the innermost part of man that is born of the divine Spirit in regeneration (1 Thes. 5:23; John 3:6). Thus, the hidden manna in the golden pot in the Holy of Holies signifies our experience of Christ as our life supply in the deepest part of our being. The fellowship with God that we enjoy in the Holy Place—the intellect and consciousness of our soul—is somewhat indirect and veiled. In contrast, the overcomers come forward through the veil to the Holy of Holies, that is, to their spirit, to have direct fellowship with the Lord in His presence (Heb. 10:19-22; Psa. 16:11).

The daily manna was for the enjoyment and sustenance of the people in a public way, but the omer of manna placed

in the golden pot was hidden and not for the public congregation. As such, it signifies the special, hidden portion of Christ that is reserved for His overcoming seekers, who overcome the degradation of the worldly church. Jesus taught His disciples, “When you pray, enter into your private room, and shut your door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matt. 6:6). In order to eat the hidden portion of Christ, we must contact Him in secret and have some secret enjoyment of Him. Jesus’ word to the disciples is not merely an instruction on prayer. It is also a principle, opening a door to a vast hidden chamber in which the overcomers spend much time and eventually dwell, as the Lord gives more grace. Only through such a deep, mysterious, hidden, and spiritual experience of the hidden Christ can we counter the trend of the worldly church. Watchman Nee writes,

Manna is not something common. It is God’s food to those who trust in Him solely, who have no other trusts, whose only support is from God, and who would die of starvation otherwise. It is because men have this dependence and need that God manifests His power and love to take up the responsibility to meet their needs. (4: 409)

During the centuries of persecution, the early believers truly knew this kind of dependence. How different was the situation when the church became married to the world, receiving its help, sustenance, and supply from a worldly ruler of a devilish empire. In the proper church there is no food other than Christ as our manna. God desires a group of overcomers who come out of the world to feed on Christ uniquely. Witness Lee writes,

According to God’s economy, we should live on Christ and on Christ alone. Christ should be our unique diet, and we should live by Him. We should not seek to live on any other food. Whatever satisfies, strengthens, and sustains us is our food. The unique food we take for our sustenance, strength, and satisfaction must be Christ...When we eat Christ as our real food, we are joined to Him and become one spirit with Him. (*Exodus* 418-419)

By eating the hidden manna, we overcome the world. On the one hand, eating the hidden manna is a reward to the overcomers; on the other hand, it is the believer’s way to become an overcomer: “You can become an overcomer by enjoying Christ as manna. Eat the open manna, and Christ will become the hidden manna. This hidden manna will constitute you into an overcomer” (459-460).

The hidden manna is not only the portion of the overcomers today, but it is also the reward to the overcomers in the coming age, the age of the kingdom. Verse 7 of chapter 19 says, “Let us rejoice and exult, and let us give

the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” The wife of the Lamb is composed of those who overcome the adulterous solicitations and embraces of the world and have not made themselves its mistress. Verse 9 continues, “Blessed are they who are called to the marriage dinner of the Lamb.” The marriage dinner of the Lamb will be the wedding feast in the millennial kingdom, which will be a reward to the overcomers. Only those who have partaken of the hidden manna will have a memorial of the secret experiences of Christ to be enjoyed in that thousand-year feast:

While the church goes the way of the world, these overcomers come forward to abide in the presence of God in the Holy of Holies, where they enjoy the hidden Christ as a special portion for their daily supply. This promise is being fulfilled today in the proper church life and will be fulfilled in full in the coming kingdom. If we seek the Lord, overcome the degradation of the worldly church, and enjoy a special portion of the Lord today, He as the hidden manna will be a reward to us in the coming kingdom. If we miss Him as our special portion today in the church life, we will surely lose the enjoyment of Him as a reward in the coming kingdom. (Lee, Recovery Version, 2:17, note 2)

Only through a deep, mysterious, hidden, and spiritual experience of the hidden Christ can we counter the trend of the worldly church.

