

## What is God's True Church?

*"God put all things under Christ's feet and gave him to the church as supreme Lord over all things. The church is Christ's body, the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere."*

Ephesians 1:22-23: *Good News New Testament*

### **Church of the Messiah and Jews**

**T**he use of the term "*Christian*" is unfortunate because it is based on the Greek word *christos* and hides the true application of the historic Hebrew word and description of the "*Messiah*". This would have made the true Church of Jesus properly the "*Church of the Messiah*", with its roots in the *Old Testament* prophecies, rather than the "*Church of Christ*" with its separatist connotations often mistakenly associated with the Apostle Paul in the *New Testament*. Jesus, while still alive on earth, declared: "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it*", and the Apostle Paul clearly stated "*the head of the church*

is *Christ*", but also made it clear that Jesus was the bridge between Israel and the Church and not the divider. What Jesus denounced throughout his lifetime was the Babylonian Judaism of the post-exile Jewish rabbis and not the *Pentateuch* of Moses. He declared emphatically, "I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."<sup>63</sup>

The word for "church" which Jesus used was a common Greek word, *ekklesia*, meaning "an assembly of people called together for a special purpose". It had been used in the *Old Testament* Scriptures to denote the people of Israel as a religious unit, or congregation, so the term was familiar to all Jews. It was Jesus' use of the word to designate a personal and universal entity within the kingdom of God which was new. The pictorial imagery used by Jesus to describe the "Church" provided two totally new concepts: (i) the use of the word "build" indicated *building a house*, using the word "house" in its most comprehensive sense—e.g. "the house of the Lord"—but also in its single unit sense of adding brick to brick ("living stones"), or individual to individual; and (ii) the use of the word "prevail", in the confrontation with Satan, indicated *a body of people in contest or war*. The "Church of the Messiah", therefore, would be (i) a *Mediatory Building* composed of identifiable individuals (as in a "House of Justice"); and also (ii) a *Militant Body* composed of committed activists (as in the hymn "Like a Mighty Army is the Church of God").

The *Church of the Messiah*, according to Jesus, would be the centre of moral authority and spiritual power in any community. This was enshrined in his manifesto: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." The divine principles practiced in daily living in the world and the discipline associated with their breach were the responsibilities of approved spiritual people in the Church, and not some denominational accretions from the mists of the past, academically certificated clergy, or businessmen selected from the community. The spiritual power of the church would be evident in the presence of the Messiah in even small gatherings ("For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them"); and in the perceptions of spiritual decisions of spiritual people ("If two of you on earth agree

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<sup>63</sup> Matthew 5:17

*about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven").*

Finally, Jesus made it clear that the kingdom of God was being transferred from Old Israel and given to people who would practice its principles:

*"I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."*<sup>64</sup>

But Paul did not mean permanent separation with this statement for he has made it clear in several places that a repentant Israel would also be forgiven by God, even if only a "Remnant" of the whole nation. Writing to the Roman church, composed mostly of Gentiles, he declared:

*"The Jews are God's people; he made them his sons and revealed his glory to them; he made his covenants with them and gave them God's Law; they have the true worship; they have received God's promises; they are descended from Hebrew ancestors; and Christ, as a human being, belongs to their race . . ."*<sup>65</sup>

He went on to describe their relationship with the Church as he had received it from God:

*"Some of the branches of the cultivated olive-tree have been broken off, and a branch of a wild olive-tree has been joined to it. You Gentiles are like that olive-tree, and now you share the strong spiritual life of the Jews. So then, you must not despise those who were broken off like branches. How can you be proud? You are just a branch, you don't support the roots—the roots support you."*<sup>66</sup>

With the initiation of the *Church of the Messiah* by Jesus and the Apostle Paul, blessings of the kingdom of God were transferred to a new theocracy, which would be different and more glorious than David's theocratic nation was to Saul's democratic failure. It would be Daniel's prophesied *"The sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all rulers will worship and obey Him."*

This universal aspect of the *"Church of the Messiah"* is what is emphasised in the Apostle John's *Apocalypse* with both its rewards and judgements involving the *"True Church"* in the *"Seven Churches"*, and *"Remnant Israel"* purged in a series of unfolding judgements

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew 21:43, 24:1, 28:13, 27:19

<sup>65</sup> Romans 9:4-5

<sup>66</sup> Romans 11:17-18

involving. (i) *The Messiah and the Church*; (chapters 1-3); (ii) *The Messiah and the World* (chapters 4-11); (iii) *The Messiah and Satan* (chapters 12-21); and (iv) *The Messiah and Eternity* (chapter 22).

