

The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (12)

The last four of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3—Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—prophetically signify the condition of the church that will remain until the Lord’s return at the end of this age. The times of the apostles (signified by Ephesus), of the tenfold persecution (Smyrna), and of the church’s initial marriage to the world (Pergamos) have all passed, but the conditions of the church as foretold in the latter four epistles are present with us and will continue until the second coming of the Lord Jesus. The final epistle is to the church in Laodicea (3:14-22). As for its condition, Laodicea signifies the church in lukewarmness and pride. As a prophetic-historical stage of the church, it foretells the retrogression of the church after having reached the high peak of Philadelphia, the church in brotherly love. Strictly speaking, therefore, Laodicea has a very particular aspect. It denotes neither Roman Catholicism nor Protestantism. Watchman Nee writes,

That which came out from the Roman Catholic Church is called the Protestant church; that which came out from the Protestant churches is called the brothers; and that which goes forth from Philadelphia is called Laodicea...A wrong denominational church is Sardis, not Laodicea...The denominations are not qualified to become Laodicea. Only failing Philadelphia can become Laodicea...Only that which has tasted the goodness of Philadelphia and is now fallen is Laodicea. (82)

The epistle to Laodicea, therefore, is a strong and particular warning to those who genuinely seek to practice the proper church life for the building up of the Body of Christ in the present age. The Lord tells the church in Philadelphia, “I come quickly; hold fast what you have that no one take your crown” (v. 11). As the built-up Body, the reality of Philadelphia will constitute the bride of Christ, whose readiness will cause the Lord to return (19:7). However, as we await His coming, there is the danger that having once reached a high peak, we may slip back, fall, and retrogress to the condition signified by Laodicea. If this happens, we will have been defeated; we will fail the Lord and delay His return. Moreover, our crown will be taken from us, and we will lose the reward of the wedding feast with the Lord and the co-reigning with Him in the coming kingdom age. This is a great matter, which touches God’s heart and the goal of His econ-

omy to have a built-up Body and a prepared bride for His expression and joy.

Losing the One Accord

As a fulfillment of Philadelphia, those believers called “Brethren” in Great Britain enjoyed the overcoming life of the church in brotherly love. Beginning from the late 1820s, the church life practiced by them was the apex of the Lord’s move in His recovery of the church after centuries of degradation and incomplete restoration. The Brethren honored the Lord’s name by meeting in oneness apart from all denominating sects. They dropped their classes and statuses to meet simply as brothers and sisters, and they practiced the universal priesthood of the New Testament by abandoning unscriptural offices and by exercising the gifts of each member according to the pattern of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. Moreover, because they kept the Lord’s word, the riches of the interpreted Word poured forth from them. W. H. Cole, a brother at Plymouth, recalls,

At that time all was happiness and peace, unruffled by personal questions, undisturbed by jealousies or ambitions. The distinctions between rich and poor were lessened by holy, loving fellowship and unity which characterized their intercourse...Their worship evinced the nearness of their communion with the Lord; their prayers were earnest for an increased knowledge of God, and for the spread of His truth. Their teaching showed their deep searching of the scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whilst the exercise of the varied ministry, under the power of the Spirit, testified to the blessedness of the teaching of God’s Word on each important subject...I breathed what appeared to me the pure element of love; I was in the enjoyment of the liberty of home; I was enlightened by its teachings, cheered by its joys, comforted by its hallowed fellowship, strengthened by godly companionship, and encouraged by those who were over me in the Lord. Those were delightful times, so sweet for their simplicity. (qtd. in Lang 380-381, 383)

However, he adds, “But it was too fair a scene for Satan to contemplate, and he must by some means mar its beauties and desolate its loveliness” (383). This work of marring and desolating began with the loss of the one accord among the chief teachers. Acts 1:14 says, “These all

continued steadfastly with one accord in prayer.” *One accord* in Greek is ὁμοθυμαδόν, composed of ὁμοῦ (“same”) and θυμός (“passion,” “ardor,” “inflaming wine” (Thayer 293)). It denotes a oneness in heart, mind, and purpose, not merely of assent but with fervor and zeal. It is the attitude, the spiritual morale, needed to maintain the oneness of the Body of Christ in its work and move. The breach of the one accord sowed the seed of discord among the Brethren.

