

The Word of Righteousness

The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (9)

The book of Revelation unveils Christ as the One who carries out God's governmental administration over the churches and throughout the entire earth. Toward the churches He exercises both His shepherding care with the supply of His divine light and life and His government with His rebuke and correction, in order to perfect the churches, so that He may consummate the present age, marry His matured bride, join with His perfected, corporate warrior to defeat Antichrist, and bring in the age of the kingdom. To this end, the Lord speaks to the seven churches in His government and administration in order to deal with their particular condition according to His economy. The overcomers in the churches are those who hear the Spirit's speaking, accept the Lord's diagnosis of their failures and shortcomings, and respond to His call to rise up, as a minority among the greater number, to receive the Lord's grace and meet His need for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ, the bride, and the corporate army.

Revelation 3:1 begins, "To the messenger of the church in Sardis." In addition to being a local church in an important city of western Asia, the church in Sardis is a sign portraying both a principle and the issue of a significant period in the history of the church. The name Sardis denotes "remains," "restoration," "something...renewed," "remnant," or "an escaped few" (Seiss 161). As such, it prefigures Protestantism, the reformed church from the time of the Reformation to the second coming of Christ. By the turn of the sixteenth century, the downward decline of the church reached its full nadir in apostasy and corruption. Many of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith were lost or obscured in the heresy, superstition, and idolatry of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. The genuine church had fully abandoned its holy nature and defiled itself through its involvement with and usurpation of worldly government. The papal hierarchs of this period were selected from infamous families through nepotism and enterprising marriages.¹ Moreover, the medieval Roman Catholic Church persecuted those who left to pursue the Lord according to the further light they had seen. At this juncture of history the Lord could no longer tolerate this condition. Because the prophetic church in Thyatira was unwilling to repent (2:21), the Lord began something new in the way of recovery. The church in Sardis is God's reaction to Thyatira. In this article we will consider the principle of recovery, as embodied in Sardis, and the role of the

overcomers, who keep, abide in, and continue in the precious things restored to them (3:2-3).

The Principle of Recovery

A recovery is a return to a state of normalcy, health, strength, and purity after a damage or loss has taken place. God's work, both in the old creation and the new creation, is always perfect. When He laid the foundations of the earth, the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God—the angels—shouted for joy (Job 38:7; cf. 1:6). However, Genesis 1:2 says, "The earth became waste and emptiness, and darkness was on the surface of the deep." The corruption of the pristine, primeval earth that resulted from Satan's rebellion necessitated a work of recovery in which God restored His damaged creation and added to it until it was "very good" (vv. 3-31). In the New Testament, Jesus' word to the Pharisees concerning divorce sets forth the principle of recovery. He said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall be joined to his wife; and the two shall be one flesh?'" (Matt. 19:4-5). The tempters then asked Him, "Why then did Moses command us to give her a certificate of divorce and divorce her?" Jesus answered, "Moses, because of your hardness of heart, allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been so" (vv. 7-8). Jesus' answer to degradation was "From the beginning." Divorce is a deviation from God's original ordination concerning marriage, but by His answer Jesus recovered marriage back to the beginning. This illustrates that the goal of recovery is to return to the condition that God created in the beginning.

In the Old Testament God gave His law to His people, which Moses wrote in a book and commanded to be placed at the side of the Ark of the Covenant (Deut. 31:24-26), but after entering into the good land, the people first neglected the law, then forsook it, and eventually forgot it altogether. At the time of Josiah, however, and with the cooperation of the young king, the book of the law was found, bringing in a great recovery by destroying the idols and returning to Jehovah (2 Kings 22:8, 10; 23:2-24). Later, Nebuchadnezzar carried away the people and destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem. At the completion of the time of their captivity, however,

God brought in another recovery. Among the captives He stirred up the spirit of a remnant, who returned to Jerusalem so that God's economy could be fulfilled by regaining the ground for the building of the temple as God's house and by providing a people for the genealogy of Christ, the coming incarnated God-man (Ezra 1:3, 5; Matt. 1:1, 17). Both of these milestones in the Old Testament further illustrate the principle of recovery.

In the New Testament the church that was raised up on the day of Pentecost was God's new creation, but in the lifetime of the apostles it suffered damage and decline. The Epistles speak of those who made divisions and causes of stumbling (Rom. 16:17), destroyed the church as God's temple (1 Cor. 3:17), removed from Christ to a different gospel (Gal. 1:6), taught things differing from God's economy (1 Tim. 1:3-4), departed from the faith to give heed to teachings of demons (4:1), turned away from the apostle and his teachings (2 Tim. 1:15), secretly brought in destructive heresies (2 Pet. 2:1), and in the spirit of antichrist denied the Father and the Son (1 John 2:18, 22). All of this brought about the need of a recovery, revival, and restoration of all the precious things once possessed by the church. By this we can see the crucial role of recovery in the progressive history of the church.