The first four chapters of the *Apocalypse* are like the beginning of any book, with a "Contents" page and an "Introduction" before the actual events unfolded in the subsequent chapters. In Chapter 1 there is the central figure of God described in similar fashion as Daniel prophetically describes him in his vision of the last days of the world. In chapters 2-5 the "Church of the Messiah" is seen in heaven and then is not mentioned again in the *Apocalypse* until chapter 21.

In chapters 2 and 3 the "Church of the Messiah" is exclusively composed of "overcoming saints" as listed in the Seven Churches inheriting a seven-fold promised inheritance with the Messiah: (i) "to eat of the tree of life"; (ii) "not to be hurt of the second death"; (iii) "to eat of the hidden manna . . . given a white stone . . . a new name"; (iv) "given power over the nations" . . . "rule over them" . . . morning star . . . " (v) "white raiment . . . name not removed from the book of life . . . confess name . . ."; (vi) "a pillar in the temple . . . name of city of God and God's name . . . own name . . . "; (vii) "sit on Messiah's throne . . . companion and sup with him . . ."

Throughout the *Apocalypse* the Apostle John is said to be "in the Spirit" on four separate occasions: (i) in chapter 1 he is said to be in the Spirit "on the isle of Patmos", to learn about the destiny of the "overcoming" Church of the Messiah (vv 9,10); (ii) in chapter 4 he is "caught up to heaven" by the Spirit, to witness the Throne of God and Tribunal of Judgement (vv 1,2); (iii) in chapter 17 he is "carried away into the wilderness" by the Spirit, to witness the deliverance of the kingdom of God believers (v 3); and in (iv) chapter 21 he is "carried away to a great and high mountain" by the Spirit to witness the marriage ceremony of the Church of the Messiah and the conquering Ruler/Messiah (v10).

In the *Apocalypse* as in *Daniel*<sup>67</sup> God is seen as about to judge the world in seven judgements: (i) judgement on the Church; (ii) judgement on Remnant Israel believers; (iii) judgement on Jewish unbelievers; (iv) judgement on Gentile unbelievers; (v) judgement

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<sup>67</sup> Daniel 7:9ff

on Babylon; (vi) judgement on angels, and (vii) judgement on Satan. What these judgements are is described in horrific detail of escalating catastrophic divine punishments during a period of seven years, ending with the unimaginable slaughter of the final battle of Armageddon.

All of the foregoing is anticipated in the *Apocalypse* chapter 4 where God, as the prophetic "*Ancient of Days*", takes his seat on the throne in the heavens. In chapters 4 and 5 the word "*throne*" is mentioned 15 times in the 25 verses, in six segments—throne set, round about throne, out of throne, before throne, midst of throne, sat on throne—with the Messiah as "*Lamb of God*", together with all those, angelic and human, who will exercise authority with him in the ultimate purged and redeemed "*new heavens and new earth*".

Of all the unfolding historical mysteries of God, the *two mystery judgments* of the last days of the world—the "*Seven Churches*", and "*Babylon the Great*"—are the most difficult to understand. That is because, with the earlier mysteries in previous chapters of this book, we are looking backwards at them historically with knowledge of the existing contemporary circumstances; while the judgments of the last days of the *Apocalypse* are ahead and still to take place. This historical span is stated explicitly by God himself in his opening words to John: "*Write what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later*"—in other words, John's commission in the *Apocalypse* would include the unfolding purpose of God from the beginning to the end of time.

