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THE SEVEN CHURCHES

We began some months ago a series of articles on The Seven Messages to the Churches, of Rev. 1 to 3.

Absence from home and other reasons have hindered their continuance. We have already examined the first four, but it is suggested that we partially review these before proceeding.

We hold that the book of Revelation is a book of *symbols*. We are told that our Lord “sent and signified [made signs:: by his angel unto his servant John” (Rev. 1:1).

We know that the book abounds in symbols or signs, and we are satisfied that these are the rule, and the literal—when unavoidable—is the exception.

To be in harmony, then, with the rest of the book, “the seven churches which are in Asia” must be symbolic: and as the book is chiefly “history written beforehand,” they must also symbolize seven successive stages in the history of the Christian Church; covering the period between the first and second advent of Christ. The fulfillment, we think, proves the correctness of this position.

In the first chapter we have a description of “one like unto the Son of man,”

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as seen in a vision by John. Some one or more of the features of this description are peculiarly appropriate to each of these successive stages of the Church; and in each case he who sends the message is thus described.

The names of the churches are also characteristic, as we shall see when we come to look at them.

The last part of each message, or the promise to the “overcomers,” is also peculiarly adapted to the different periods.

To give a sort of birdseye view of the arrangement, we would notice their chronological position. *Ephesus* covers the period during the lives of the Apostles; *Smyrna* during the time of the Pagan persecution, reaching to about A.D. 323, when Constantine became sole Emperor of Rome, and

declared in favor of Christianity. *Pergamos* embraces the transition period in which the Papal Church had its rise; *Thyatira* the space during which the true Church was in the wilderness, and the mother of Harlots sat as a queen, cohabiting with the kings of the earth. Sardis takes in a short interval just before the Reformation. *Philadelphia*, from the Reformation until recent times; and *Laodicea*, the nominal Church of to-day.

Ephesus means, *first, desirable*. In this period our Lord “holdeth the seven stars in his right hand,” etc. (compare chap. 1:20). The messengers of the Churches (Paul, Peter, John, etc.) during that period were so powerfully led and kept in the grasp of the Lord Jesus that we accept their teachings as we accept his, believing that their words were really his. This Church is commended for its faithful, patient *labor*, and its discernment of truth and teachers (Acts 20:28-30, 1 Cor. 11:19). It was a characteristic of that period that “they forsook all and followed him”; they took joyfully the spoiling of their goods; they sold what they had, and gave to those in want. Though often deprived of the bread of this life, they not only had the living bread, but the promise of “*the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.*”

Smyrna means *bitter*, [*Myrrh* and *Marah* (Ex. 15:23) are kindred words.]: It was the period of most bitter persecution, under the Roman Emperors from Nero to Diocletian. “The *devil* [Pagan Rome:: *shall cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried, and ye shall have tribulation ten days*” (last and most severe persecution, A.D. 303 to A.D. 313).

Those who have read the history of this period can understand the depth of the words, “that ye may be tried.” Some of the most sublime pictures of Christian endurance that the world has ever seen were enacted during the Smyrna period.

The call was for faithfulness “*unto death*”; the promise was “*a crown of life.*” Also “*he that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*” *Pergamos* means an *earthly elevation*. The speaker is he who has “*the sharp two-edged [Greek, two-mouthed] sword*”—the Word of God. During this period, while the nominal Church was growing popular, the true Christians were tested by the introduction and development of Pagan and Papal ideas. The Pagan priests, unwilling to lose their positions of honor and influence among the people, sought to bend their theories to fit the new religion; and while nominally professing Christianity they brought many of their ideas with them; which were eventually engrafted upon the true stock. Thus the Church was led into error, evil practices, and away from God. This is what is alluded to in the reference to Balaam and Balak. Balak tempted Israel to sin, and thus brought about what he could not accomplish by his own powers (Num. 31:16). So these priests taught the Church to indulge in spiritual fornication, and thus brought upon her the withering blight of God’s wrath.

The doctrine of the Nicolaitanes seems to be the theory of lordship or headship in the Church. Nicholas means a *lord*. The strife as to who should be greatest existed among many of the Patriarchs (fathers) of the prominent churches. At their councils there was a bitter fight for supremacy. The tendency was toward an earthly head, and of course many wanted the honor. The patriarchs of Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome, were most prominent. The first two dropped out, but the strife continued several hundred years between Constantinople and Rome, and was only settled by a division of the Church: the Eastern, or Greek Church accepting the Patriarch of Constantinople for its head, and the Western, or Papal Church acknowledging the Bishop or *Pope (Father)* of Rome.

Many of the true in the churches denounced this attempt to disobey the direct command of Jesus, "Call no man Father" (Matt. 23:9), and of course received the persecution promised (2 Tim. 1:12). This class in Pergamos our Lord commends under the symbol of "Anti-pas my faithful martyr." In the Greek, *anti* means *against*, and *Papas*, *father*; so in the usual formation of words Antipas would mean an Anti-papist, one who protests against the Pope or Father.

In this age also those who sought to be popular received the emoluments of the Church, but the promise to the overcomers is of pleasure and honor that shall be eternal.

Thyatira seems to mean "The sweet perfume of a sacrifice." It was the period of the Papal persecution. The Antichrist had seated himself in the temple of God, announcing himself through his minions as "Our Lord God the Pope," ruling the nations and the churches with a rod of iron; dashing in pieces like a potter's vessel those who would not acknowledge his authority. The virgin church was enduring the hardships of the wilderness, while the harlot, reveling in her lewdness, sat on the throne of her royal paramours.

The message is sent by one who has "*eyes like a flame of fire*" to watch over his faithful ones as they wandered through the dark valleys, or hid in the darker caves of earth; and "*feet of hard brass*" to walk by their side as they scale the rugged mountains, or wander footsore and weary seeking a place to plant the seeds of truth. An allusion is made to a faithful old prophet who had to flee for his life into the wilderness from the idolatrous wife of a king. The picture is from the history of Elijah, Jezebel and Ahab. Jezebel was the protector of the priests of Baal. Her husband was king, and she wielded his power for her own ends. The drouth of three and a half years was evidently a type of the "time, times and a half"—1260 years—of the spiritual famine, "not of bread nor of water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). "*And I gave her space [chronos, time] to repent. ... And she repented not. Behold I will cast her into a bed [sleep, stupor], and them that commit adultery with her into [the] great tribulation.*" A symbolic "time" is 360 years, as the three and a half above. Her time for repentance has been, of course, since the light of the

Reformation dawned upon her. On Oct. 31st, 1517, Luther nailed his ninety-five propositions on the church door in Wittemberg. The news and light spread rapidly. Dating the beginning of this "time" from the spring of 1518, allowing the intervening months for the light to spread, 360 years bring us to the spring of 1878; when, according to the *parallels*, the announcement was made, "Your house is left unto you desolate"; and the fall of Babylon was due to begin. The "world" who supported her are also already entering the "time of trouble." *"And I will kill her children [daughters] with death."* Spiritual death is what ails the Churches of to-day. The Physician has given them up and the spiritual gangrene is surely doing its work. [See article Seven Last Plagues, by ED., 1st Plague, in this issue].

The characteristic of this Thyatira

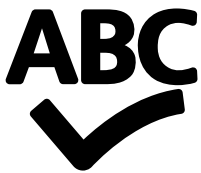
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period was the reign of the false church, therefore the promise to the overcomers is, *"To him will I give power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father."*

The false Church claimed infallibility, that she alone could interpret the Scriptures; but to the faithful is here promised not only light before the day, but the same proof of the time of night and of the dawning—*"I will give him the morning star."* W. I. M.

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— June, 1883 —



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