The Lord's recovery, as signified in part by Sardis, is not the invention of new truths. Jesus Himself did not speak His own teaching, but the Father's (John 7:16). As the reproduction and continuation of Christ, the apostles also had one teaching, the unique "teaching...of the apostles," in which the church at first continued (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 4:17). Moreover, Paul charged Timothy to allow only the teaching of God's economy with no "different things" added to it (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Watchman Nee writes,

All the truths are in the Bible; there is not one truth that is not in the Bible. Although they are all in the Bible, through man's foolishness, unfaithfulness, negligence, and disobedience many of the truths were lost and hidden from man. The truths were there, but man did not see them or touch them. Not until the fullness of time did God release certain truths during particular periods of time and cause them to be revealed once more...These freshly revealed truths are not God's new inventions. Rather, they are man's new discoveries. There is no need for invention, but there is the need for discovery. (11: 843-844)

These discoveries, which God has given to men progressively, are what we call the Lord's recovery.

The Lord's Recovery Being Progressive

The greatest items recovered by the Reformation of the sixteenth century were the opening of the Bible, the truth

of justification by faith, and the freedom of men's conscience from the tyranny of the papal system. As a progressive recovery, its harbingers can be seen in antiquity and the Middle Ages. At least by the twelfth century, and like the Paulicians and Bogomils before them, the Waldenses rejected the worldliness, vain ritual, and heretical doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.² Peter Waldo, a leader among them, commissioned a translation of the New Testament in Franco-Provençal, the first translation of the Bible into a modern tongue since Latin ceased to be a living language. These simple shepherds and vine-dressers long preceded the Reformation in seeing the truth of the Triune God, the meaning of the incarnation, the need for divine grace, the real meaning of baptism and of the Lord's table, the nature of the church, and the evils of the papal system and its unscriptural teachings. The Waldenses' catechism on salvation (A.D. 1100) approaches a clear statement of justification through grace:

Why has God created you? To the end that I might know him, and serve him, and be saved by his grace...

What is that grace? It is redemption, remission of sin, justification, adoption, and sanctification.

By what things is this grace hoped for in Christ? By a living faith, and true repentance, saying, "Repent ye, and believe the gospel."

Whence proceedeth this hope? From the gift of God, and the promises of which the apostle mentioneth, "He is powerful to perform whatsoever he hath promised." For he hath promised himself, that whosoever shall know him, and repent, and shall hope in him, he will have mercy upon him, pardon and justify. (Blair 484, 487)

In the 1380s John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English, which was widely circulated despite the threat of death for those who were found with it.³ Wycliffe's teachings were circulated in Bohemia, where their chief proponent was Jan Huss, who proclaimed the authority of the Scriptures against the corrupted papacy a century before Luther. At the end of the fifteenth century Girolamo Savonarola spoke concerning original sin, grace, justification, and calling on the Lord in the Spirit. He told the Lord in prayer,

The Apostle said, "Your justice is through the faith in Jesus Christ for all and upon all who believe in him" [Rom. 3:22]. So my tongue shall sing by praising this justice of yours, by extolling your grace, by glorifying your kindness, by confessing my sins so that your mercy may be praised in me. Your mercy has deigned to justify such a great sinner. (75)

If it is through your grace that you would have made me just ["rendered me righteous" (*iustum reddideris*)], then

I already have your justice ["righteousness" (*iustitiam*)].
Your grace is your justice in us...And grace would not be
grace if it were given because of merits. (97)

These early glimpses of the truths and experiences opened more fully by the Reformation illustrate that the recovery of the church is progressive, advancing throughout the church's history. The Reformation was exemplary of a rapid, momentous, and far-reaching move of the Lord, but His recovery proceeded elsewhere, and still proceeds, in ways imperceptible to those who view only great world events. Nee notes, "Throughout the ages, the church has been like stepping stones in a stream" (55: 248), each stone bringing the Lord's move into brighter light and greater fullness. Although the revelation of these forerunners may not come up to the standard of the light of the Reformation, we cannot despise them, because the light they received was the full measure that the Lord was willing to give at that time. In this sense, they were up to date with the Lord's progressive recovery. Nee adds, "Do not measure someone in a particular age according to God's absolute revelation...God is progressing—in teaching and in the flow of the Spirit" (247).

These pioneers of the Reformation illustrate the principle of the overcomers in Sardis (Rev. 3:5). Those who receive the light that the Lord grants in a particular age and who pay the price to remain in His up-to-date work are useful to Him for His advancing move for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the army to defeat His enemies. As such, they will be counted as overcomers and will be rewarded by the Lord at His coming.

