

THE EPISTLES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

BY WITNESS LEE

Revelation 2 and 3 contain the seven epistles to the churches, which are the last epistles given by the Lord to His church. These seven epistles were written to seven churches in Asia; however, at that time there were more than seven churches. Why did the Lord write epistles to only these seven churches? Bible students agree that these seven churches are representative of all the churches. They are a full picture of the condition of all the churches at that time.

A Prophecy of the Full Course of the Church


Moreover, Revelation is a book of prophecy (22:7, 18-19). Hence, what is mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 must also be in the nature of prophecy, and we must interpret the seven epistles as prophecies. In the four Gospels, the book of Acts, and the twenty-one Epistles there is no adequate prophecy concerning the course of the church on the earth. If Revelation 2 and 3 were not a prophecy of the church, there would be a gap in the New Testament. However, this gap is filled by these two chapters. The picture of the seven churches in these two chapters is a prophecy of the full course of the church during the long period from the end of the time of the apostles to the Lord's coming. In addition, if we do not understand these two chapters in the way of prophecy, they are not as meaningful. If we realize these two chapters in the way of prophecy, we will obtain their proper meaning, and they will be very meaningful.

If we compare the record of these two chapters with the facts of church history, we will realize that they correspond to one another. These seven local churches in Asia represent not only the situation of all of the churches in Asia at that time but also the seven stages of the course of the church on this earth. If we look into these seven epistles from this point of view and under this light, we will realize how meaningful and helpful they are. When we talk about the practice of the church, we all need to know and understand the seven stages of the course of the church on this earth.

Watchman Nee published twenty-four issues of a monthly paper entitled *The Christian*. Each issue contained many pages of meditations and exposition on the first three chapters of Revelation. Those twenty-four issues revolutionized the young people throughout all of Christianity in China. More than ten thousand copies of each issue were distributed throughout the country. Following this, during World War II Brother Nee conducted a study of Revelation 2 and 3 a second time in a wonderful way. I received much help from all these writings.

The Church in Ephesus

The seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 represent the progress of the church in seven



stages. The first church, the church in Ephesus, represents the stage from the end of the time of the apostles to the time when the Roman Empire began to persecute Christianity (2:1-7). That was the short period during the latter part of the first century, the initial stage of the church. All the early apostles had passed away by that time, and only John, the writer of this book, remained.

During this stage the church was still prevailing. However, although the church had not drifted far away from a proper condition, there was a hidden factor that became the source of her fall and degradation. She had left her first love toward the Lord. There was nothing wrong outwardly; outwardly speaking, everything was all right and normal. Within, however, she had lost her first love (v. 4). The word *first* in Greek also means “best.” The first love that the church lost was the best love. Therefore, the Lord rebuked this church and warned her that she must repent. If she would not repent, she would suffer loss in two ways. First, the lampstand would be removed from Ephesus (v. 5). History tells us that in all the centuries since the lampstand in Ephesus was taken away, there has never been a genuine church there. This prophetic word of warning truly has been fulfilled.

The second loss was that the believers would not be rewarded with the enjoyment of the tree of life in the Paradise of God (v. 7). The lampstand is a matter of light, and the tree of life is a matter of life. If we lose our first love toward the Lord, we will not have the enjoyment of life, and the light will be gone. If we love the Lord, on the other hand, we will enjoy Him as life, and we will enjoy light as the issue of this life. Life is the light (John 1:4), but in order to enjoy this life, we must love the Lord. We may do many works for the Lord, and outwardly speaking we may have no problems with the Lord, but if we do not have the best, first, and fresh love to the Lord, we will not enjoy Him in a full way as our life. Then we will lose the shining of light.

This is a warning to us. If we intend to practice the church life, we cannot merely do something in an outward way. We must start from within by loving the Lord with the best love, the first love, and a fresh love. Then we will enjoy Him as the tree of life in the Paradise of God, and we will have the light of life. The loss of the first love was the very source, the factor, of the degradation of the church.