### ***The Church "Overcomers"***

The 90-year-old John was in exile on the Mediterranean island of Patmos when he received the *First Vision*. The "*Seven Churches*" mentioned in the *Vision* were not especially distinctive at the time, except in that they were geographically close to each other (and all within the north-west corner of what is now modern Turkey), and were probably churches that John had previously visited. The two most important features of the *Vision* mystery were (i) the presence of Jesus the Messiah as "*Lamb/Ruler*", and (ii) the "*overcoming believers*" reigning with him:

*“On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: ‘ Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea . . .”*<sup>68</sup>

The opening verse of John’s *Apocalypse* declares the purpose of God in giving the revelations to John:

*“The revelation of Jesus the Messiah, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw . . .”*

The word “soon” used here is unfortunate, because a more accurate meaning is “suddenly”, in the sense of something happening “swiftly” within a short period once begun, or “things which in their entirety must happen with speed”. It is the same thought expressed by Jesus some sixty years previously when he spoke of the same events “coming quickly”, or “coming swiftly”. What God was saying to John was, that at a point in time, the unfolding *Apocalypse* he was about to receive from God regarding Jesus the Messiah *would take place swiftly in sequence once begun*.

For the purpose of this particular Vision, Seven Churches were chosen by God, not because they were different from all other churches elsewhere but because they were in their seven-fold variety representative comprehensively of *what perfect churches should be despite adverse circumstances*. John probably had been to these churches, had seen the evidences of the recorded things practiced, just as he had seen the things practiced in churches in Jerusalem and other regions, and there was nothing unique about them—except their being selected by God for His apocalyptic purposes. Therefore, because they were representative of all churches at that time the prophetic significance of the Vision involving them meant that they were also representative for all time to come. Everything that was said to each church was, like all prophecies, for real and immediate application by all individuals and all churches *at that time*, but also the *near and distant future to “the end of time”*. This was in order that all churches everywhere reading the *Apocalypse* might conform to the one high standard of divine perfection, such as had been outlined previously by Paul in his several *Epistles*.

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<sup>68</sup> Revelation 1:4

Those believers who exercised the spiritual responsibilities in the post-resurrection Church of the Messiah, listed in Paul's *Epistles*, are given the special designation of "overcomers" by God in the revelation of the mystery of the Seven Churches in Asia. They were distinguished from others in local churches elsewhere by a variety of internal and external characteristics which differentiated the nature of their "born-again inheritance" from the "lesser rewards" of those with lesser aspirations and performances. This is evident by the repetition of the word and necessity of "repentance" for lowering the standard of "perfection" set by God, where the word "repent" is directed to the practices of six of the seven listed churches.

Paul wrote seven *Epistles* to the churches, followed by the seven *Epistles* to individuals; the whole corpus making a comprehensive statement of the God-ordained universal ministry of "perfection" for the Church of the Messiah committed to him by God. This ideal of perfection for the Church is reflected in the Hebrew perfect number "seven" used for the *Epistles*. In chapters 2 and 3 of the *Apocalypse* the Church is defined as exclusively composed of "overcoming saints" listed in the Seven Churches inheriting a seven-fold promised identification with the Messiah: (i) "to eat of the tree of life"; (ii) "not to be hurt of the second death"; (iii) "to eat of the hidden manna . . . given a white stone . . . a new name"; (iv) "given power over the nations" . . . "rule over them" . . . morning star . . .": (v) "white raiment . . . name not removed from the book of life . . . confess name . . ."; (vi) "a pillar in the temple . . . name of city of God and God's name . . . own name . . ."; (vii) "sit on Messiah's throne . . . companion and sup with him . . ."

