

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES IN REVELATION

(CP Rev 1:4, 9-11) The significance of these seven churches is that while they were actual churches which existed at that time, they are also representative of all churches in all ages (CP 2:1-7).

This is the letter to the church at Ephesus. We learn here that doctrinal and moral purity, zeal for the truth, and disciplined service is no substitute for the love for Christ which the church at Ephesus had forsaken. Jesus warned the church to repent otherwise He would remove it from its place in the kingdom of God "... *else I will come unto thee quickly, and remove thy candlestick out of His place, except thou repent.*" Only those who repent and overcome will eat of the tree of life. This admonition is for us too. Jesus' purpose in writing to the churches is to reveal their spiritual condition and outline the future events that will come upon the earth preceding, and subsequent to Christ's second coming (CP 1:19). The letters to the seven churches in Asia is a warning to both the corporate church and to every individual Christian, which they must heed in order to be saved. Christians must continually examine their beliefs and activities, and ensure that they conform to what Christ expects of His church (CP 1Cor 9:24-27; 10:12; 11:27-29; 2Cor 13:5).

It is not known who the Nicolaitans are in Rev 2:6. A great many Christians believe they were a heretical sect who compromised with the culture of the day and promoted immorality and idolatry. They were also prominent in the church at Pergamos together with Balaam (CP 2:14-15). Others however, believe that the word *Nicolaitans*, because it means "to rule over the laity, or people", is a symbolic reference to the rise of the "clergy system" in the church, which designates paid, professional full-time ministers or priests, as opposed to the rest of the church – the *laity*. This implies a system with grades of status or authority ranking one above another in the New Testament church, which is hierarchical, and totally unscriptural. However, it is more likely that doctrinal error is in view in Rev 2:6 rather than a hierarchical church system. Nicolaitans are still in the church today, professing to love Christ but compromising God's word with the corrupt world system. (CP Rev 2:8-11)

This is the letter to the church at Smyrna. We learn from this that Christians are called to suffer persecutions for Christ's sake and that those who endure to the end will receive a crown of life - the reward of everlasting life with Jesus (CP Mk 10:29-30; 13:13; Jn 16:33; Ro 5:3-5; 2Ti 3:12; Jas 1:1-4; 1Pe 4:12-13 with 2Ti 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1Pe 5:4). It does not matter what a Christian's financial status is, it matters that they remain steadfast in the faith, and faithful to God's word. If they do this, though they may be poor in material possessions, they will be spiritually rich in Christ, and that is all that matters (CP Lu 12:15-16, 22-32). *Ye shall have tribulation ten days* (Rev 2:10) symbolizes the relatively short time the Christians in Smyrna would spend in prison for their faith – it does not refer to the great tribulation, as many think. The *second death* (2:11), is a reference to the eternal damnation of sinners in the lake of fire handed down at the great white throne judgement (CP Rev 20:11-

15; 21:8). Now let us read the letter to the church at Pergamos (CP Rev 2: 12-17).

We learn from this that, although we may still believe in Jesus and not deny our faith in spite of persecution, any compromise with teaching that promotes idolatry and immorality – the doctrine of Balaam – means that we will forfeit our place in God's eternal kingdom. The two-edged sword in V12 symbolizes God's word which either cuts away sin from churches and individual members, or it cuts churches and individual members away from the eternal kingdom in judgement (CP 1:16 with Jn 12:48; He 4:12-13). Balaam was a prophet in the Old Testament who sold his services to the king of Moab – Balak – and counselled him to lure the Israelites into sexual immorality with the Moabite women, in defiance of God (CP Nu 22:1-12; 25:1-2; 31:16).

As noted in our study on the church at Ephesus it is not known who the Nicolaitans are, but they obviously promoted idolatry and immorality like Balaam, and compromised with the culture of the day in Pergamos, as they did in Ephesus (CP 2:1, 6). Nicolaitans are still in the church today. They profess to love Christ but compromise God's word with the corrupt world system. *To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna* (in V17), refers to the spiritual nourishment the bread of life – Jesus – will provide for overcomers (CP Jn 6:31-35, 47-51, 58). It is unclear what the white stones are (also in V17), or exactly what the name on each stone will be, but they are highly significant because they are the evidence that one has been accepted by God and declared worthy to receive eternal life. The *new name* written on the stone will be the new name God gives to each individual saved (CP Rev 2:18-29).