This breach began shortly after the meeting at Plymouth was established. As John Nelson Darby developed his system of interpretation of prophecy, he set it forth in regular conferences at the manor of Lady Powerscourt near Dublin. This line included the teaching of the secret coming of Christ to rapture the church prior to the great tribulation. Benjamin Newton, one of the founders of the meeting at Plymouth, rejected Darby’s teaching and circulated papers to this effect among the Brethren meetings. In addition, Newton stopped attending the Powerscourt conferences and established his own conference at Plymouth. This serious act of rivalry was one of the first breaches of the one accord among the brothers. In 1843 Newton embodied his views in *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*, which Darby denounced as mischievous, careless, and reckless. Darby’s reaction reveals his zeal and absoluteness for the truth, as he saw it, but was harsh and unbecoming of those who meet in the principle of brotherly love. He writes, “The whole tissue of statement, page after page of this book, is the mere fruit of an unbridled imagination” (*Collected Writings* 8: 195). In reality, both Newton’s work and Darby’s response contain errors, and both Newton and Darby could have and should have received that which was complementary in the other’s portion and labored together for the sake of the truth. However, history demonstrates that this was not the way that the Brethren would take. Rather, as Harold H. Rowdon notes, “The relationship between Darby and Newton was like a thermometer which registered the health of the infant body” (58).

Darby and Newton differed also in their view of the administration of the church. Darby opposed any hint of clericalism and at first was reluctant even to appoint elders in a church. Newton, on the other hand, was “severe and autocratic” and often exercised control (Coad 138). By 1845 this brought the two into open conflict. Again, Darby’s response was confrontational. He declared that a “spirit of delusion from the enemy” was at work in Plymouth (qtd. in Rowdon 246). He writes, “I felt God was practically displaced; and more particularly, that there was a subversion of the principles on which we met; that there was evil and unrighteousness unconfessed and unjudged” (qtd. in Neatby 113). Based on this, he withdrew from the existing meeting on Ebrington Street and established an alternate meeting elsewhere in the city. In the following year the dispute spread to London, where the church, under the leadership of George Wigram, “after

united prayer and consultation concluded that Mr. Newton could not be admitted to the Lord’s table there, so long as he refused to satisfy their consciences as to the grave charges alleged against him” (Ironsides 42).

This terrible dispute had a great negative effect on the church in Plymouth, which was now divided. Cole speaks of “the distress of mind, the poignant sorrow and heart-grief” caused by that turmoil:

The disastrous strife of the two great teachers, who then became rivals, broke up the peace of the assembly and almost stopped the progress of the work...Strifes, jealousies, wraths, factions, parties, works of the flesh, took the place, in great measure, of the fruit of the Spirit and loving fellowship of the saints. (qtd. in Lang 383)

These events prove that not even the Brethren, who for a few precious years were the church in Philadelphia, had an adequate vision of the crucial need for maintaining the oneness and the one accord. Henry Groves, referencing 1 Corinthians 1:10-12, writes,

What an opportunity for grace to shine in! for Christ to triumph in the saint over self! But, alas, self triumphed over Christ on both sides of the conflict, though in different ways; and the schismatic spirit of “I am of Newton,” and “I am of Darby,” as of old in Corinth, came in and carried all before it but those who had been walking before God. (14)

This was the beginning of the church in Laodicea, the fall from the nature and principles of Philadelphia.

An Unscriptural Test of Fellowship

The turmoil soon worsened. Unpublished notes of a message given by Newton exposed errors in his understanding of the humanity of Jesus. Again, Darby responded with the unyielding zeal that characterized all his work, accusing Newton of “entire indifference to the truth and glory of Christ” and of disseminating “poison...in secret to destroy and ruin” (*Collected Writings* 15: 44-45). Newton published a clarification of the matter but failed to entirely disavow his error. Darby refers to this as “hopeless dishonesty” and adds, “I have not the least doubt...that Mr. Newton received his prophetic system by direct inspiration from Satan” (97, 109). Newton then issued a long and detailed confession and retraction of his teaching, but Darby styled anything said in Newton’s defense as a “wretched trickery” (124). Seeing his hopeless position, Newton withdrew from the Plymouth meeting at the end of 1847. His connection with the Brethren ceased from this time, and he established an isolated meeting in London. F. Roy Coad writes, “The result of Darby’s campaign in Plymouth had been to destroy one of the most

flourishing churches of the movement, and to drive into the wilderness one of its most brilliant teachers” (151).¹

After Newton’s departure, three of the other leading teachers who met on Ebrington Street also resigned. Those who remained, with Samuel Tregelles, issued a statement reaffirming their orthodox belief in Christ’s humanity. In Darby’s mind, however, this was not adequate. He insisted that anyone who remained at Ebrington Street was a partaker in Newton’s sin. This caused the meeting there to become isolated. In 1848 this policy also had a devastating effect on the meeting at Bristol, which met at Bethesda Chapel under the care of George Müller, whom, because of his work of faith there, William Blair Neatby calls “the greatest preacher and the greatest apologist of the [nineteenth] century” (156). Two brothers who had been at Ebrington Street came to Bristol and, after being examined, were received for fellowship. Darby, who had been invited to Bristol by Müller, declared that he could no longer visit there, because they had received followers of Newton.