These seven different attributes have defined the different attainments they have inherited in their commitment to pursue the path of perfectability to be like their Lord and Master as defined by the Apostle Peter:

*"Keep alert and set your hope completely on the reward which will be given you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Be obedient to God, and do not allow your lives to be shaped by those desires you had when you were still ignorant. Instead be holy in all that you do, just as God who called you is holy. The scripture says: 'Be holy as I am holy'".*<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> 1 Peter 1:14-16

Peter then goes on to specify what the divine virtues are by which sinful creatures can be holy as God is holy:

*“God’s divine power has provided us with everything we need to live a truly spiritual life through our knowledge of the one who called us to share in his own glory and goodness. In this way he has given to us the very great and precious gifts he promised so that by means of these you may escape from the corruption in the world and instead share in the divine nature. Add to your faith, goodness; to your goodness, knowledge; to knowledge self-control; to self-control, endurance; to endurance, godliness, to godliness, brotherly kindness; to brotherly kindness, love.”*

All of these seven virtues are within the capabilities of any individual desiring to “*be holy as God is holy*” with the help of the Spirit of God. It is this aspiration and accomplishment that makes the individual an “*overcomer*”, different in degree of commitment, and promised a commensurate share in the divine nature and holiness like God. The *Apocalypse* is a “*book of sevens*”: there are seven Visions, with the seven-fold ascription of glory to God and to the Lamb, the seven Spirits of God, the seven candlesticks, seven stars, seven lamps of fire, seven seals, seven horns and seven eyes of the Lamb, seven angels with seven trumpets, seven thunders, seven heads of the Beast and seven crowns upon those heads, seven plagues, seven vials, seven mountains and seven regencies. There are over fifty “*sevens*” in the *Apocalypse*—and seven in the Hebrew Scriptures is the number of completion, of perfection.

The *Seven Letters to the Seven Churches* all have certain emphases in common, although their respective messages are different. These are also seven-fold: (i) there is the distinctive symbol of authority introducing each message; (ii) there is the expressed personal knowledge of affairs, and the commendation of the Lord; (iii) there is the distinctive charge against each; (iv) there is the command to repent; (v) there is the threat of judgment and punishment; (vi) there is encouragement of respective aspirations; (vii) there is the promise of inheritance to the overcomers.<sup>70</sup> Within that seven-fold framework, if all the charges of the Lord God are met, repented, and overcome, the confessed believer—*and only that committed believer*—will be fit to reign with the Messiah in the Second Coming

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<sup>70</sup> Revelation 4:10

post-Armageddon administration described in John's later *Visions*. As Daniel said, in his prophecy regarding those same times:

*"Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey Him".*<sup>71</sup> (my emphasis)

There are those who interpret the "*Seven Churches*" Vision of the *Apocalypse* as seven historical dispensations of inevitable declension to follow the "*almost ideal*" *Ephesus* in the first century, and ending with the "*mediocre*" *Laodicea* in "*the last days*". It is evident that there is a progressive decline in moral character and practice from the first church, *Ephesus*, to the last church, *Laodicea*, and there are lessons to be learned from this; but historical and geographical conclusions can be ruled out because of the divinely-emphasised nature of their selection.

For example, *Ephesus* was not the "*first*" church, by any definition other than divine priority; Jerusalem and Antioch churches had greater claim to be first. *Ephesus* was popularly known at the time as "*the first city in Asia*"; but other great cities like Rome or Alexandria in Egypt, also claimed that primary distinction. Antioch in Syria was the "*first*" Gentile church after Jerusalem, and it was from there that Paul and Barnabas and others carried the gospel to the Gentile world. Therefore, it could be said that Antioch had a greater historical and geographical claim to "*Christian*" pre-eminence than *Ephesus*, especially since it was in Antioch that the term "*Christian*" was first used. *Ephesus*, although the most architecturally magnificent of the cities of Asia, and the most religiously popular, was not the most important city; Pergamos was more politically important, being the old capital of the ancient Mesopotamian kings as well as the Roman titular capital. But, because *Ephesus* had the great harbour on the coast, and dominated the central highway from Syria to Rome making it the commercial centre for the region, it had gained greater prominence

