

One Church from Seven

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, June 4th, 2017

“John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.... to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,’ and, ‘What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.’” (Rev. 1:4-6, 10-11)

In explanation of the inner meaning of the letters to the seven churches described in the opening chapters of *Revelation, The Apocalypse Revealed* takes note of the spiritual characteristics represented by each church, including all their shortcomings of doctrine, worship and life, and concludes with this statement: “All these are called to the New Church, which is the New Jerusalem” (AR 68). The invitation is repeated even after the description of Laodicea, which is listed as the worst of them all and severely criticized (AR 153b). What can we make of this, and how does it apply to our lives individually and as New Church members?

Well, to make a detailed analysis of the 7 churches would require a lengthy class, or perhaps a whole series of sermons (in fact there’s a wonderful New Church book about this in our library*) but the essential point clearly is that the Lord never gives up on anybody, and in fact the whole reason for the letters is to encourage us and help us to understand that whatever our faults may be the Lord can work with us and help us to enjoy a truly heavenly life.

So if you look closely at the letters you will see that in every case but Laodicea the messages begin with praise for some very good qualities: Ephesus, for example, is praised for its labor, patience and intolerance of evil; Smyrna is praised for its tribulation and poverty (obviously meaning poverty of spirit, or humility); Pergamos is praised for its perseverance in the face of evil, and so on. Thyatira is recognized for a broad *spectrum* of virtues: love, service, faith and patience! It would seem to be the best of all, except for the fact that it “allowed that woman, Jezebel... to teach and beguile My servants to commit whoredom” and eat things sacrificed to idols. In other words, its members were doing very well in their own lives but they were too tolerant of corrupting influences in the church. Likewise all the churches but Philadelphia, which is not criticized, are urged to address their faults, but then again, just as they begin with affirmations, they ALL end with affirmations, including beautiful prophecies of spiritual life.

Of course all the criticisms of the church – like the extreme tolerance of Thyatira – are not only about what we can tolerate in other people’s lives; they are about our own internal attitudes and what we tolerate within ourselves. Who is Jezebel, anyway, and who are the servants, and what is this whoredom? All these things are elements of our own character: Jezebel is our own selfish

* Landmarks in Regeneration, by the late Rev. Douglas Taylor; paperback, 116 pages.

will, servants are the thoughts of our understanding that do the bidding of the will, and whoredom is the adulteration of what is good or true by commingling it with what is false or evil – in ourselves – when we know better! We can be living an outwardly good life, we can even have true love, faith and patience, but if we don't address the sinister stuff that is within us at the same time it all gets corrupted at the source.

So let's have a quick look at the things that need correcting in our lives as represented by the states of 6 out of the 7 churches, and let's remember as we do so that there's good in all but one, and even that one can be redeemed, for ALL of them are called to be part of the New Church.

First of all, let's think about the location and cultural influences on each of the 7 churches, because a lot of what is said about them relates to those issues. For example, the first three churches named were all in coastal cities along the Aegean Sea. Coastal regions represent introductory states, and in particular those states dominated by thought from the understanding, since waters correspond to truths. So Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos all relate to our intellectual life, that is, to our states of doing what we do because we know we should. More about this in a minute.

The other four churches were inland, in a line descending south-east from Pergamos. These more interior regions correspond to more interior spiritual states, which are those dominated by the will. So in Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia we see a growing emphasis on loves and affections, including warnings against mere outward appearances of good and the need to really BE good inwardly. Philadelphia is the best and represents a state of genuine charity and faith. Coincidentally it was also situated in a fertile plain that supported a thriving economy based on vineyards and wine production, all things that correspond to a life based on the truths of faith. Early in the first century this city suffered a major earthquake and was subsequently rebuilt. No doubt the disaster represented the temptations that church also faced and the rebuilding testified to their resilience and strength in overcoming those temptations. The main point of the letter to the church in Philadelphia was to "Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown!"

The last church, in Laodicea, was actually in a dry plain where the water supply was from hot springs nearly 6 miles away, brought to the city by viaducts. And of course by the time the water reached that city it was "neither cold nor hot," and it contained a sulfurous mix of minerals from those hot springs, making the water faintly nauseating! Of the people there historians tell us that they were rather complacent, and the arid conditions speak to the fact that they were not very attentive to the things of spiritual life. In fact, coming after Philadelphia in the list of letters this church clearly represents what happens when we finally enter into the life of genuine charity and faith, but then grow complacent, and turn away from the spiritual life. The Heavenly Doctrines call this profanation and it's a very dangerous situation, worthy of the rebuke and exhortations given in the text. Still, even this situation is not hopeless, and the Lord's promise is that "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne with My Father on His throne."

But let's go back now to the beginning and try to see how this whole progression of letters speaks to the progression of states and conditions that WE need to address in our spiritual lives. You might find it helpful, in following this series, to open your pew Bibles to chapter 2 in the Book of Revelation (beginning at page 1407).

The first church was in Ephesus, a very ancient, very prosperous city on a natural sea port. Its monuments were magnificent and the population generally wealthy from the trade and industry

there – notably the manufacture of idols for the worship of the Greek goddess, Diana. Paul wrote his first Epistle to the Corinthians from and in the sphere of Ephesus, and his Epistle to the Ephesians themselves speaks to the challenges the early Christians had in maintaining their faith despite the pagan worship, sexual immorality and other excesses that pervaded the culture of the city. No wonder this first letter focuses on the stars and lamps, in general the LIGHT of faith, praising and encouraging this in the young church.