Nevertheless, the elders at Bristol, including Müller and Henry Craik, declined to investigate any further into the matter of Newton’s teaching, which decision was embodied in their “Letter of the Ten.” The letter states,

The requirements that we should investigate and judge Mr. Newton’s tracts, appeared to some of us like the introduction of a fresh test of communion. It was demanded of us that, in addition to a sound confession and a corresponding walk, we should, as a body, come to a formal decision about what many of us might be quite unable to understand...

We would seek to maintain fellowship with all believers, and consider ourselves as particularly associated with those who meet as we do, simply in the name of the Lord Jesus...Let all who are interested in the matter know that we continue unto the present day, “speaking the same things.” (qtd. in Coad 299-300)

Darby protests this stance in his “Bethesda Circular”:

To receive anyone from Bethesda...is opening the door now to the infection of the abominable evil from which at so much painful cost we have been delivered. *It has been formally and deliberately admitted at Bethesda under the plea of not investigating it...*For my own part I should neither go to Bethesda in its present state, nor while in that state go where persons from it were knowingly admitted. (*Collected Writings* 15: 166-167)

He expresses his enduring respect for Müller and Craik but says exhortingly, “Woe be to [brothers] if they love the brethren Müller and Craik or their own ease more than the souls of saints dear to Christ!” (166). This was, in effect, a

wholesale excommunication of the meeting at Bethesda and a termination of fellowship with any who contacted them. Darby writes, “The evil at B. is the most unprincipled admission of blasphemers against Christ, the coldest contempt of Him I ever came across” (*Letters* 2: 216). In a subsequent series of meetings Müller publically announced his condemnation of Newton’s teaching, but it was to no avail; fellowship with the meeting at Bristol was never restored.

Darby considered wrong doctrine to be a fatal and highly contagious disease, from which one must separate at any cost. He writes concerning Bethesda,

The question is, Does the person come from a place which has identified itself with the refusal to judge evil? It little matters to me how many steps a person is from the first who had the typhus fever in the country; five or fifty is all alike, if a man has got it...I shall own no *gathering* once in connection with B. and its supporters. (219-220)

He asserts that if a brother hesitated to condemn the meeting at Bethesda, it means that the brother’s “heart is unsound, as a man who would refuse to be examined by a priest for leprosy; he condemns himself” (222). Darby’s stance is that as typhus and leprosy are to be avoided, so is anyone, or any church, who contacts or admits one who fails to pass the new test of fellowship. This principle governs all who follow Darby’s strict interpretation of fellowship, and since 1848 it has been the rule for those Brethren who are called Exclusive.² In subsequent years,

a large number of churches were induced to accept as a necessary test of fellowship the condemnation of the church at Bethesda on account of a doctrine never held by it...So consistently was this system carried out that brethren in the West Indies had to judge the Bethesda question, and Swiss peasants in their Alpine villages were obliged to examine the errors attributed to Newton and condemn them. (Broadbent 393)

Robert H. Baylis says,

The only way for fellowship to be restored between the descendants of those who condemned Newton’s heresy and those who did not (Bethesda and all who take this independent stand) is for the latter to “judge the question” properly—that is, to agree that Bethesda was wrong. In years gone by...it was quite common for an Exclusive brother to refuse acquaintance with someone from an Independent assembly by asking, “Have you judged the question?” (49)³

A Lamentable Fall

Anthony Norris Groves, one of the first to see the way of Philadelphia, said,

We are evidently called to know nothing among our fellow-Christians but this one fact—Do they belong to Christ? Has Christ received them? Then we may receive them, to the glory of God. (qtd. in Baylis 5)

Edward Cronin likewise began his quest, “with the strong impression on my soul...that the Church of God was one, and that all that believed were members of that one body” (qtd. in Neatby 19). Darby writes,

Our principle is this...whenever Christ has received a person—we would receive him...As our table is the Lord’s, not ours, we receive all that the Lord has received...We do not make a creed but Christ the ground and term of union. (*Collected Writings* 14: 219-22)

In time, however, Groves felt to write to Darby, warning him of their gradual fall:

I feel you have departed from those principles by which you once hoped to have effected [your purposes], and are in principle returning to the city from whence you departed. (539)

Groves saw that the ground of their meeting was

daily becoming one of doctrine and opinion more than life and love...It is into this position, dear D—, I feel some little flocks are fast tending, if they have not already attained it. Making *light* not *life* the measure of communion. (539-540)