### ***The Church In Ephesus***

It was this combination of geographical accessibility, material

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<sup>71</sup> Daniel 7:26-27

success and popular religion of Diana, or Artemis, worship, which provided its importance as the first “*example*” of the “Christian-professing churches” in John’s *Apocalypse* revelation. In this set of circumstances the Ephesian church was commended by God for its rejection of overt evil, its spiritual perception, its patience under persecution, and its unique emphasis on love; or, rather, its early emphasis on love which the angel in the Ephesian church now charged them with diminishing and even forsaking. The specific charges were clear, and only two points need to be emphasized here: the first was the threat to remove the symbolic “*lampstand of witness*” from its place; and the second is that they “*hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans*”. The importance of the threat to remove the “*lampstand of witness*” from Ephesus was that it is the only time it is made to any of the Seven Churches—yet their only real fault was that the believers there had “*forsaken their first love*”. There were demonstrably greater derelictions of obedience in the other churches, yet this threat of lampstand witness removal is not made against them. In “*hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans*” this was the attempt to introduce a privileged elite of clerics distinct from laity being advocated by one named Nicholas.

We should be quite clear about this: *it is possible to have the Lampstand of priestly witness and function divinely removed from a local church for the loss of first love alone*. It does not say for apostasy, or heresy, or incest, or other sins; but for losing their first love while retaining spiritual activities of patience, high moral standards and discernment. Unless the Ephesian church repented of its wrong emphasis, and restored love to its first place, they were not worthy to be a church in the estimate of the Messiah, and he would remove their spiritual authority from them. Unless love is recognized as being the foundation of all spiritual witness in all the churches of the world, the basis of all the practice of the commandments of God; and, unless there is a recognized striving towards perfection of witness, then all else is useless and worthless in the sight of God—“*wood, hay and stubble fit only for the fire*”, as Paul said.

### *The Church In Smyrna*

Smyrna was fallen into ruins when Alexander the Great recreated the city, as he did Ephesus. It grew rapidly when the Romans expanded it as a rival of the great maritime power of Rhodes. Cicero said that Smyrna was *"the city of our most faithful and ancient allies"*; and because of this it was agreed that the new Temple to Tiberius should be built there. The city was acclaimed for the beauty of its situation and buildings, the grandeur of its streets, and its many trees. Appolonius of Tyana, the great orator, said of Smyrna,

*"Though it is the most beautiful of all cities under the sun, and makes the sea its own, and holds the fountains of Zephyrus, yet it is a greater charm to wear a crown of men than a crown of porticoes and pictures and gold beyond the standard of mankind"*.

So Smyrna was proud of its reputation as *"the crown of Asia"*. This becomes significant in the light of the words of Jesus to the church in Smyrna that, in return for their obedience and faithfulness, he would give them *"the crown of life"*—the symbol of rule with the Messiah because of the suffering to death like him. The message to the Church of the Messiah in Smyrna came from *"the First and the Last, who died and came to life again"*. The church had grown out of temptation in the midst of material wealth; and persecution, especially from Jews who followed the Alexandrian Judaism of mixed occult and numerology derived from Egyptian and Babylonian sources, and practiced by the Jewish philosopher Philo and his followers. Hence, *"the synagogue of Satan"*, which differs from *"Satan's throne"* in Pergamos. The message to them was that the persecutions were to increase even more, but only for a limited period. To those *"overcomers"* who were *"faithful unto death"* during this restricted period of intense persecution, there was promised *"the crown of life"* from the One who *"came to life again from the dead"*, and they would not be *"hurt at all by the second death"*—that is, would not be consigned to the punishment of hell-fire. To be an *"overcomer"* in Smyrna meant being faithful unto death; not necessarily being a martyr, but to strive and *"endure to the end"* under extreme persecution.

There are two words used for *"crown"*: one, *stephanos*, is the crown

awarded to the victorious athlete; and the second, *diadema*, is the crown worn by kings: both involve striving for victory in contest. There are *five crowns* mentioned in the Scriptures as being available for “*overcomers*” who strive to excel for a prize: (i) a *crown of life*, for martyrs, given personally by the risen Messiah (*Revelation 2 v 10*); (ii) a *crown of righteousness*, for a holy and righteous life by those who have longed for his appearing (*II Timothy 4 v 8*); (iii) a *crown of rejoicing*, as an award for disciplined attainment (*I Corinthians 9 v 25*); (iv) a *crown of gold*, as a symbol of royal approval (*Revelation 4 v 4*); and (v) a *crown of glory*, for those who shepherd, or care for, the congregations of the churches of the Messiah (*I Peter 5 v 4*). These are the crowns that the “*Overcoming Church’s twenty-four elders*” cast before the throne of God in heaven in worship and adoration of “*Him who sits on the throne*”<sup>72</sup>