The Church in Smyrna

The second epistle is to the church in Smyrna, the church under the suffering of persecution (Rev. 2:8-11). The word *Smyrna* in Greek means “myrrh,” and myrrh in figure signifies suffering. This church represents the second stage of the course of the church—from the latter part of the first century to the time that Constantine became emperor. History tells us that during this period the Roman Empire persecuted the church. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* contains many stories of the believers' suffering under persecution. I encourage the young brothers and sisters to read it; the accounts in it are very inspiring and very strengthening. One account is the story of Polycarp, an elderly brother. When arrested by the authorities and urged to renounce Christ, he answered, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who has saved me?” The persecution by the Roman Empire reached such an extent that the authority of the city of Rome asked the Caesar not to kill any more Christians lest all the citizens of that city be cut off. By this he meant that the more they killed the Christians, the more others were becoming Christians.

The church in Smyrna received no rebuke from the Lord, only encouragement. The Lord told this church that He is the First and the Last, who became dead and lived again (v. 8). He is the One who was put to death by persecution but now is living. The suffering church must know the Lord as the resurrection and the resurrection power. Nothing can hold the resurrection life, not even death. This resurrection life is within the suffering church, so the church must experience Christ as resurrection. The reward to the church in Smyrna

is the crown of life. Not only the tree of life but the crown of life will be a reward to the suffering church. This period in the history of the church has now been fulfilled.

The Church in Pergamos

The third epistle is to the church in Pergamos (vv. 12-17). In this epistle we can see a great change in the nature and form of the church. According to history, Pergamos represents the stage of the church beginning at the time that Constantine made Christianity the state religion and encouraged people to become professing Christians, causing the church to change its nature and form. The word *Pergamos* in Greek has two meanings. The first is "marriage." A marriage is a union. At this time the church became united with the world, becoming a worldly church. The church married the world and joined to it. The second meaning of *Pergamos* is "fortified tower." At that time the church became something high on the earth, a high tower, not something low. When Constantine came into Christianity, made it the state religion, and encouraged people to come into it, he made it something great. This was the fulfillment of the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31-32, in which a little herb became a big tree, like a high tower.

The Teaching of Balaam

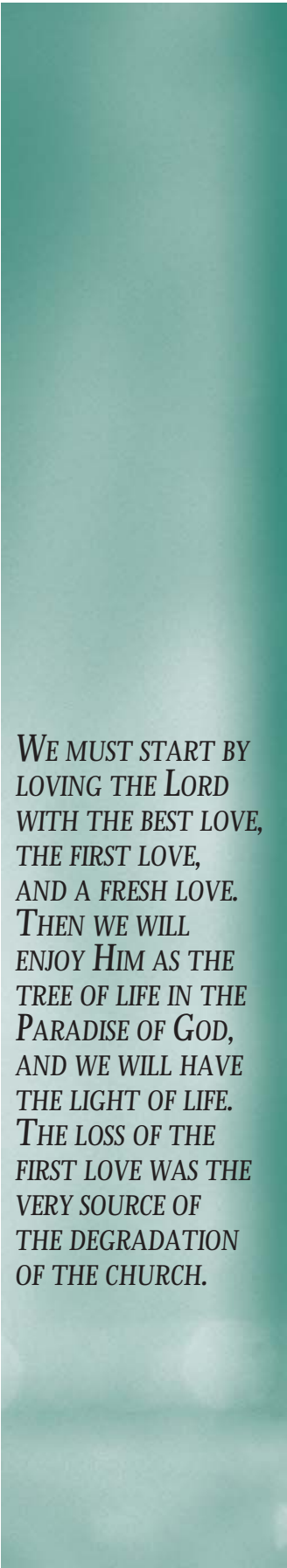
In the church in Pergamos there were two things that are evil in the eyes of the Lord. First, there was the teaching of Balaam (Rev. 2:14). Balaam was a Gentile prophet who taught Balak the king to cause the people of God to commit fornication and worship idols (Num. 22:4-6; 25:1-3). The time that Constantine came into Christianity was the start of the teaching of the heathen prophet, the teaching of heathenism. This caused the church to commit spiritual fornication by joining to the world and to worship idols. This was evil to the Lord.

The Teaching of the Nicolaitans


The second evil matter in Pergamos was the teaching of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:15). In the initial stage the church in Ephesus had only the works, the activities, of the Nicolaitans (v. 6), not yet the teaching. However, by the third stage of the church the works of the Nicolaitans had become the teaching of Nicolaitanism. By a thorough study of history we can realize that the teaching of the Nicolaitans is the teaching of the clergy-laity system, the teaching of the hierarchy, the "holy order." The Greek word for *Nicolaitans* means "subduing the common people." The so-called clergy, the hierarchy, subdues the other people in the church.