The subsequent divisions among the brothers was a lamentable and tragic fall from the principles of oneness that form the basis for the proper church life, as signified by the church in Philadelphia. Proverbs 17:14 has this warning: “The beginning of contention is like letting out water; / Therefore abandon strife before it breaks out.” Once the way of separation on the basis of doctrine and practice began, it could not be stopped. E. H. Broadbent writes, “Such a system could not fail to lead to further divisions. Even in Darby’s lifetime, several such took place, the parties taking different sides, excluding each other as rigorously as they had unitedly excluded Groves and Müller” (393). In 1866 W. H. Dorman and Percy Hall parted from Darby on doctrinal grounds. In 1879 Cronin himself, one of the earliest of the Brethren, was excommunicated, and following upon this, divided meetings in London and Ramsgate exchanged mutual excommunications. William Kelly was drawn into the turmoil and eventually became the leading figure in an alternate, divided Exclusive line. The controversy spread to North America, where Frederick W. Grant was excommunicated, and the movement on this continent became further divided. Grant writes,

Alas! who hath bewitched us, that such things should be

possible at all,—that we should not be able to recognize the true character of an endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit by such means as cutting off all who differ from us, and building the wall of separation highest where the real differences is in fact the slightest? (qtd. in Ironside 116)

John G. Bellett, another of the original brothers in Dublin, writes, “What was erected in the midst of us twenty years ago may be a dishonoured ruin—the light then communicated may have become darkness, and the deposit then entrusted be forfeited never to be restored” (qtd. in Neatby 239). In 1890 C. H. Mackintosh spoke of the “sad and humiliating condition of things amongst us” and longed to see the end of “this heart-sickening, soul-withering discussion and strife” (qtd. in Ironside 129-130). Robert Chapman of Barnstaple lamented this period of time in this way: “The Church of Christ at Corinth was never rent asunder as are the saints of God now” (qtd. in Holmes 61). Frank Holmes, Chapman’s biographer, adds, “History has shown that ‘Brethren-ism’ is the worst of all ‘isms,’ for it takes the sublimest truths and makes them the tools of party strife” (102-103).

The move of the Lord that was for a while the church in Philadelphia suffered defeat because those who were raised up did not keep brotherly love intrinsically, they did not see in full the proper ground of the oneness of the church practically, and they did not adequately realize the need to do all things through the subjective operation of the cross and in the life-giving Spirit of the crucified and resurrected Christ. For these reasons Brethrenism fell into the condition of Laodicea.

Being Wretched, Miserable, Poor, Blind, and Naked

In Revelation 3:15-18 Christ, the faithful and true Witness, said to Laodicea,

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I am about to spew you out of My mouth. Because you say, I am wealthy and have become rich and have need of nothing, and do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined by fire that you may be rich, and white garments that you may be clothed and that the shame of your nakedness may not be manifested, and eyesalve to anoint your eyes that you may see.

In the eyes of the Lord, the characteristics of Laodicea are lukewarmness and spiritual pride. The once glorious but now fallen church became wretched because it was “proud of being rich in the vain knowledge of doctrine” yet was “poor in the experience of the riches of Christ” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, v. 17, note 2). Nee writes, “The greatest

failure of the Brethren was their excessive stress on the objective truth and neglect of the subjective truth” (89). The Lord used the brothers in Great Britain to open up many matters in the Scriptures, and much of the fundamental teaching held by believers today is the fruit of the light given to the Brethren. However, possessing the truth only in knowledge carries with it a danger. The enemy of God used the letter of the Scriptures to deaden many of the brothers. Paul tells the Corinthians, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1). John writes, “He who does not love has not known God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). As the nature of God’s essence, love is of God and is God Himself infused into us by faith so that we may love the brothers unto the building up of the organic Body of Christ. Knowledge, apart from God’s life, is the dead letter that ministers death (2 Cor. 3:6). Falling from love into the vain, outward knowledge of doctrine causes us to be in a wretched condition before God.

Laodicea is also miserable because it is blind, “lack[ing] true spiritual insight in the genuine spiritual things” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, Rev. 3:17, note 2). Henry Groves remarks, “While knowledge had increased, that deepest and most humbling of all knowledge—self-knowledge—had not” (12). There is a kind of knowledge that touches our inward being, that governs us, and that brings us into a vital, organic relationship with the Triune God. The subjective knowledge of the cross, the divine life, and the Spirit all require light, not mere knowledge. Moreover, the crucial importance of oneness, one accord, and keeping the principles of the Body must be a light that governs our church life and our dealings with one another.

In addition, the degraded church is miserable because it is naked. In the Bible garments signify our conduct and daily walk before the Lord. To be naked is to be found not living Christ as our subjective righteousness in our daily walk. Like Paul, we need to count all things loss and pursue to be found in Christ, that is, in a transcendent condition, expressing God by living Christ (Phil. 3:8-9).