A Fuller Recovery through the Reformation

Standing on the shoulders of his forerunners, Martin Luther received the greatest, clearest light concerning the judicial redemption of the believers. What was revealed to him was not a novel teaching but the recovery of a precious, long-lost truth in the New Testament. In this sense, as Alphons Victor Müller tells us, "Luther was not an innovator but a renovator"⁴ (10), ushering in a significant step and a new turn in the progressive recovery of the truth of God's economy. Luther saw that the righteousness of God, which he had formerly loathed from fear, is known not mainly in His punitive dealings but as a gracious, objective imputation to those who believe. Luther recalls,

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed as it is written, He who

through faith is righteous shall live." There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. ("Preface" 30)

On realizing this, he adds, "I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates" (30). To describe this transaction from God toward man, Luther coined the phrase *passive righteousness*: "Here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness 'passive'" (*Lectures* 5). This was his great discovery, both of truth and experience, and he preached it everywhere:

The Gospel does not really demand works of ours by which we become righteous and are saved, nay, it condemns such works; but it does demand faith in Christ, that He has overcome for us sin, death, and hell, and thus makes us righteous, and gives us life and salvation, not through our works, but through His own works, death, and suffering, in order that we may avail ourselves of His death and victory, as though they were our own. (*Works* 442).

As though they were our own unveils the believer's vicarious appropriation of Christ's work on the cross, by which he receives the "righteousness of

faith, which God imputes to us through Christ without works" (*Lectures* 4). "Faith," Luther writes, "unites the soul with Christ, like a bride with a bridegroom" (*Freedom* 499). Using the allegory of marriage law, he continues,

Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation; the soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith intervene and it will turn out that sins, death, and hell are Christ's, but grace, life, and salvation are the soul's. For if he is the groom, then he should simultaneously both accept the things belonging to the bride and impart to the bride those things that are his. (500)

This truth, recovered by Luther, is that "faith alone—because of the sheer mercy of God through Christ [given] in his word—properly and completely justifies and saves a person" (515). Justification is the work of Christ alone (*solus Christus*), received by faith alone (*sola fide*) through grace alone (*sola gratia*) and thus issues to the glory of God alone (*solus Deo gloria*); this we know by the Scriptures, which alone have authority (*sola scriptura*). "This is our theology," he writes (*Lectures* 7); such theology was everything to the great reformer. "By this

THOSE WHO RECEIVE THE LIGHT
THAT THE LORD GRANTS IN A
PARTICULAR AGE AND WHO PAY THE
PRICE TO REMAIN IN HIS UP-TO-DATE
WORK ARE USEFUL TO HIM
FOR HIS ADVANCING MOVE.

doctrine alone and through it alone is the church built, and in this it consists” (10).

Luther also opened the gate for people to exit en masse from the corrupt and apostate institution of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1520 he wrote, “I now know for certain that the papacy is the kingdom of Babylon and the power of Nimrod, the mighty hunter” (*Captivity* 15). “Out of the Roman Church...has been fashioned...the kingdom of sin, death, and hell, so that were the Antichrist to come, he could hardly think of anything that would add to its wickedness” (*Freedom* 477). Luther denounced the papacy for its laxness, the sale of indulgences, and the corruption of the sacraments, but he had no intention at first of leaving the Roman church: “I am not as yet aware of having departed [from the Holy See], nor has anyone proved that I have” (*Captivity* 20-21). Rather, his departure was forced upon him. Leo X, in his bull *Exsurge Domine* (1520), condemned the teachings of Luther. Luther responded by publically burning the bull along with writings by Johann Eck; this issued in Luther’s excommunication the following year. Later that year Luther was condemned at the imperial Diet of Worms, but having been temporarily granted free passage, he was secretly carried to safety on the orders of Frederick III (the Wise), Elector of Saxony.⁵

It was at Wartburg Castle that Luther began to translate the Bible into German, using Erasmus’s Greek text, the *Novum Instrumentum*, for the New Testament. Being in the contemporary idiom yet faithful to the original text, the authenticity, beauty, and accessibility of his translation captured the public’s attention and fascination, and tens of thousands of copies were printed in the coming decades. With his other books and pamphlets, Luther was the most extensively published author up to that point in history.

Being Established in the Present Truth

However, the work of the sixteenth century was not the final work of the Lord’s recovery. Beginning from the middle of the seventeenth century, reformed authors utilized the banner *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda est* (“the church is reformed and always reforming”).⁶ Understood properly, this signifies both the Lord’s work of recovery in the reformed church and the need for a further, ongoing recovery, what John Milton called “the reforming of Reformation it self” (45). *Semper reformanda* illustrates the truth that the Lord’s work of recovery in the church—the discovery, restoration, and reinstatement of scriptural truths, experiences, and practices once lost—is progressive.