In ancient times, after the people of Israel were delivered out of Egypt, God declared that they were a kingdom of priests (Exo. 19:6). However, due to the failure of the people of Israel in worshipping the golden calf at Sinai, only one tribe out of the twelve tribes became priests. Originally, God ordained that the whole nation of Israel would be a kingdom of priests, but due to that failure, only one tribe became the priests. These priests became an intermediary class between God and the children of Israel. This became the system of the priesthood in Judaism. The New Testament, however, tells us clearly that all the believers are priests of God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6). All the genuine believers, who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, are priests. There is no intermediary class between the believers and God. All the believers are on the same level, have the same rank, and are in the same class. There is no clergy, no laity, no hierarchy, and no intermediary class.

Nevertheless, at the end of the time of the apostles, some rose up to be the Nicolaitans. The epistle to the Ephesians says that the church there hated the works of the Nicolaitans (2:6). Although by that time those practices had already begun, it was not yet a teaching, but in the third stage of the church those works became a teaching. This was completely fulfilled in the history of the church. After Constantine



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made Christianity the state religion, thousands of unregenerated people were baptized into Christianity as members. They were not regenerated; they did not have the life of God. They did not have the Holy Spirit, and they were not the living members of Christ's Body. Therefore, they did not know how to function, and they were not able to function, so some began to teach that certain persons should be trained to be the clergy. A small number were trained to be the priests, the clergy, while the vast majority of the nominal Christians took care of their worldly living. It was in this way that the intermediary class of the clergy came into existence. This is something very evil in the Lord's eyes, and it must be overcome.

Today we must recover the universal priesthood. Every Christian must be a functioning member and a serving priest. In the church there must be no class, or we may say, there must be only one class—not clergyman or layman but brother. Some people today speak of a "lay ministry" or "lay preachers." However, we are neither clergymen nor laymen; we are the priests and the members. We are all members of the Body of Christ, and we are all priests of God.

Enjoying Christ in a Hidden Way

In the epistle to the church in Pergamos the Lord promises to give the hidden manna to the one who overcomes (v. 17). This corresponds to the parables in Matthew 13. Pergamos was a fortified tower, like the great tree in Matthew 13:31-32, in which everything was exposed for outward show. In principle, however, the precious things are hidden (v. 44). In this age Christ is the hidden manna. Therefore, we must be the hidden church. We must learn to be hidden and not exposed. We should not advertise ourselves in a worldly way. To do so is to be married to the world and commit spiritual fornication. It is not only to have idol worship but to become an idol. We must learn to be hidden. Since this is the age for Christ to be hidden, we as His Body must also be hidden. Then we will enjoy Him as the hidden manna.

The more we are hidden, the more we will experience Christ as the hidden One and experience the white stone (Rev. 2:17). White in Revelation signifies being justified, approved, and accepted by the Lord (3:4-5, 18). We should not try to be accepted or admired by people. We must not be afraid to be criticized and persecuted. Rather, we should try to be justified and accepted by the hidden Lord. When we become the hidden ones, we sense the Lord's hidden approval.

Upon the white stone is a name that the Lord gives. This name is known only by us and the Lord; no one else knows it, because it is a secret. We need to have secret, hidden experiences of Christ. Then there will be something secret between us and Him. While the entire Christianity is married to the world and has become a great tree, a high tower, we must be hidden—hidden from the great tree, hidden from the high tower, hidden from spiritual fornication, and hidden from idol worship.

Revelation is a book of prophecy in symbols, and the seven epistles in chapters 2 and 3 contain many symbols. If we understand them only according to the words, they are not as meaningful, but when we understand them according to the symbols, they are much more meaningful. The titles, names, and events in these chapters are symbols, showing us that by the third stage of the church the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans had caused the church to change in form and in nature.

In the degradation of the church, the church and government with its politics were improperly mixed. This was according to the teaching of Balaam (2:14). By this teaching, the church was united with the world. This was spiritual fornication, and along with this there was also idol worship. We can trace this progression in the history of the church.