Paying a Price to “Buy” the Riches of the Triune God

The Lord said to the church, “I counsel you to buy from Me” (Rev. 3:18). *Buy* reveals a great principle in God’s New Testament economy. Our salvation through justification for the forgiveness of our sins was purchased at a great price by the Lord Jesus, but to us it is a gift received freely by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). However, in order to follow the Lord, deal with our flesh and self, grow in life, and serve the Lord profitably and faithfully, we must pay a price. The Lord asked His disciples, “Are you able to drink the cup which I am about to drink?” The disciples replied, “We are able.” Jesus prophesied, “My cup you shall indeed drink” (Matt. 20:22-23). The disciples eventually learned in their experience that it is only “through

many tribulations” that one can, practically speaking, enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Paul testifies, “I now rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His Body, which is the church” (Col. 1:24). The afflictions of Christ here are not His sufferings for our redemption; Paul could have no part in those. Rather, the afflictions of Christ that Paul is speaking of here are the sufferings and labors necessary for producing and building up the church. To pass through these sufferings for the sake of the Body is to “buy” the precious things of the Triune God.

In Matthew 25 the Lord spoke the parable of a bridegroom and virgins who awake to meet him after having fallen asleep, signifying Christ’s second coming and the resurrection of the saints who have died. When the bridegroom came, the prudent virgins went out to meet him with their lamps lit and with oil in their vessels. The foolish virgins, however, did not take oil with them. Verses 8 and 9 say,

The foolish said to the prudent, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out. But the prudent answered, saying, Perhaps there will be not enough for us and for you; go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.

While they were going away to buy, the bridegroom came, and the door to the wedding feast was shut to those who had not already paid the price. *Buy* in verse 9 (ἀγοράζω) is the same word as that used in Revelation 3:18. This shows the crucial need for paying a price before the Lord. Witness Lee writes,

Buy indicates that a price must be paid. Having the filling of the Holy Spirit is at a cost, such as giving up the world, dealing with self, loving the Lord above all, and counting all things loss for Christ. If we do not pay this price today, we will have to pay it after we are resurrected. (*Recovery Version*, Matt. 25:9, note 3)

The church in Laodicea needs to buy “gold refined by fire” (Rev. 3:18); *gold* here signifies our operating, working faith that is tested for approval through trials and sufferings (1 Pet. 1:7). Gold also signifies the divine nature, of which we partake in faith (2 Pet. 1:4). We must also buy “white garments” (Rev. 3:18). As those who have come to the Father, all Christians possess the “best robe,” the garment of redemption, which is Christ as the God-satisfying righteousness to cover repentant sinners (Luke 15:22; 1 Cor. 1:30). However, not all who appear before the Lord will have the wedding garment, a second garment wrought and stitched in their being through the subjective experience of Christ in their daily living (Matt. 22:11-14). This is the white garment mentioned in the epistle to the church in Sardis (Rev. 3:5). In Revelation 19:8 the wedding garment is called “the righteousnesses of the saints.”

Righteousnesses, plural, refers to the righteous acts of the saints, which are Christ lived out through our soul as the expression of God in our daily living. The overcoming Christ must be wrought into us, and we must allow Him to live a life of surpassing righteousness through us (Matt. 5:20). The first garment, the robe of objective righteousness, is for our redemption and eternal salvation. The second garment, the robe of subjective righteousness, is for our approval before Christ for our entrance into the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Those in Laodicea must also buy “eyesalve” (Rev. 3:18), which is the anointing Spirit, Christ Himself as the life-giving Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27; 1 Cor. 15:45). The truth from the Lord’s Word must be “painted” on our inner being, causing the Word to become living, rich, and real in us. We need deep, spiritual insight and foresight much more than mere doctrinal knowledge. The eyesalve of the Spirit will allow us to have the Lord’s present guidance, speaking, leading, anointing, and teaching.

There is no way to gain the reality of these three items—gold, white garments, and eyesalve—other than paying a price before the Lord again and again. If we pay such a price, we will gain the Triune God subjectively, allow Him to work Himself into us, and become precious materials for the building up of His house and temple, which will ultimately be the New Jerusalem. It is for this that the Lord is standing outside the fallen church, knocking at the door, and awaiting the response of the individual overcomers to open to Him so that they may dine with Him by experiencing and enjoying Him for the sake of His Body and bride (Rev. 3:20).