The work of recovery was remarkably manifested in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, but it has proceeded ever since through men who receive fresh light from the Lord and pay the price to minister according to what they

see. However, the pattern of revivals in Protestantism is that a willing vessel, most often a person of extraordinary capacity, receives a revelation in the form of a recovered truth; those to whom he ministers are revitalized by that truth; and in a short period of time the heirs to that truth institutionalize it as a creed or confine it in a denomination, causing what was once vital to become dead and resistant to further change. Very few in the history of the church have remained open to the Lord in order to receive wave after wave of new light. This shortcoming is embodied in the Lord’s words to the church in Sardis:

I know your works, that you have a name that you are living, and yet you are dead. Become watchful and establish the things which remain, which were about to die; for I have found none of your works completed before My God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and keep it and repent. (Rev. 3:1-3)

Peter speaks of this need, exhorting the believers to be “established in the present truth” (2 Pet. 1:12). Throughout the history of the Lord’s recovery there has always been a truth, or set of truths, that is “present,” in the sense of being new, fresh, up to date, and with a timely emphasis on the speaking and operating Spirit in order to meet the Lord’s need for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ. Joseph Revell writes, “He still nourishes and cherishes the church...There is, therefore, never a time when His people cannot count upon Him for a present ministry, suited to the special need of the moment” (1). Nee states likewise, “In every age God has always raised up some people. In every age the church has been progressing. From generation to generation, it is ever moving onward and ever progressing forward, even up to the present day” (55: 248). For this reason each of the seven epistles in Revelation 2 and 3 ends with, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). At every stage of the church the Spirit is speaking, and the overcomers have an ear to hear Him.

The Resistance to Recovery

The recovery of the precious truths by the Reformation was the present speaking and new move of the Lord at that time. In the following generations, however, those who held to these recovered truths fell to the temptation of stagnating in a now-outdated operation of the Spirit. Those who had received the newest wave of truth resisted the next waves that were to come, so that when the Lord was ready to reveal further truths, He needed to abandon the former group and raise up a new number of believers to receive His up-to-date revelation. This historical cycle has been repeated ever since the Reformation. John Robinson, the pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers at Leiden before their departure to the New World, counseled them to not limit themselves to what they had received from

Luther, Calvin, and even himself but to be receptive to any channel through whom the Lord would speak. Edward Winslow, one of those present, recounts how Robinson urged them:

If God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of His, to be as ready to receive it, as ever we were to receive any truth by his ministry: For he was very confident the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy Word. He took occasion also miserably to bewail the state and condition of the Reformed Churches, who were come to a period in Religion, and would go no further than the instruments of their Reformation: As for example, the *Lutherans* they could not be drawn to go beyond what *Luther* saw, for whatever part of God's will He had further imparted and revealed to *Calvin*, they will rather die then embrace it. And so also, saith he, you see the *Calvinists*, they stick where he left them: A misery much to be lamented; For though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God had not revealed His whole will to them. (97, archaisms corrected for readability)

Those who would go no further than what Luther taught resisted the new light brought in through John Calvin, and those who received Calvin's teaching resisted, as many do today, any further light given by the Lord to the church.

The present speaking of the Lord is always according to what He once spoke in the Bible and was taught and practiced by the apostles. At the same time, those who resist what seems to be a new teaching often claim that it is an unscriptural novelty. Even Calvin needed to defend his teaching from such a charge. He writes,

By calling [our teaching] "new" they do great wrong to God, whose Sacred Word does not deserve to be accused of novelty. Indeed, I do not at all doubt that it is new to them...That it has lain long unknown and buried is the fault of man's impiety. Now when it is restored to us by God's goodness, its claim to antiquity ought to be admitted at least by right of recovery.⁷ (15-16)

John Walvoord says similarly, "The development of most important doctrines took centuries, and it is not surprising that even in the twentieth century new light should be cast on our understanding of Scripture" (50). Charles Caldwell Ryrie concurs, saying, "Discovery and refinement of doctrine does not mean at all that such doctrine is extra-Biblical" (18). However, those who pursue to be in the Lord's present recovery will inevitably suffer persecution, even from those who are the heirs of a truth

that in its own time, now past, was the up-to-date speaking of the Lord. Revell writes,

A present ministry will ever be the object of Satan's bitterest attacks. His aim is always to frustrate the purpose of God, and with this in view he opposes any setting forth of the present mind of God concerning His people. In doing this he may most successfully use that which is past...It is easy to adopt as orthodoxy a past ministry which in its own time was persistently rejected, for the bitter opposition of Satan is against a present ministry. (2-3)

The Uncompleted Works of Protestantism

The recovery of justification by faith, the dissemination of the Bible in the common vernacular, and the freedom from religious tyranny were great moves of the Lord, bringing in much light and leading many thousands to the way of salvation. Nevertheless, Christ says to the church in Sardis,

Become watchful and establish the things which remain, which were about to die; for I have found none of your works completed before My God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and keep it and repent. (Rev. 3:2-3)

The Lord's diagnosis of Sardis is that despite the crucial and wonderful things recovered and regained by the Reformation, its works remain

uncompleted and about to die. In this sense, Sardis refers not to the Reformation itself, that is, the Spirit's work of recovery, but to the issue of the Reformation, the Protestant church after the initial reforms. Nee writes,

Reformation is God's own work. He is not judging the Reformation itself for He cannot judge His own work. Here, what the Lord held the church responsible for was its condition after the Reformation...Sardis does not represent the Reformation that was full of the power of the Holy Spirit, but the Protestantism that is void of power and life. (5: 472)