In addition, there was also the teaching of the Nicolaitans (v. 15), the teaching of the hierarchy, the difference between the clergy and the laity. *Nicolaitans* is derived from two Greek roots—*nikao*, meaning “to subdue,” or “conquer,” and *laos*, meaning “laity,” or “common people.” It denotes the subduing of the laity. This resulted in a clerical class, an intermediary class. This brought something of Judaism into Christianity. This was another improper mixture. The teaching of Balaam brought the church into union with the world, and the teaching of the Nicolaitans mixed the church with Judaism. History tells us that during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, these things happened exactly in this way. The church adopted the forms and rituals of Judaism as well as some of its terminology and titles.

The Church in Thyatira

The fourth epistle is to the church in Thyatira (vv. 18-29). History tells us that about two centuries after Constantine made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire, in the latter part of the sixth century, this state religion became the Roman Catholic Church. When the bishop of Rome began to be considered as the pope, the Roman Catholic Church was officially and formally formed. This began another stage of the church.

The Roman Catholic Church was prophesied by the Lord in Matthew 13:33, in which a woman took leaven and added it to fine flour. This woman is the evil Jezebel in Revelation 2:20. Jezebel was the pagan wife of Ahab, king of Israel. By her marriage to Ahab, the people of the kingdom of God became mixed with paganism. In the eyes of the Lord the Roman Catholic Church became the same as this woman, bringing many heathen practices into the church.

Jezebel calls herself a prophetess, teaching the Lord’s people (v. 20). According to the principle in the New Testament, the Lord never allows a woman to teach with authority (1 Tim. 2:12). In the same way, the church itself must not teach, because in the eyes of the Lord the church is in the position of a woman. Only the Lord Himself is the man, the one who has the right to teach, the right to say yes or no, right or wrong. However, according to history and the present situation, people in Catholicism say, “The church says...” It is hard to convince people in Catholicism. If we tell them, “The Bible says,” they answer, “The church says.” No matter how many passages we quote from the Scriptures, they have one reply: “The church says.” In this way they do not care for the Bible; they care only for what the church says. The church has the highest authority; whatever the church says is right. This “church” is the evil woman, Jezebel. The Roman Catholic Church is a teaching woman.

By the teaching of this woman, many pagan and heathen things were brought into the church, causing fornication and idol worship (Rev. 2:20). The famous Roman Catholic cathedrals are full of idolatry, containing images of Peter, Paul, and many other so-called saints, as well as of Jesus and Mary. Many people come into these “churches” with candles just to worship these idols. Many of the evil mysteries within the Catholic Church have been exposed by writings in the past. If we read the history of the church, we will discover the actual fulfillment of the prophecy of the Lord in this epistle to Thyatira. The fulfillment was exactly as the Lord prophesied. The thousand years from the sixth century to the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century was a period of darkness.

The three women in Matthew 13, Revelation 2, and Revelation 17 are the same person. In Matthew 13:33 a woman takes leaven and hides it in three measures of meal, in Revelation 17:1-6 the evil woman is riding on a beast, and in 2:20-23 this same woman is called Jezebel. These three women all refer to the Roman Catholic Church. It is the Roman Catholic Church that brings leaven into the fine flour, it is the Roman Catholic Church that is the harlot riding on the beast, and it is the Roman Catholic Church that is Jezebel, corrupting Christianity. In 1929 Mussolini signed an agreement to give the

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Vatican to the pope as his territory. From that time the Vatican became an independent state with its own jurisdiction, conducting diplomatic affairs. It is truly a Jezebel.

The Church in Sardis

The churches in Revelation 2 and 3 represent the stages of the history of the church. The latter stages of the church have more to do with us today than the first ones, so we must be more familiar with them. The church in Sardis depicts the fifth stage of the history of the church, the church during the Reformation (3:1-6). The Greek word for *Sardis* means “remainder,” or “restoration.” No doubt, the Reformation, which began at the time of Martin Luther, was the fulfillment of the prophecy in this epistle. Although the Reformation was good, everything in it was very weak. According to history, none of its works were completed (v. 2). This is why the Lord says, “You have a name that you are living, and yet you are dead” (v. 1).

On the one hand, many things were recovered in the Reformation, but on the other hand, many of those things withered away. In the reformed churches, that is, the Protestant churches, there is always recovery and then withering, followed by more recovery and more withering. There are many revivals, each followed by a falling away. The history of the Protestant churches is a history of revival and falling, recovery and withering. Nothing there is strong, adequate, living, or permanent. Therefore, the Lord is not satisfied with Sardis, the reformed church.