### ***The Church In Pergamum***

Pergamum was the centre and repository of all contemporary Mesopotamian religions, gods and occultism, exported through Babylon to all other nations. It was as famous for its literature and science as Ephesus was for its religion, and Smyrna for its commerce. Its library was said to contain over two hundred thousand volumes and manuscripts. Its official name, *pergamina chartae*, was derived from the curing of sheepskins for manuscripts and parchments. Its patron deity was Aesculapius, the god of healing, and was worshipped in the form of a serpent. Pergamum was formed by the Romans into the official capital of Asia, and it was from Pergamos that the Roman Caesars took the religious title of “*Pontifex Maximus*” — used by later Popes.

Thus, Pergamum was symbolic of Satan’s earthly seat of power — the “*prince of the power of this world*” — demanding worship as well as obedience, so it was described as where “*Satan’s throne*” is located, as distinct from Smyrna, where “*Satan’s synagogue*” for demonic religious practice was found. In the midst of this gross pagan worship, comprising both ecclesiastical and imperial powers, the message from “*him who has the sharp, double-edged sword in his mouth*”, commends the church in Pergamum for remaining true to his name.

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<sup>72</sup> Revelation 4:10

However, they had two faults: they held *"the doctrine of Balaam"*, which was an opportunist combination of divination and materialism, leading the people of God astray with false conceptions of God; and they also held the pernicious *"doctrine of the Nicolaitans"* — a priestly elite associated with licentiousness and hedonism. What in Ephesus was *"deeds of the Nicolaitans"*, in Pergamum had developed into the *"doctrine of the Nicolaitans"* by priestly authority.

The divine counter to this state of affairs was to be personally evident: *"... fight against them with the sword of my mouth"*. This is a reference to the Scriptures which had been described:

*"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account".<sup>73</sup>*

The Scriptural *"overcomer"* in Pergamum is promised two things: hidden manna to eat; and a white stone, with a new name written on it. The *"hidden manna"* is an obvious reference to the *"secret"* heavenly food which was miraculously provided by God to sustain the people of Israel in the wilderness; and also refers symbolically to Jesus the Messiah, who said he was *"the Living Bread sent down from heaven"*. He will be the strength and life of the heavenly *"hidden manna"* for His overcoming companions with the hidden wisdom from God to rule with the Messiah.

The meaning of *"the white stone"* is obscure, unless it refers to the white stone of the *"Urim and Thummim"* in the ephod of Israel's high priests. The ephod pouch held a white stone and a black stone, signifying the positive and negative aspects of the will of God, when direction from God was being sought. The *"white stone"* for the overcomers in Pergamum, therefore, would be the revelation of the will of God, and the *"new and unknown name on the stone"* would be the individual's unique personal relationship with God.

### ***The Church in Thyatira***

Thyatira was a military colony, much different from the other three cities; its titular deity, *Apollo Tyrinnios*, was represented on a

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<sup>73</sup> Hebrews 4:12

horse with a battle-axe on his shoulder. Thyatira's distinctive condemnation among the Seven Churches was to be persuaded by "*the Jezebel factor*". When Jezebel was a tyrannical pagan queen in Israel, wife of the weak Jewish but Baal-worshipping King Ahab who caused Israel to sin more than any other leader, she seduced the Israeli nation into idolatry until, the Scriptures record, "*every man did that which was right in his own eyes*". The combination of demon worship, sexual malpractices and cultic idolatry comprised "*the Jezebel factor*"—an unholy alliance with pagans—and these false forms of worship, replicated as misinterpretations and malpractices of the Scriptures, are abhorrent to "*the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze*". The modern equivalent of these debased practices is in the secular ethics now permeating the churches where homosexuality is condoned, gay marriage is practiced, worship of clergy and liturgy is tolerated, and secularism is creeping Satanism. God warned them:

*"I have given her time to repent of her sins, but she does not want to turn aside from her immorality. So I will throw her on to a bed where she and those who committed adultery with her will suffer terribly . . . I will also kill all her followers, and then all the churches will know that I am the one who knows all thoughts and wishes. I will repay each one according to what he or she has done."*

God accepted no specious excuses for Thyatira, although he acknowledged "*your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first*".