This is the letter to the church at Thyatira. We learn here that although we may abound to good works, love, service, faith, and patient endurance, it will count for nothing with Jesus if we compromise God's word in any way and engage in heathen practices. The word *fornication* is used here metaphorically of the association of heathen practices with professed Christianity. This is a form of speech common in the Old Testament. It refers to the unfaithfulness of the Jews toward God under the figure of Israel being God's wife (CP Jer 3:6-10, 14; Eze 16:15, 22-26; Hos 2:2-5; 4:12). Any unfaithfulness toward God equates with sexual immorality and unfaithfulness to one's spouse. Friendship with the world and participating in worldly pursuits is spiritual fornication (CP Jas 4:4; 1Jn 2:15-17 with Rev 14:8; 17:1-4; 18:1-3; 19:2). *That woman Jezebel* in Rev 2:20, symbolizes the seduction of Christians from the truth by false teachers in the church down through the ages. *Eating meat sacrificed to idols* violates the principle of strong Christians being sensitive to weaker Christians' needs. This symbolizes Christians being more concerned about their own self-indulgent pleasures and pursuits than the needs and concerns of fellow-Christians (CP Ro 14:1-2, 13-15, 21; 1Cor 6:12; 8:4-13; 10:13-24). *The morning star* in Rev 2:28 is a reference to Christ Himself (CP 2Pe 1:19; Rev 22:16). Jesus Himself is the ultimate reward for overcomers. They will rule and reign with Him throughout eternity (CP Rev 2:26-

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28). The next letter is to the church at Sardis (CP Rev 3:1-6).

We learn here that good works are not always a true indication of the purity of one's heart, and that Christians can never take their salvation or their faith for granted (CP Mt 6:19-20; Jn 6:27; 1Cor 10:12; 2Cor 13:5; Php 2:12-13; 1Ti 6:17-19; 2Pe 1:10-11; Jude 1:3). No one can ever lay claim to the name of Jesus without reckoning with Him for every dereliction of duty (CP Mt 7:21-27; 24:42-44; 25:13-30; Rev 16:15). Christians should never be lulled into a false sense of security because of a good reputation. "... *I will not blot his name from the book of life,*" is clear evidence that every member of the human race already has their name written in the book of life, but it is whether their names stay written in the book that counts in eternity. Only the names of those who conform to God's plan of redemption remain in the book; the rest are blotted out (CP Psa 139:13-16; Dan 12:1; Php 4:3 with Ex 32:31-34; Psa 69:28; 109:13; Rev 17:8; 20:12-15; 21:27; 22:18-19). We learn from these scriptures that everyone's name is written in the book of life from their mother's womb. They are only blotted out when men sin and incur the death penalty. Knowing that our names are already in the book of life should be incentive enough to continually examine ourselves and ensure that we keep them there (CP Rev 3:7-13).

Of the seven churches in Asia Jesus addresses in Rev 2-3, the church at Philadelphia is the only church He promises to save from the great tribulation, "... *because thou hast kept the word of my patience. I will also keep thee from the hour of temptation which shall come upon the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth*". The word *from* here means "out of". This means that Jesus is going to save everyone who belongs to the church at Philadelphia, **out of** the great tribulation. This is further evidence of a pre-tribulation rapture, which is taught throughout scripture (CP Lu 21:36). This is the first allusion to the rapture in scripture. Here Jesus tells His listeners that there is a way to escape the horrendous events of the great tribulation He was describing in Lu 21, and that is to be "accounted worthy". Those who the church at Philadelphia represents, are accounted worthy (CP 1Th 1:6-10). What Paul says here is essentially the same as what Jesus said in Lu 21:36. The tribulation is God's wrath poured out upon sinners, not saints (CP Ro 5:8-9; Eph 5:1-6; 1Th 1:10; 5:2-11; 2Pe 2:9).

These scriptures all teach that Jesus is coming back for those who belong to Him **before** God's wrath is poured out upon the earth, not at the same time as, or afterwards, as so many in the church believe. This is also proved by what Jesus said in Rev 1:19, "... *write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.*" *The things which shall be hereafter*, cannot begin until *the things which are* have been fulfilled. *The things which are* concern the church age and are addressed in Rev 2-3. *The things which shall be hereafter* have been predestined to take place after the church age and are addressed in Ch 4-22. The church is never mentioned again in scripture as being on earth after Rev 3. It has been raptured, and is represented by the twenty-four elders in heaven (CP 4:4, 9-11; 5:8-10; 19:1-4). The

twenty-four elders in these scriptures represent the raptured church in heaven. They identified themselves in Rev 5:9 as the church, redeemed to God from out of every tribe, language, people and nation in the earth (CP 5:9). *The things which shall be hereafter* include the revelation of Antichrist; the great tribulation; Christ's second coming; the battle of Armageddon and the defeat of both Antichrist and the devil; the judgment of the nations; Christ's millennial reign; the great white throne judgment; the final judgment of Satan and all the unrighteous, the creation of a new heaven and earth, and the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven to earth to be the seat of government, from which both God and Christ will rule throughout eternity. None of these things can begin until the church age in Ch 2-3 is fulfilled. The saints who are saved after Rev 3 come out of the great tribulation - they are not the church, as so many believe (CP Mt 24:9; Rev 6:9-11; 7:9-14; 17:6). They were beheaded for their witness to Christ; they would not take the mark of the beast, nor worship him (CP 13:7-8, 15-17; 14:13; 15:2-4; 20:4).