The Roman Catholic Church became an international church, mixed with all the nations but under one head, the pope. Although during the Reformation the church gave up its international character, it fell to become the national churches. Luther himself admitted that this was wrong, but he could not avoid it, because the political influence was too great. Luther was one of the greatest servants of the Lord, and we do not want to criticize him, but we must speak the truth. He was strong in dealing with the pope yet weak before the kings. We cannot say why he was this way; perhaps it is simply because he was human. He dealt strongly with Catholicism and the pope, but he was weak in dealing with the German king. The German king eventually formed the state church of Germany, and other nations followed suit. This is why today we have the national churches. In Denmark the king is the head of the Danish church, which is the Lutheran Church. Likewise, in England the queen is the head of the Church of England, the national church.

After the national churches came into existence, many seeking ones were not satisfied with them. They became the dissenters and began to form dissenting churches, the private churches such as the Presbyterian Church and the Baptist Church. In the eyes of the Lord both the national churches and the private churches are weak and full of deadness, so the Lord rebuked them. The reformed churches did not satisfy the Lord’s heart, because they did not fully return to the normal condition of the church.

The Church in Philadelphia

About three hundred years after the Reformation, the sixth stage of the church began, symbolized by the church in Philadelphia (vv. 7-13). In the epistles in Revelation 2 and 3 there are several meaningful names, such as Balaam, the Nicolaitans, and Jezebel. Now verse 7 of chapter 3 speaks of Philadelphia, which means “brotherly love.” According to the history of the church, the prophecy in this epistle was fulfilled in the practice of the Brethren, whom the Lord raised up in the early part of the nineteenth century. During their first twenty years, the Brethren were marvelous. The Brethren recovered many spiritual matters, and they opened up the Word of God. They truly came back to the normal condition of the church. The Brethren absolutely repudiated and forsook all the things brought into the church by the teaching of Balaam, the teaching of the Nicolaitans, and the teachings of Jezebel.

Certain Bible teachers such as D. M. Panton tell us that the Brethren movement was more powerful than the Reformation, although many people today do not know much about it. The Reformation had too much to do with political matters, and to a great extent it became a worldly movement. The Brethren, on the other hand, did not advertise themselves, and they had nothing to do with worldly affairs. Some of the Brethren were lords and ladies in society, but when they were gained for this testimony, they renounced their titles. In the entire history of the church there has never been a group of believers as the Brethren who gave up the world in such an absolute way.

The Brethren were rich in the recovery of the truth. More than ninety percent of the fundamental teachings in Christianity come from the discoveries made by the Brethren teachers. The Scofield Reference Bible is very popular in the United States today, but C. I. Scofield was just the “salesman,” not the “factory,” of his teachings. The truths in almost all the notes in his reference Bible and the teachings in his correspondence course came from Brethren writings. C. H. Mackintosh was one of many great teachers among the Brethren. D. L. Moody, a great American evangelist in the last century, once said that if someone were to burn all the books in the entire world, he would be satisfied to have just one copy of the Bible and a set of Mackintosh’s *Notes on the Pentateuch*. To Moody, all Christian writings except these meant little. Besides Mackintosh, there were many other great teachers among the Brethren, including J. G. Bellett and William Kelly. C. H. Spurgeon once described William Kelly as one whose mind was as big as the universe. To read the books by the Brethren is a great help.

The Brethren were very influential in their time. In the middle 1800s a certain hurricane caused much damage to the island of Jamaica. Very soon after the news went out, the Brethren in many different parts of the world sent material gifts to rescue the brothers on that island. The money sent by their gifts totaled more than the money sent by the British government.

The Brethren were outstanding in three things—in brotherly love, in keeping the Lord’s word, and in not denying His name (v. 8). They had much brotherly love. They were truly “the brothers.” Moreover, they dropped every kind of name and title, telling others that they met only in the name of the Lord, and they always kept the word of the Lord. Brotherly love, keeping the Lord’s word, and not denying His name were prominent among them, and they dropped all other things. Among them there was no clergy or laity. Brother Watchman Nee once told us that even a cook among the Brethren knew the Bible better than a missionary. Even the small brothers among them were very clear about the Word. The Brethren began meeting around 1825. By 1829 there were meetings in Italy, and within a short time they spread quickly, even to Arabia.