The Establishment of State Churches

A great shortcoming of the Reformation was in its lack of a proper ecclesiology. Almost from the beginning, the Reformation was entangled with politics and the ambitions of worldly princes. The Holy Roman Empire at that time consisted mostly of German territories as a decentralized, elective monarchy composed of kingdoms, principalities, duchies, and other subunits. Princes possessed de facto independent power in their territories and felt little loyalty

THOSE WHO PURSUE TO BE IN THE LORD'S PRESENT RECOVERY WILL SUFFER PERSECUTION, EVEN FROM THOSE WHO ARE THE HEIRS OF A TRUTH THAT IN ITS OWN TIME WAS THE UP-TO-DATE SPEAKING OF THE LORD.

to the emperor, Charles V. They saw Luther's reforms as an opportunity to undermine the autocracy of Charles by dividing the empire on religious grounds. In 1526 the Diet of Speyer granted the German princes the temporary right to determine the religion practiced in their realms, which they freely practiced as the *jus reformandi religionem*, the right of reforming religion. When this right was overturned at a second diet in 1529, the princes registered a formal *Protestio*, giving birth to the term *Protestant*, a label with both spiritual and political denotations.

In 1531 Philip I, Landgrave of Hesse, and John Frederick I, Elector of Saxony (after Frederick III), established the Schmalkaldic League, a military alliance of princes who now took the name of Protestant. A condition for membership in the league was agreement to the Augsburg Confession, the statement of faith composed by Luther, Philip Melancthon, and others. Seeing the economic advantages of the league, other northern principalities joined in. Charles defeated the league in a subsequent war and decreed the Augsburg Interim of 1548, mandating a return to Catholic rites and practices, but through political and military intrigues he was forced to issue the Peace of Passau in 1552, which recognized Lutheranism as a legal religion. The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 conceded even further to dividing the empire on religious lines, according to the principle later known as *cuius regio, eius religio*, "whose reign, his religion." Henceforth, the official religion of any realm—whether Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism—was determined by the religion of its prince. This was the official basis for the formation of state churches, which was one of the greatest external issues of the Reformation.

If the reformers of that day had been recovered all the way back to the beginning, that is, to the teachings and practices of the New Testament, they would not have allowed the ground and jurisdiction of the church to be determined by political rulers. Paul wrote to the "church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thes. 1:1). Such an address indicates that a local church is "born of God the Father with His life and nature and is united with the Lord Jesus Christ organically in all that He is and has done" (Lee, *Recovery Version*, v. 1, note 1). The New Testament speaks of the church of God (1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:5, 15), indicating that the church is constituted with the element of God and that it is His personal treasure, which He obtained through His own blood (Acts 20:28). It speaks of the churches of Christ (Rom. 16:16), indicating that they are not the possession or private work of anyone or any domain but of Christ Himself. They are the churches of the Gentiles (v. 4) and the churches of the saints, the sanctified ones (1 Cor. 14:33). The divine and spiritual essence makes the believers the church of God and of Christ, and the human components make them the churches of the saints. According

to the pattern of the New Testament, a church (singular) is of all the believers in a particular city, such as Thessalonica (1 Thes. 1:1), Laodicea (Col. 4:16; Rev. 3:14), and Sardis (v. 1); the churches (plural) are those of the believers in a country or region, such as Asia (1 Cor. 16:19), Macedonia (2 Cor. 8:1), Galatia (Gal. 1:2), and Judea (v. 22). A church that is defined by the political state, possessed by the state, and governed by the state cannot be found in the Word of God.

The mixture of the church with the state seemed to be the expedient that ensured the survival of both the ministers and the truths of the Reformation. However, the dependence of the church on the political state was a continuation of the long-held position of the Roman Catholic Church, which both served and was served by the kings and emperors of the Middle Ages. The reformers received no new light from the Lord concerning the structure of the church and thus carried forth the Roman paradigm into the new Protestant state churches. The One who speaks to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3 is He who has the seven Spirits of God (v. 1). In looking to the patronage of the worldly powers, the reformers demonstrated that they did not apprehend the boundless power and unlimited wisdom of Christ alone to accomplish God's desire. Christ alone has the authority to rule and direct the churches. If the reformers and their heirs had seen this, they would not have recognized and depended on the power of worldly kings over the church. The patronage of the world enjoyed by the church in Pergamos, the rule of the world practiced by the Jezebel-led church in Thyatira, and the partnership of the state with the reformed church in Sardis are all a concord with Belial (2 Cor. 6:15), which God forbids.

In countries where state churches reside, the head of the state becomes the head of the church. In 1531, for example, the title of Supreme Head of the Church of England was created for Henry VIII. Article 37 of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion (1571) declares concerning the monarchs of England, "They should rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evildoers" (Boulton 284-285). Regardless of the actual title used, the principle of a monarch as head of the church is a direct usurpation of the headship of Christ (Eph. 1:22; 4:15).