A White Stone with a New Name Written upon It

Christ says to the church in Pergamos, “To him who overcomes,...to him I will give a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knows except him who receives it” (v. 17). If the believers are faithful to overcome worldliness in a church that is married to the world, the Lord will give them something that is designated in figure as a white stone. That the stone has a name written upon it indicates that the stone represents the overcoming believers themselves. In the Bible a stone signifies God’s people as material for His building. When Andrew brought Simon to the Lord, the Lord told him, “You are Simon, the son of John; you shall be called Cephas” (John 1:42). *Cephas* is akin to Aramaic *keypha*, meaning “rock.” *Peter*, which John states is an interpretation of *Cephas* (v. 42), likewise is Πέτρος, a “stone.” Jesus declared Peter’s name again in the context of God’s building, saying, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18). Based on this, Peter writes, “Coming to Him, a living stone, rejected by men but with God chosen and precious, you yourselves also as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:4-5). Christ is a living stone, and all the believers also are living stones.

A stone signifies transformation for the building of God. Man was created of clay, the dust of the ground (Rom. 9:21; Gen. 2:7), but in regeneration we receive the divine life, which by its growth in us transforms us into living stones. Paul’s thought is also on this line. He tells the Corinthians, “Another foundation no one is able to lay besides that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if anyone builds upon the foundation gold, silver, precious stones..., the work of each will become manifest” (1 Cor. 3:11-13). “Gold, silver, and precious stones signify the various experiences of Christ in the virtues and attributes of the Triune God” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 12, note 2). By participating in Christ and enjoying Him in our spirit through the Holy Spirit, we are transformed into material that is suitable for the church as the temple of God (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Cor. 3:16).

To speak of God’s building is to touch the heart and purpose of God. In the Old Testament God dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple, and in the New Testament age He is building up the church as His spiritual house, a holy temple in the Lord, and the dwelling place of God in spirit (Eph. 2:20-22). The work of God’s building will consummate in

the New Jerusalem, which is composed of gold, pearl, and precious stones—the fully transformed people of God (Rev. 21:11, 18-21). This is what God is seeking after, this is the great purpose of His work, and this is the reason He needs overcomers today. Only by overcoming the trend of the worldly church can the believers experience Christ to such a degree that they become precious, pure materials for God’s building.

The color white signifies justification and approvedness. To be transformed into a white stone signifies that we are justified and approved by the Lord for His building, that our testimony is bright, pure, and shining, and that we match His standard for His building. In contrast, the Lord condemns and rejects the worldly church, which is neither pure nor precious. God’s work of building the church depends on our transformation, and our transformation issues from the enjoyment of Christ as the hidden manna.

Upon the white stone a new name is written. Just as a name designates a person, a new name designates a transformed person. No one knows this new name except the one who receives it. Thus, the new name is hidden and secret. “Such a new name is the interpretation of the experience of the one who has been transformed” (Lee, Recovery Version, 2:17, note 4).

Our new name defines for us our own experience with the Lord, our own history with the Lord. Something has been written into us, and our new name is the definition, meaning, and explanation of what we have gone through. It is God's interpretation to us of the value of what we have passed through before Him. This is a secret between the Lord and us. Even if we were to tell others this name, they would not understand it. Only we know this name because this name is the definition of our hidden history in the Holy of Holies to become a white stone for God's building. (Kangas 148)

Only those who overcome the enticements and embraces of the world can develop a hidden life with the Lord that issues in newness and transformation for His building. Those who collect such precious experiences will be rewarded with what they gain of Christ in the depths of their being, both today in the church age and in the coming age of the kingdom. However, those who are snared and befuddled by the appeal and corruption of the church that is married to the world will have few inner and deeper experiences of the Lord to enjoy as an eternal memorial. Moreover, they will be rejected from the enjoyment of the wedding feast of the Lamb in the millennial age.

Conclusion

The church at this time, prophesied by the church in Pergamos, saw relief from persecution, the rapid spread of churches, landmark victories for scriptural truth through the councils, and great changes in the world around it. At the same time, though, it succumbed to the subtlety of Satan, the deceiving serpent, and suffered much decline and corruption. During this period numerous practices, concepts, and customs of a negative kind came in to pollute the pure testimony of the church. Although many of the practices of the church from this time can don the cloak of antiquity, custom, and tradition, they differ and digress from the truth and examples revealed in the New Testament.

Some of the detrimental effects of these errors were already visible at the time of Pergamos. In many ways, though, these errors were still in nascent form, to be fully developed in the period to come, figured by the church in Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29). Jesus said, "Every good tree produces good fruit, but the corrupt tree produces bad fruit...By their fruits you will recognize them" (Matt. 7:17, 20). Seeds of error were planted in the church in the epochs of Ephesus and Smyrna, and they had much growth in the time of Pergamos. However, their true fruit was not known until the dark centuries of the Middle Ages, when their evil and corrupt character was fully manifested in the enormities of the apostate Roman Catholic Church.