The Church in Laodicea

The seventh stage of the church is symbolized by the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22). Today some wrongly teach that the church in Laodicea represents the fallen, cold reformed churches. If we thoroughly study the history of the church, we will see that Laodicea represents the degraded Brethren. In this epistle the Lord did not rebuke them for anything except spiritual pride. There is no mention of sinfulness or the teaching of Balaam, the teaching of the Nicolaitans, or the teachings of Jezebel. There was no problem with them except their pride. They claimed to be wealthy and rich and to have need of nothing, but in actuality they were neither cold nor hot but lukewarm (vv. 15-17).

The Brethren had a very good start over a century ago, but after about twenty-five years, many of them fell into degradation. When we attend their meetings in Europe, England, or America, we can sense the fulfillment of this epistle. We thank the Lord that some of them are still in the condition of Philadelphia, but not many are. They are spiritually proud and rich in knowledge, but they do not have much spiritual experience. They do not have

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much living faith or the eyesalve for their eyes so that they may see the spiritual things. They have even lost the presence of the Lord; the Lord is outside their door (v. 20).

In the reformed churches there is still the teaching of Balaam, the teaching of the Nicolaitans, and even to some extent the teachings of Jezebel. In Laodicea, however, we cannot find these things. Therefore, Laodicea represents not the reformed churches but the degraded Brethren, who are fallen not due to sin but due to pride. They say, "We know what is taught in Genesis, and we know what is taught in Revelation. We have a great teacher who gave an exposition of Daniel and other teachings. Who can know more than we do?" In this way they have become proud, being rich in knowledge and right in doctrines. However, the Lord says that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (v. 17). They do not have much experience of the Lord, they do not have much living faith, and their eyes are not truly opened but are blinded by doctrines. They have mental knowledge and doctrines, but they do not have light in their spirit. Therefore, they need to pay the price (v. 18).

If we read the epistle to Laodicea again and if we visit the Brethren assemblies, we have to admit that this is the exact fulfillment of the Lord's prophecy in the seventh epistle. This is the real Laodicea, with lukewarmness, the blindness of knowledge in the mentality, and the lack of anything living. Then we will say, "Lord, be merciful to me."

Choosing to Be the Church in Philadelphia

The stages of the church represented by Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamos have all concluded. None of these three churches exist today. However, the church in Thyatira, the fourth stage of the course of the church, exists today and will remain until the end of this age. In the epistle to Thyatira the Lord clearly indicates that this church will remain until He comes (2:25). Today the Roman Catholic Church not only exists but is flourishing. In addition, the church in Sardis, the reformed church, will also exist until the Lord's coming (3:3). Likewise, Philadelphia and Laodicea will remain until the Lord's return (v. 11).

Today, before the Lord's return, four kinds of churches remain before us—the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant churches, the church of brotherly love, and the degraded Brethren. If we were born five hundred years ago, there would have been no choice before us; there was only one kind of church. After the Reformation, however, there were two kinds of churches. Then as of about one hundred forty years ago, there were three kinds. Today in this century there are four choices related to the church. Of course, we may all agree that we can have nothing to do with Thyatira, but some people still argue for Sardis. Strictly speaking, though, Sardis should not be a choice. Can you be satisfied to be a part of Sardis? I left Sardis in 1927. In actuality, only two kinds of churches remain before us. Will we be the church in brotherly love, or will we be Laodicea? Once we become Philadelphia, we can never again be Sardis, but we must be careful that we do not become Laodicea.

Although Ephesus lost its first love, it remained at the level of normality. Therefore, the church in Ephesus was still good, desirable, and lovable. After this, Smyrna, the suffering church, also continued at the level of normality. However, at the time of Pergamos, the church became abnormal, and Thyatira continued the same trend. Sardis turned back to the normal level but came only halfway. The writings of Luther tell us that Luther himself was not satisfied with the Reformation, although, regrettably, many of his followers were satisfied. We praise the Lord that Philadelphia came all the way back to the level of normality. However, not long afterward, it degraded and fell below the level of normality. All four kinds of churches before us will remain until the Lord's coming back. Now we must ask ourselves which of the four we will choose. I believe we are all clear as to which is the one that will satisfy the Lord. **AFC**