Moreover, as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, the monarch upholds his or her subjects' rights to the sacraments of the church, as enshrined in English law, ensuring that any citizen, whether a true believer or unregenerate, has the right to be baptized into the church. In this way churches that are formed according to the state are a field in which many tares—unbelieving, nominal members—are sown (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43). This also is

a great corruption to the church that was set in place by the incomplete works of Protestantism.

When a church owes its existence to the state, it must also render its loyalty. In this way the church takes on a national flavor and becomes an institution of the parent country. Just as saints and their relics are worshipped in Roman Catholicism, statesmen and national heroes are honored in Protestant churches.⁸ When Protestantism traded a pope for a monarch, it replaced Catholic superstition with state patriotism. In the epistle to the church in Sardis, Christ comes to adjust and correct the reformed church through judgment. Just as the One with eyes like a flame of fire condemns Thyatira for bringing the world into the church, the One with the seven Spirits rebukes Sardis for bringing the church under the state (Rev. 2:18; 3:1).

The Principle of Babylon in Protestantism

As an issue of the Reformation, the Roman church was traded for a German, Danish, and English church. The “world” church became state churches; the “international” church was fractured into national churches. Moreover, many of the principles of the Roman Catholic Church were retained in Protestantism. The system of clergy and laity was transferred from Catholicism into Protestantism in a modified and only slightly ameliorated way so that today the international pope is simply replaced by national archbishops. Christ, who speaks to the church in Sardis, has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars (v. 1). The seven stars signify the leading ones in the churches, who are bright and living, a guard against death and staleness, but in the hierarchical system of Protestantism, the vitality and function of the proper leading ones are annulled.

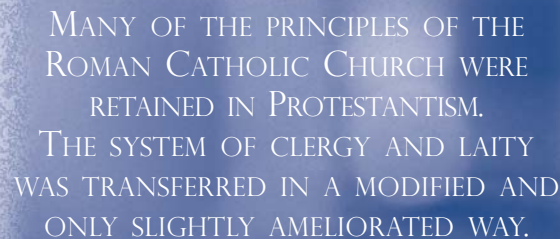
In Protestantism the headship that was usurped by the papacy is not returned in full to Christ. Church hierarchs, officials, and pastors are produced by seminaries, in which the present Christ has little ground. In Antioch the Holy Spirit sent out Paul and Barnabas through prayer and fasting (Acts 13:1-4), but in Protestantism pastors are hired by nominal members of denominations, and missionaries are sent out by committees. In *The Waning Authority of Christ in the Churches* A. W. Tozer writes,

Jesus Christ has today almost no authority at all among the groups that call themselves by His name. By these I mean not the Roman Catholics nor the liberals, nor the various quasi-Christian cults. I do mean Protestant churches generally, and I include those that protest the

loudest that they are in spiritual descent from our Lord and His apostles, namely, the evangelicals. (4-5)

Nee says likewise, “If the Holy Spirit is to work, He is only allowed to work within the confine of the committees, the executive meetings, the constitutions, regulations, and ceremonies” (5: 495). Tozer continues,

The present position of Christ in the gospel churches may be likened to that of a king in a limited, constitutional monarchy. The king...is in such a country no more than a traditional rallying point, a pleasant symbol of unity and loyalty, much like a flag or a national anthem. He is lauded, feted and supported, but his real authority is small. Nominally he is head over all, but in every crisis someone else makes the decisions...Because of long and meticulous organization it is now possible for the youngest pastor just out of seminary to have more actual authority in a church than Jesus Christ has. (5-7)



MANY OF THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH WERE RETAINED IN PROTESTANTISM. THE SYSTEM OF CLERGY AND LAITY WAS TRANSFERRED IN A MODIFIED AND ONLY SLIGHTLY AMELIORATED WAY.

In addition, the reformers’ break from the Roman Catholic Church resulted, in time, in countless divisions among God’s people. According to the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament, the church is one both universally and in its local expressions. Oneness is the intrinsic attribute of the Triune God, and as such, it is the nature and a primary characteristic of the church (John

17:21-22; Eph. 4:3-4, 13). The New Testament churches were one in the locality in which they appeared, having no divisions (Acts 8:1; 13:1; 1 Cor. 1:2, 10). The churches lived, met, and functioned in one accord, and the apostles and leading ones operated in one accord (Acts 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25). However, neither the reformers of the sixteenth century nor their heirs received light from the Lord concerning the oneness of the church. This is another uncompleted work of Protestantism that has had the greatest impact on the practicality and testimony of the church.