Concerning the hypocritical worship of Israel, Jehovah said, "Do not learn the way of the nations" (Jer. 10:2). In the time of Pergamos, however, we see the growth of the clergy-laity system, which is fully fashioned according to the human concept and the government of the nations. The growth of the professional clerical system corrupted the pure service to the Lord, and it isolated and paralyzed the function of the majority of believers, who would for long centuries afterward be known only as the silent, dormant, and deadened laity. We also see the development of dependence on secular power, involvement with imperial politics, the solicitation of public approval, and the overconfidence of holding the majority opinion, which united the church with the interests of the worldly empire that God calls a "dreadful and frightful" beast (Dan. 7:7), a human entity wholly under the dominion of Satan in his evil and rebellious administration. This period also saw the new custom of richly furnished meeting places and formal, priestly worship—the "old superstition of heathenism in the new dress of Christianity" (Miller 190).

Realizing that a direct, violent attack against the church was not able to destroy it, Satan, the adversary, the enemy of God, subtly changed his tactics. The world, through the patronage of the Roman Empire, embraced the church, and the church received its embraces. In doing so, the church—which should be the pure and spotless bride of Christ—committed harlotry and became faithless, loving and joining herself to another husband and settling down in the place where Satan's throne is.

In the time of Pergamos not many, even among the genuine believers, recognized the species of the growing errors. The Lord testified, however, that His secret overcomers discerned the real situation. In figure, these are "Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you" (Rev. 2:13). *Antipas* means "against all," signifying those who stood against all that the worldly church brought in and practiced. Antipas, as an anti-witness, an anti-testimony, stood against all that deviated from the pure testimony of Jesus even at the cost of his life. These are those who ate the hidden manna, the special portion of Christ as the overcoming supply to His faithful ones, causing them to be transformed, through many secret and unknown experiences of Him, to be the materials for the building of God's spiritual house.

The Lord is calling His believers today out of the midst of a manifestly degraded and worldly church to actively respond to and cooperate with Him to meet His need for overcomers so that He may gain His pure and spotless bride for His satisfaction. Those who answer this call will be rewarded with the highest enjoyment of Christ in His thousand-year wedding feast, but those who

are snared by the world, although they are genuine Christians, will lose the enjoyment of the hidden manna as their portion in this age and their reward in the next.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹Andrew Miller reminds us to keep a pure heart when, in searching for God's mind, we turn to secular history:

The measure of our interest in the history of the Roman Emperors must be proportionate to their acknowledgment of the truth, and their treatment of Christians. Did we not seek to discern God's hand in their government, it would be wearisome and profitless, at this distant period, to examine what remains of them. But to see God's hand, and to hear His voice, and to trace the *silver line* of His grace, throughout these rude times, keeps us in company with Himself, and our experience is increased. (212)

²Eusebius assures us that these and other stories came from none other than Constantine himself:

The account of [these things] might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he was honored with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of after-time has established its truth? ("Life" 490)

³For the interpretation of the vision of the beasts, see Daniel 7:2-7 and notes in the Recovery Version.

⁴During the reign of Constantine, paganism remained the constitutional religion of the Roman senate. Gratian, half a century later, was the first emperor to refuse the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, high priest of the ancient religions. However, it was not until A.D. 381, under the reign of Theodosius I, that paganism was officially outlawed and Christianity made the state religion.

⁵Julian, called "the Apostate" (r. 360-363), sought to undo the edicts of Constantine and revive paganism, but the reign of the last non-Christian emperor was brief.

⁶The heretic Arius was condemned by the council and exiled. However, Constantine, being chiefly concerned with harmony and peace in the empire, recalled him from exile two years later.

⁷Please see *Affirmation & Critique* 19.2 (2014): 116-118.

⁸In the Epistles *πρεσβύτερος* ("elder," "elderly man") is used in the singular number only to denote a particular one under rebuke or accusation (1 Tim. 5:1, 19) and to refer to the apostle John in his function of caring for a local church (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Otherwise, it always appears in the plural.

⁹The exact nature of a *chorepiscopus* has been debated without a definite conclusion, but it is clear that he was subordinate to a bishop ("Nice" 21-23).