Bearing a Greater Responsibility before the Lord

W. H. Griffith Thomas said, “The Brethren are remarkable people for rightly dividing the Word of truth and wrongly dividing themselves” (qtd. in Ironside 110). For a period of twenty to thirty years the Brethren in Great Britain were the fulfillment of the church in Philadelphia. They met outside all divisions and denominations, taking the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as the unique name and taking regeneration in Christ as the unique basis for coming together as the church. They forsook the clerical system and allowed each member to exercise his gift according to the pattern in 1 Corinthians 14. They loved one another, and the riches of the interpreted Word of God poured forth from them abundantly. In all these things John Nelson Darby and the brothers with him were the leading figures in the Lord’s great work of recovery. However, history proves that they did not have the adequate light to care to the fullest extent for the proper oneness and one accord by giving a greater place to the principles of the Body of Christ than to correct teaching. Darby himself alluded to this by admitting that “perhaps knowledge has been too much attended to at

Plymouth” (*Letters* 1: 46). As Henry Groves writes, their holding to sacred truths proved to be “too much in the head and too little in the heart” (14). Although the leading men among the Brethren were deeply spiritual persons, and the blessing among them was rich, they were not yet able to receive the full revelation needed to overcome the obstacles upon which they ultimately stumbled.

The prophecy of the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3 strongly indicates that a church that comes up to the highest standard will exist on the earth at the time of the Lord’s coming. This means that the Lord will carry out His final recovery and the capstone of His work with a proper, recovered church at the end of this age. As those who pursue to be the church that He desires, we must receive up-to-date light from the Lord and be current with Him in the progress of His recovery. We must keep all the principles of the Body, and we must learn the lessons and receive the warnings from history. However, for those who seek this, there are perils. We who endeavor to know the Lord’s will and to do it may share in all the blessings of the church in Philadelphia. However, this also means that we will confront all the perils of the church in Laodicea. Furthermore, we must be cognizant of what Jesus spoke in this parable to His disciples:

That slave who knew his master’s will and did not prepare or do according to his will, will receive many lashes; but he who did not know, yet did things worthy of stripes, will receive few lashes. But to everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required from him; and to whom much has been committed, they will ask of him all the more. (Luke 12:47-48)

Becoming those to whom much is given will also make us those from whom more is required. This is the word of righteousness to the believers as we approach the end of this age.

A Concluding Word

In this department of *Affirmation & Critique* we have examined the “word of righteousness,” the solid food in God’s word that embodies the deeper thought of His justice and righteousness in His dispensational and governmental dealings with His people (Heb. 5:13-14). In the following we offer a brief review of our presentation.

The Word of Righteousness in the Gospels and Epistles

In the Gospels this word begins with the coming of the kingdom of the heavens, referring to a particular section within the broader kingdom of God and composed of the church today and the heavenly part of the coming millennial kingdom. Whereas the kingdom of God, in a general

sense, is entered simply by faith in the Lord Jesus, participation in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens requires the heavenly and spiritual nature and living as revealed by the King of the kingdom in Matthew 5 through 7, a living that manifests surpassing righteousness (5:20).

The believers in Christ must give the Lord the ground to grow in the “soil” of their heart, issuing in thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or hundredfold fruit that produces the church as a loaf to be offered to God (13:8, 23, 33; Lev. 2:1; 1 Cor. 10:17). Moreover, as spiritual virgins, they must pay the price to gain an extra portion of the Spirit (“oil,” Matt. 25:1, 4) for the filling and saturating of their souls, and they must also exercise the gifts given to them by the Lord (“talents,” vv. 14-15) in order to gain a profit for Him. Those who are prudent and faithful will be rewarded by the Lord with the participation in His wedding feast and with co-reigning with Him in the coming millennial age (vv. 10, 21, 23). However, those who are foolish and slothful will be disciplined dispensationally by being cast into the outer darkness in the coming age (v. 30).

The Epistles also speak of living in the reality of the kingdom today and entering into the reward of the kingdom in the future. Paul charges the believers to build up the church as the temple of God with the experiences of Christ in the virtues and attributes of the Triune God (“gold, silver, precious stones,” 1 Cor. 3:12), for if they build with worthless wood, grass, and stubble, they will suffer loss; their work will be burned, and they will be saved, “yet so as through fire” (v. 15), that is, through governmental punishment in the age to come (Matt. 12:32). Paul also warns that those who live in the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God, referring to the enjoyment of the coming kingdom as a reward to the overcoming believers, a reward in addition to the believers’ salvation (Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5). Witness Lee writes,

The believers have been regenerated into the kingdom of God (John 3:5), and they are in the church life, living in the kingdom of God today (Rom. 14:17). Not all believers, only the overcoming ones, will participate in the millennium. In the coming age the unclean, defeated ones will have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God, the millennium. (*Recovery Version*, Eph. 5:5, note 3)