In the sixteenth century the churches in the German territories declared their independence from Rome, eventually becoming the Lutheran and Calvinist churches in continental Europe and the Anglican and Presbyterian churches in England and Scotland. Very shortly thereafter, a small remnant who saw further light and could not in a good conscience continue in the state churches broke away to establish small fellowships, which in time became independent denominations. From the Presbyterians in America came the American Restoration with the Disciples of Christ and the Church of Christ. From the early dissenters in Europe came the Quaker,

Congregational, and Baptist denominations, and from the latter came the Adventists in America. In the late 1700s the Methodists arose in England, and from these ultimately came the “holiness movement,” producing the Nazarene and various Pentecostal divisions. The number of Protestant denominations today is exceedingly numerous, divided on the grounds of church structure, doctrine, practice, and even nationality, race, and ethnicity.

Because the heirs of the Reformation—the founders of Protestantism—did not see the light of the oneness of the church as the Body of Christ, over the course of several centuries they allowed what was once the Lord’s vital and fresh move to become institutionalized and fractured into seemingly endless divisions. Moreover, they did not adequately forsake the practices of Roman Catholicism but retained many of them in ameliorated ways.

After Jehovah judged Babel by confounding the people’s language, the people were no longer able to understand one another and were scattered over the surface of the earth (Gen. 11:6-9). The result was the “nations” (10:32), the competing, warring, and irreconcilable divisions of mankind. This division of people at Babel, the result of Jehovah’s curse, is a type that very plainly finds its fulfillment in the many divisions in Christendom. According to this principle, the denominational divisions in Protestantism are simply a relic of the Babylonian character of the degraded church. In Revelation 17 John saw the vision of the great harlot, Babylon the Great. Verse 5 says that she is the “mother of the harlots and the abominations of the earth.” According to the natural principle, daughters are of like kind with their mother. The great Babylon, corresponding to Jezebel in 2:20, signifies the apostate Roman Catholic Church. According to the vision in Revelation 17, the “daughters” of the apostate church must be all the different sects and groups in Christianity—the many divisions of Protestantism—that to some extent keep the teachings, practices, and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. To be sure, Protestantism has not kept its charge of *semper reformanda*, always reforming. Rather, the Lord finds none of its works completed (3:2).

The Overcomers and the Principle of Recovery

The Lord spoke to the church in Sardis, “You have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments, and they will walk with Me in white because they are worthy. He who overcomes will be clothed thus, in white garments” (vv. 4-5). Christ calls for His overcomers to come out of the old and stale institutions of Protestantism in order to walk with Him according to His present speaking, that is, in order to fully participate in the stage of His recovery that is current in the present period of this age. That small remnant among God’s people, who aspire to overcome, must come not only out of the apostate Roman Catholic Church

but also out of her “daughters.” Witness Lee writes,

Christ came the first time, in His incarnation, through the return of a remnant of Israel to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon for the rebuilding of the temple. He will come the second time through the return of a remnant of His New Testament elect from their captivity in the religious Babylon (Rev. 17) to the proper ground of the church for the recovery of the building of the church, God’s spiritual house (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:5). (Recovery Version, Hag. 2:7, note 1)

To this end we must seek to know and to be in what the Spirit is speaking and operating today. Nee says, “Every worker of the Lord should inquire before God as to what the present truth is...Although there are many major and crucial truths in the Bible, what we need to know is God’s present truth” (11: 844). Despite its shortcomings, Luther’s work was the peak of the work of the Holy Spirit at that time. At the time of the Reformation, the pinnacle of the Lord’s move was the recovery of the precious truth of justification by faith, the propagating of the Bible in the common idiom, and freedom from the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church. However, to this day there are many who consider this work to be the final, definitive work of the Lord’s recovery. To hold this position is to be held back in an earlier era, as if donning a sixteenth-century suit of armor to fight a twenty-first century battle. The moving and speaking of the Spirit is going on progressively, even up to the present time. The work of Luther was the Lord’s fresh move in his day, but to cling to that stage of the recovery is inadequate today. We must advance.

God is a God of completion (Phil. 1:6; 1 Thes. 5:23; 2 Tim. 3:17). Our Lord is the Alpha who purposed in the beginning, and He is also the Omega who will bring His work to completion for the accomplishment of His purpose. To this end He is calling for overcomers in Sardis to pay the price to come out of the religious Babylon, seek His present truth, receive His up-to-date revelation, be watchful over these things, and keep the principle of recovery by participating in His final move on the earth at the end of this age. These overcomers give the Lord the way to advance stage by stage until His work in the present age is fully accomplished, and He can return to claim His built-up Body and His victorious, prepared bride, in whom there is no oldness or blemish. When He comes, the Lord will reward the overcomers, and they will walk with Him in His rule over the earth in the coming millennial kingdom.

Notes

¹Pope Alexander VI (r. 1492–1503) was of the infamous Borgia family. Leo X (r. 1513–1521) and his cousin Clement VII (r. 1523–1534) were both of the Medici family, the wealthy and bloody bankers of Florence. On his election, the debauched Leo

wrote to his brother, "Let us enjoy the papacy, for God has given it to us" (Schaff 6: 479). It was this pope who excommunicated Martin Luther.