¹⁰In relating the history of the growth of the clerical hierarchy, we have cited the writings of Ignatius, Tertullian, and Cyprian, who strictly speaking belong to the period of history signified by the epistle to the church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11), the church under persecution in the second and third centuries. The "works of the Nicolaitans" (v. 6) were already present in the church during the time of the apostles. When the church was under the trial of persecution, the error of the clergy-laity system was growing further.

However, in Christ's sympathetic care for the suffering saints, He did not address this fault in the prophetic church in Smyrna. He laid upon her only the charge to be faithful unto death (v. 10). After the church found rest from persecution, however, in the period foretold by the epistle to Pergamos, Christ again came to deal with the Nicolaitan system,

which by this time had degraded from a mere practice to a codified rule of church governance, as revealed in the history and writing of the Nicene and post-Nicene authors.

Works Cited

- Brown, Francis, et al. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003. Print.
- "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 7. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Coxe, A. Cleveland. "Introductory Notice to Lactantius." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 7. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Cyprian. "The Epistles of Cyprian." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 5. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. Print.
- . "The Seventh Council of Carthage under Cyprian." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 5. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. Print.
- Eusebius. "Church History." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- . "The Life of Constantine." *Nicene and Post-Nicene*

- Fathers*. Ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- "The First Council of Nice." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 14. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Gibbon, Edward. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 3 Vols. New York: Everyman's Library, 1993. Print.
- Hains, Edmont. *The Seven Churches of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d. Print.
- Hefele, Charles Joseph. *A History of the Christian Councils*. Trans. William R. Clark. Edinburgh: Clark, 1871. Print.
- Hymns*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1985. Print.
- Ignatius. "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Kangas, Ron. "The Overcomers in Pergamos: The Hidden Manna, the White Stone, and the Anti-testimony." *The Ministry of the Word*. 16.11 (2012): 131-151. Print.
- Lactantius. "Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 7. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003. Print.
- . *Life-study of Exodus*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1987. 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, 1992-1994. Print.
- Optatus. *The Work of St. Optatus*. Trans. O. R. Vassall-Phillips. London: Longmans, 1917. Print.
- Scofield, C. I. The Scofield Reference Bible. New York: Oxford UP, 1909-1945. Print.
- Seiss, Joseph A. *The Apocalypse*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1987. Print.
- Stephenson, Paul. *Constantine*. New York: Overlook, 2010. Print.
- Tertullian. "On Baptism." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. Print.
- Thayer, Joseph H. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003. Print.

Footnotes from the Recovery Version of the Bible

"And I **turned** to see the voice that spoke with me; and when I turned, I saw **seven golden lampstands**" (Rev. 1:12).

turned: To see anything requires the right position with the right angle. First, the apostle John heard the voice (v. 10), and then, when he turned to see the voice, he saw the golden lampstands. He was rightly positioned, but he still needed the right angle to see the vision concerning the churches; so he turned. It is the same with us today. Many Christians need to be adjusted in their position and to be turned that they may see the vision of the churches.

seven: Rev. 1:20; 2:1

golden: In figure, gold signifies the divine nature. Here the lampstands are golden, signifying that the churches are constituted with the divine nature.

lampstands: In the Bible the lampstand is always related to God's building. The first time the lampstand was mentioned was in Exo. 25:31-40, when the tabernacle was built. The second instance was in regard to the building of the temple in 1 Kings 7:49. The third instance was closely related to the rebuilding of God's temple in Zech. 4:2-10. Here in Revelation the lampstand is related to the building of the churches. In Exo. 25 the emphasis is on Christ being the lampstand as the divine light, shining as seven lamps with the Spirit (the oil). In Zech. 4 the emphasis is on the Spirit (Zech. 4:6) as seven lamps shining, these seven lamps being the seven eyes of God (Zech. 4:2, 10). The seven eyes of God are the seven Spirits of God (5:6) for God's intensified move. This indicates that the lampstand in Zechariah is the reality of the lampstand in Exodus, and that the lampstands in Revelation are the reproduction of the lampstand in Zechariah. Christ is realized as the Spirit, and the Spirit is expressed as the churches. The shining Spirit is the reality of the shining Christ, and the shining churches are the reproduction and expression of the shining Spirit to accomplish God's eternal purpose that the New Jerusalem as the shining city may be consummated. Christ, the Spirit, and the churches are all of the same divine nature.