The word of righteousness is a major component in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Along with every major point in this book, there is a warning. In chapter 2 the believers are charged to give heed more abundantly to the things which they have heard, for there will be no escaping a just recompense if they neglect so great a salvation (vv. 1-4), a salvation that spans from the forgiveness of sins to their inheriting Christ’s kingdom with glory in the coming age. In chapters 3 and 4 the believers are warned to not harden

their hearts but to seek after and diligently enter into the Sabbath rest in the present age so that they may enjoy Christ with the kingdom as a fuller Sabbath in the millennium (3:7—4:13). In chapters 5 and 6 they are charged to be brought on to maturity, lest by falling away they bring forth “thorns and thistles”—works that are worthy only to be burned (5:11—6:20). In chapter 10 the believers are exhorted to come forward to the Holy of Holies and not sin willfully (vv. 19-39), that instead of “worse punishment” they may have “great reward” (vv. 29, 35). Finally, in chapter 12 the believers are charged to run the race and not fall away from grace (vv. 1-29), lest they forfeit their birthright—the inheritance of the earth (2:5-6), the priesthood (Rev. 20:6), and the kingship (v. 4), all of which are the main blessings in the coming kingdom age.

Being Charged before Christ, the Coming Righteous Judge

Paul wrote to Timothy, “I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:1). Here Paul speaks of the Lord’s appearing, His judging, and His kingdom. These are themes strongly taken up in Christ’s speaking to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, in which He called for overcomers in the churches. To the overcomers in the church in Thyatira, He said, “What you have hold fast until I come” (2:25). He warned the church in Sardis that if the believers in it do not watch, He will come as a thief, and they shall by no means know at what hour He will come upon them (3:3). To the overcomers in the church in Philadelphia, He declared, “I come quickly; hold fast what you have that no one take your crown” (v. 11).

When the Body is built up and the bride makes herself ready, Christ will rapture the overcomers. This will take place in the middle of the seventieth week prophesied by Daniel (Dan. 9:25-27), which will be just prior to the great tribulation in the final three and a half years of this age. At this time two will be in the field, and one is taken and one is left; two will be grinding at the mill, and one is taken and one is left (Matt. 24:40-41). These will be the living overcomers. The dead overcomers from all the past centuries will be caught up to God and to His throne and will comprise the man-child (Rev. 12:5). The overcomers who are alive at the Lord’s coming will be the firstfruits, who will stand with the Lamb on the heavenly Mount Zion (14:1-5). Near the end of the great tribulation the remainder of the believers will be raptured. At this time Christ, the righteous Judge, will judge all the genuine New Testament believers. At the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10) the overcomers of the church age will receive a reward—an incorruptible crown (1 Cor. 9:24-25), a crown of boasting (1 Thes. 2:19-20), a crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:7-8), a crown of glory

(1 Pet. 5:2-4), and a crown of life (Rev. 3:11). Those who were defeated, however, will receive a dispensational punishment in what the Bible calls “outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). They will miss the glory and joy of the manifestation of the kingdom and will be put outside of its bright realm in the millennial age.

Overcoming to Meet God’s Need

In God’s dispensational move Christ produced the church through His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension so that He may have a Body on the earth to express and represent Him in dealing with His enemy and propagating Him among man. However, the church as a whole failed Him and became degraded. For this reason Christ calls for overcomers among the churches so that He may have some, a minority, to stand in place of the whole and accomplish what He desires. By what they become and by what they work out, the overcomers overcome on behalf of the whole church. When Christ sees the overcomers, He will righteously declare that a proper, corporate man is standing for His interests on the earth.

Immediately after being judged at the judgment seat, the resurrected and raptured overcomers will be presented to Christ as His prepared bride, and the wedding feast of the Lamb will begin. Then the bride, arrayed in her bridal garments, will become the Lord’s army and descend with Him as the corporate smashing stone to destroy Antichrist and all human government (Dan. 2:34-35). This stone will become a great mountain—the manifestation of the kingdom—that fills the whole earth:

In order to have the mountain, the Lord must have the stone; in order to have the stone, He must have the army; in order to have the army, He must have the bride; and in order to have the bride, He must have the Body. The overcomers in Philadelphia are actually, intrinsically, experientially, and organically becoming the Body, which will become the bride, the army, and the stone that will usher in the kingdom...The Body, the bride, the army, the corporate smiting stone, and the kingdom depend on the overcomers in Philadelphia. (Kangas 214-215)

The overcomers consummate God’s economy for the building up of the Body and the preparation of the bride so that Christ may return, close this age, and set up His kingdom on the earth. Christ will take the earth as His realm, sit upon His throne, and reign in His kingdom. Moreover, His overcomers will inherit the earth with Him (Psa. 2:8; Matt. 5:5) and share in His reign as co-kings. Christ said to the church in Laodicea, “He who overcomes, to him I will give to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21). God’s intention is to work on a group of people so that they can share His throne with Him. God can-

not receive the full glory, His kingdom cannot come in full, and His enemy cannot be subdued until there are some who share His throne with Him. How precious it is, how victorious and transcendent, that Christ “also overcame.” He is the unique Overcomer. As our Leader, Pioneer, and Forerunner, He has cut the way for us to enter into glory and sit on the throne, and He is leading many sons into glory so that they also may sit with Him on His throne (Heb. 2:10; 6:20; 12:2; 1 Cor. 2:7; 1 Thes. 2:12).