²The name *Waldenses* derives from *Vaudois*, or *Vallenses*, "men of Vaud" in today's western Switzerland. They were also called the men of the valleys (in Piedmont) and the Poor Men of Lyons, but among themselves they simply called one another brothers. Philip Schaff says of them, "The Waldenses, leaning upon the Scriptures, sought to revive the simple precepts of the Apostolic age. They were the strictly biblical sect of the Middle Ages" (5: 493). Their persecutors called them "the most dangerous of all heretics, because the most ancient" (Wylie 8). Henry Charles Lea writes concerning their persecution, "Their crowning offence was their love and reverence for Scripture...All, men and women, old and young, were ceaseless in learning and teaching" (86). Andrew Miller says likewise, "Their mortal sin was found in their appeal to the Scriptures, and to the Scriptures alone, in all matters of faith and worship" (459). A secretary to the king of France reported that he had seen peasants among them who could recite the entire New Testament by heart, and doctors fresh from the Sorbonne declared that they understood more of the truth of salvation from the children of the poor men than they had learned in their theological disputations (Milner 429-430).

³Those who followed Wycliffe's reforms were called Lollards, from a Dutch word meaning "mumbler," for their frequent recitation of the Scriptures (De Hamel 170).

⁴"Luther wollte kein Neuerer, sondern ein Erneuerer sein" (Müller 10).

⁵Under the sovereignty of God, Frederick established the University of Wittenberg in 1502, where Luther and Philip Melancthon later taught. Frederick remained a Roman Catholic throughout his life, although he may have converted to Protestantism on his deathbed.

⁶The phrase *secundum verbi Dei* ("according to the Word of God") is often added (Dreyer 53-54). The original statement is attributed either to Jodocus van Lodenstein of Delft or Gisbertus Voetius of Utrecht.

⁷*Right of recovery (postliminii iure)* was a legal term for the recovery of a man's possessions after his return from captivity.

⁸Underneath St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the apostle Peter is said to be buried. Underneath St. Paul's Cathedral in London are the tombs of John of Gaunt, Admiral Nelson, and Viscount Wolsey, among other national heroes.

Works Cited

- Blair, Adam. *History of the Waldenses*. Vol. 1, Adam Black, 1832.
- Boulton, T. P. *A Commentary on the Thirty-nine Articles Forming an Introduction to the Theology of the Church of England*. Longmans, Green, and Co., 1877.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, Westminster P, 1960. The Library of Christian Classics 20.
- De Hamel, Christopher. *The Book: A History of the Bible*. Phaidon P, 2001.
- Dreyer, Wim A. "Calvin, Van Lodenstein and Barth: Three Perspectives on the Necessity of Church Reformation." *HTS Theologes/Theological Studies*, vol. 73, no. 5, 2017. doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i5.4508/. Accessed 20 Aug. 2018.
- Lea, Henry Charles. *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*. Vol. 1, Harper & Brothers, 1888.
- Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible, Living Stream Ministry, 2003.
- Luther, Martin. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Edited by Paul W. Robinson and Erik H. Herrmann, Fortress P, 2016.
- _____. *The Freedom of a Christian*. Edited by Timothy J. Wengert, Fortress P, 2016.
- _____. *Lectures on Galatians*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. Concordia Publishing House, 1963. Luther's Works 26.
- _____. "Preface to the First Volume of His Latin Writings." *The Protestant Reformation*, edited by Hans J. Hillerbrand, Harper Perennial, 2009.
- _____. *Works of Martin Luther*. Vol. 6. Baker Book House, 1982.
- Miller, Andrew. *Miller's Church History*. Bible Truth Publishers, 1976.
- Milner, Joseph. *The History of the Church of Christ*. Vol. 3, Farrand, Mallory, and Co., 1809.
- Milton, John. *Areopagitica*. Clarendon P, 1894.
- Müller, Alphons Victor. *Luthers Theologische Quellen: Seine Verteidigung gegen Denifle und Grisar*. Alfred Töpelmann, 1912.
- Nee, Watchman. *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*. Living Stream Ministry, 1992. 62 vols.
- Revell, Joseph. "Present Ministry." Mybrethen.org/ministry/myl4jr.htm#present. Accessed 10 Sept. 2018.
- Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*. Loizeaux Bros., 1981.
- Savonarola, Girolamo. *Prison Meditations on Psalms 51 & 31*. Translated and edited by John Patrick Donnelly, Marquette UP, 2011.
- Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1996. 8 vols.
- Seiss, J. A. *The Apocalypse*. Vol. 1, Charles C. Cook, 1913.
- Tozer, A. W. *The Waning Authority of Christ in the Churches*. Christian and Missionary Alliance, 1963.
- Walvoord, John F. *The Rapture Question*. Zondervan Publishing House, 1979.
- Winslow, Edward. *Hypocrisy Unmasked*. The Club for Colonial Reprints, 1916.
- Wylie, J. A. *The History of the Waldenses*. ReadClassic.com, 2010.