It is highly significant that the only Christians who qualify for the rapture belong to the Philadelphia church. *Philadelphia* means brotherly love; the love of brethren; love for the brethren. The New Testament stresses how Christians are to love one another, because it is only their love for each other that proves Christians' love for God, perfects His love in them, and assures them of their place in His eternal kingdom (CP 1Jn 2:10; 3:14; 4:7-21; 5:1-2). The effectiveness of God's love in Christians demonstrates itself in their love for the brethren. This is the "perfect love that casts out fear" in 1 Jn 4:18. This fear is the fear of being eternally damned. Christians in whom God's love is perfected do not have this fear - they have passed from death to life, because of their love for each other, as we learned in 1Jn 3:14, "... *we know that we have passed from death into life, because we love the brethren.*" This clearly teaches that it is only Christians' love for one another that ensures their place in God's eternal kingdom. We need to heed what these scriptures teach because they all emphasize the love Christians are to have for each other as the key to eternal life (CP Mt 22:36-40; Jn 13:34-35; Ro 12:9-10; 13:8-10; 1Cor 13:1-7; 1Pe 1:22).

Not everyone who calls Jesus Lord, will be saved (CP Psa 119:9; Pr 4:4; Mt 7:21-27; Lu 13:23-27; Ro 2:13; Jas 1:22-25; Rev 1:3; 3:14-16). Jesus has promised to save only those who have repented and overcome the evil in their midst, persevered in faith in the face of intense persecution, and love their brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of where they fellowship. They have fulfilled the New Testament law of love and are assured of their place in God's eternal kingdom (CP Mt 22:39-40; Ro 13:8-10). Now last but not least; the letter to the church at Laodicea (CP Rev 3:14-22).

We learn here that there are no such things in God's economy as lukewarm or nominal Christians (CP Mt 7:21-27; 12:30; Lu 13:23-27; Ro 2:13; Jas 1:22-25). The Laodicean church is representative of nominal Christians whose lives revolve around luxury living and accumulating material wealth and possessions, while around them souls are dying, in need of the gospel. Laodicean Christians are indifferent to spiritual things. They love everything the world

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loves: sports, television, movies – all forms of self-gratifying pleasures. Their church programmes are packaged to accommodate the culture of the world more than for worshipping Jesus. In fact, Jesus is so shut out of Laodicean Christians' lives that He has had to issue an invitation for them to fellowship with Him, "... behold I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." (Rev 3:2) The irony of this scripture is that Christians use it to lead sinners to get saved, when in fact it is addressed to Christians who need saving, themselves (CP Lu 12:35-40; Jn 14:23; 2Cor 6:14-18). Laodicean Christians see themselves as rich, increased with goods, and needing nothing, but Jesus sees them as poor, blind, wretched, miserable and naked. He counsels them not to lay up treasures for themselves on earth, but to store it up for themselves in heaven (CP Job 31:13-28). What Job says here should be the testimony of every born again believer, because one day, like Job, we will all have to give an account to God for everything we lavish on ourselves, and withhold from others.

The spiritual condition of the seven churches in Revelation is representative of the spiritual condition of all local churches down through the ages. These letters are to be interpreted as not only applying for that generation, but as having an ongoing application for all generations, including ours. Their relevance for today is what they reveal about how churches can stagnate spiritually, fall into error, accept false teaching, tolerate immorality, idolatry and heresies, lose their zeal for God and adapt to the anti-God elements of the corrupt world system. They are not hearing what the spirit is saying to them. But churches are people – Christians formed into a body, and God holds each of them individually responsible for their own salvation (CP Mt 6:19-20; Lu 13:23-27; Jn 6:27; Php 2:12-13; 1Ti 6:17-19; 2Pe 1:10-11; Jude 1:3). The letters to the seven churches is a warning to every individual Christian which they must heed in order to be saved. They must continually examine their beliefs and activities and ensure that they conform to what Christ expects of His church (CP 1Cor 9:24-27; 10:12; 11:27-29; 2Cor 13:5).