A Word of Promise

In 1939 and 1940 Witness Lee published a series of messages that present in a thorough way the scriptural ground, definition, nature, structure, and process of the kingdom. After revealing the surpassingly high requirements for entering the kingdom in its reality today and being rewarded with its manifestation in the future, this series ends with a chapter entitled “The Truth concerning the Kingdom—the Promises and the Power for Entering into the Kingdom of the Heavens.” Lee writes, “Perhaps you may feel that these conditions are too difficult. Indeed, I too admit that they are difficult, but thank God, nothing is too difficult for Him! What He demands of us is matched by the grace and power that He gives us” (*Collected Works* 523).

In our pursuit of the kingdom, the words of the Lord Jesus give us much strength, encouragement, and confidence in Him. In Luke 12:32 Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, little flock, because your Father has been well pleased to give you the kingdom.” In Matthew 19:23 Jesus said, “Only with difficulty will a rich man enter into the kingdom of the heavens.” When the disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus answered, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (vv. 25-26). Concerning this, Lee writes,

If we are willing to stand on the Lord’s promises and offer ourselves to God by faith, He will certainly come in to do a work of grace in us to the extent that He has the position to give us the kingdom that He is well pleased to give us...

If we are willing to receive His kingdom, we should ask Him for it, and if we are willing to ask God for it, He will surely give it to us...

“God is well pleased!” “God is able!”...Blessed are those who hear these two sentences. Those who can say from their heart, “God is well pleased” and “God is able,” will certainly be able to participate in the kingdom of God. (524, 526, 530)

It is God’s good pleasure to give His Son a kingdom, and it is His good pleasure that we would fully participate in and enjoy the kingdom with Him. This will give the

Lord the righteous ground to subdue His enemy and receive the earth as His inheritance. Then He will return to claim the bride who has made herself ready. He will reign on the earth in the manifestation of His kingdom, and the overcomers will reign as co-kings with Him. God's purpose with man will be fulfilled, our Lord will be satisfied, and we will join with Him in His joyous wedding feast and victorious kingdom rule for a thousand years. May the Lord soon work out this word of righteousness in His loving seekers.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹In 1848 a conference was held at Bath to reaffirm the decrees made against Newton. Robert Chapman, from the meeting at Barnstaple, suggested that Darby should have waited longer before separating from Newton, to which Darby replied, "I waited six months." Chapman said, "If it had been at Barnstaple, we should have waited six years" (qtd. in Holmes 60). Late in his life Darby said of Newton, "Mr. Newton is the most godly man I ever knew." When asked how he could speak in this way of one with whom he fiercely contended, he replied, "Mr. Newton had taught blasphemous doctrines about the person of our blessed Lord, and these had to be dealt with" (qtd. in Coad 162). However, Newton eventually recanted his error, and had the brothers received more light concerning the oneness of the Body, a reconciliation would have been possible.

²Robert Chapman, well known for his love of the brothers, declined to call the Exclusive Brethren by that name, feeling that it was odious. He referred to them as "those brethren whose consciences lead them to refuse my fellowship and to deprive me of theirs" (qtd. in Broadbent 393). Those who took the way of Müller, Craik, Chapman, and others are called Open Brethren, or Independent Brethren.

The ecclesiology of both the Exclusive and Open Brethren falls short of the revelation in the New Testament. According to the complex and pessimistic Exclusive view, as taught by Darby, the church age is in irretrievable failure, and although an enlightened few can separate themselves from the corrupt whole, they dare not call themselves the church. This renders invalid the standing of genuine local churches according to the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament. The Open school errs in insisting on the independence and autonomy of each local church, annulling the universal fellowship and coordination of the local churches as one Body upon the earth (Eph. 4:4; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:19; 2 Cor. 8:23; 1 Thes. 2:14; Rev. 1:4).

³William H. Dorman, a prominent brother who once enforced the Exclusive stance, later wrote,

I cannot any longer pursue to "the tenth generation" people who have no more to do with Mr. Newton's doctrine than I have...My heart has been withered by the necessity of schooling Christians—young and old, ignorant and

well-informed—in the mysteries of an act of discipline of eighteen years' standing, and in endeavoring to shew the present bearings of "the Bethesda question." (qtd. in Neatby 254-255)

⁴See *The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1932–1949*, vol. 1, pp. 315-544.

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