In the same way the Lord extolls the light of faith as the means of overcoming the loves of self and the world in *our* culture and in ourselves. But, He says, we have to be careful not to neglect “our first love.” In all our enthusiasm for the truth we need to remember to “do the first works,” that is, have charity toward one another! In fact, there IS no true faith without charity, and if our faith does not support the spiritual good of our acts and intentions among others, it is all in vain.

The deeds of the Nicolaitans, by the way, were good deeds done for selfish reasons, and we also do well to hate this fake charity, but we can’t let that keep us from practicing real charity.

The second church was in Smyrna. This port city was also quite prosperous, although it had been destroyed by a neighboring city-state and then rebuilt by Alexander the Great. The promise to this church of a “crown of life” (in v. 10) may be an oblique reference in contrast to the fact that the city was nestled under a nearby prominence described by ancient writers as a statue with a crown on its head. In any case after the Romans took control around the time of the Revelation the place had become a center for the worship of Caesar.

Now the Writings teach us that this church represents our lives of good works governed by falsities. In fact it’s not that we don’t KNOW the truth, we’re just not acknowledging it in our hearts; we’re not yet seeing that our motives still need a lot of work. This is a recipe for doubt and denial: we practice the truth and live a good life, but when it doesn’t lead immediately to some personal reward we are disappointed and really struggle to maintain our faith. This is the tribulation referred to in the letter. It is the prison of wrong thinking that holds us back. In effect it’s a denial of the Lord’s love, wisdom and providence that looks to our *eternal* life. Still, if we can be “faithful unto death,” truly laying down our lives for Him, He will give us “the crown of life.”

The third letter was written to the church in Pergamos, a city not quite 20 miles inland, well north of Smyrna, perched on a high hill between two rivers. It was in an excellent defensive position and so had become a repository for great wealth. Famous for its extensive library, medical center and other public works, it nevertheless became a symbol of arrogance and moral disorder. The focus of the letter therefore is on grave temptations. Yes, they are praised for their faith and perseverance, but they are sternly warned to avoid the hypocrisy of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, to repent, and to “hear what the Spirit says.”

In effect what we have here is a big focus on good works, but it is still mixed up with idolatrous worship threatening real faith in the Lord. Again, we know the truth; we know what we need to do, but we’re inclined to think we can do it ourselves and so the conceit of self-love still lurks within and corrupts the effort. We really need to get over this, that is, overcome it, but the promise is that when we do we will be given “some of the hidden manna” and a white stone with a new name written on it, that is, real interior, spiritual good and truth and a new spiritual quality of life that only they can know. Black and white stones in ancient times were used for casting lots. Clearly the white stone represents the successful attainment of the goal of heavenly life.

We've already mentioned the fourth church, in Thyatira, but it adds interest to note that the city was renowned for its textile and bronze work – especially in the forging of battle armor. So the references to the Son of God with “eyes like a flame of fire” and “feet like fine brass” speak to this culture. The place was also a haven for esoteric teachings like Gnosticism which promoted deep, secret knowledge exclusive to the initiated, hence also the reference to *the Lord* searching hearts and minds, giving encouragement to those who have NOT known the “depths of Satan” in these cults. As noted earlier, Thyatira is praised for many things and clearly represents an advanced state of spiritual development. Maybe 150 miles inland it represents an increasingly interior state, focused on the will. Here we are beginning to address the temptations of the will and not just the understanding, recognizing the threat of Jezebel seducing us to think we can tolerate the evils in ourselves as long as we have faith. In fact, temptations of the will are the worst kind because they make us feel that we can't change; we just are the way we are – which is a real perversion, a real adulteration of the truth. Still, the Lord can help us overcome this challenge, and rule over even those feelings with a rod of iron, the power of His Word.

Sardis, the subject of the fifth letter, was at one time a very powerful and important strategic city. It had been ruined by the same earthquake that destroyed Philadelphia, but after that it never regained its prominence. So it represents a real faltering and collapse of faith and charity due, as the Writings say, to a focus on worship alone – going through the motions but not really addressing our inner life, not really shunning our evils *as sins against the Lord*. So the word to this church is, “Be watchful,” and “strengthen the things which remain,” that is, the remains of good and truth stored up from childhood that need to be drawn out and applied in the hard work of reformation. “Hold fast. Repent.” It's not that we should be fearful of the Lord, but watchful and mindful lest He should come “as a thief” and find us unprepared for the heavenly life. Such are the risks of complacency and a failure to persevere in the work of self-examination.

Finally, we come full circle to the church of Philadelphia, mentioned earlier. This, like the sixth day of creation in Genesis, is the culmination of all the work the Lord must do with us so that we can experience the happiness and peace of heaven. And the message now is pure affirmation: “See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.” “Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast to what you have, that no one may take your crown.”

Sadly, Laodicea represents the state of those who do NOT hold fast, who slip back into the pride of self-intelligence and other disorders. But even in this state the Lord can redeem us if we will buy the gold of His love and the white garments of His wisdom, that the shame of our nakedness may not be exposed, and anoint our eyes with the salve of knowledge from the Word so that we can truly understand how to live. In short, if we will “be zealous and repent” of our interior evils the Lord will offer us the throne, that is, all the power of His wisdom and His love. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” – that they may all be one, and that we may all be one in the integrity of our effort to live a truly heavenly life in the New Church which is the New Jerusalem (AR 223).

Amen.

Lessons: *Revelation* 1 (sel.) and 2 and 3, and *Apocalypse Revealed* #68: last sentence.
Children's talk comparing 6 of the 7 churches with the days of creation

For reference: *Apocalypse Revealed* #68-223 and *Apocalypse Explained* #256