None of these admirable qualities were sufficient to exonerate the believers in the church in Thyatira from blame when they were still mixed with the other Jezebel-like practices. Only those "*overcomers*" who deliberately separated themselves from the devious complexity of the Satanic deceits of representing spirits as "*angels of light*" were to know the spiritual benefits promised.

To the "*overcomers*" in Thyatira, who rejected revisionist feminist domination and satanic subversions, the Lord God said he will "*give power over the nations . . . and I will also give him the morning star*". It was said of the Messiah that he is himself "*the Bright and Morning Star*". The rising of the morning star announces the end of the long

dark night and the beginning of the dawn of a new day. Note that it does not say the "overcomers" will only *see* the morning star, but will *receive* it: that is, the "overcomers" will participate in the restoration of the Son of God's glory in association with their Lord, and subsequent millennial reign of peace and plenty ushered in by "*the Day of the Lord*" at the end of the old world.

### *The Church in Sardis*

Sardis was one of the great cities of primitive history, the capital of a powerful empire, Lydia. Herodotus, Homer and Strabo all wrote about Sardis. The legendary wealthy Croesus was the last king of Lydia. For centuries Sardis was the great, the rich, the impregnable; the focus of all ambitious conquerors from both East and West. Coins exist which are inscribed "*Sardis, the first Metropolis of Asia, Lydia and Hellenism*". It was at Sardis that Xerxes assembled his army of "*Ten Thousand Immortals*" to march against Greece in history's great Battle of Thermopylae. Sardis was built on the sheer, perpendicular slopes of the Hermes Valley, with only a single approach from the south, and so was considered to be impregnable. Yet each of its several conquerors discovered a way to breach its vaunted physical defences—and so each time it was taken by surprise.

Sardis was also "*the city of death*". Ephesus had everything good, but had a diminishing love. Smyrna was rich in goods, yet was poor in commitment. Pergamum had a few faithful believers in the midst of rampant demonism. Thyatira had good works, but also women-dominated believers. Sardis was socially alive, but spiritually dead. So Sardis historically represented an arrogant self-confidence and a catastrophic self-destruction.

When the Lord God addressed Sardis he presented himself as "*he who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars*"—symbolizing the divine majesty, insight and power that Sardis could only pathetically imitate. The Lord God warned the church in Sardis, that they suffered from the same fault as the city history: they thought they were living impregnable and thus favoured by God, not knowing they were vulnerable and that their fate was already sealed. So God told the "overcomers" to be watchful and prepared, not to be

complacent in their own works. What chiefly afflicted Sardis, however, was not the religious authoritarianism and hedonism of the Nicolaitans, nor the gender-confused activities of Thyatira, but dead ritualism, sterile orthodoxy. Because certain attitudes and actions had been satisfactory in the past, they thought, they must be good enough for the future—until sudden disaster struck. God's charges against them were:

*"I know that you have the reputation of being alive, even though you are dead! So, wake up, and strengthen what you still have before it dies completely . . . Those who win the victory will walk with me, clothed in white, and I will not remove their names from the book of life."*

The next return of the Lord to this earth will be in similar sudden fashion, he warns the representative church in Sardis—silent, unexpected and devastating. Only those "overcomers" not compromised in their beliefs and witness will be fit to walk with him in the resurrection's white garments—which elsewhere are described symbolically as "righteous acts". It is also the garment that was worn in the triumphal processions of the Romans when they celebrated victories. The writer Juvenal described the Imperial Victor's triumph in the words:

*"Add now the Imperial Eagle, raised on high,  
With golden beak, the work of majesty,  
Trumpets before, and on the left and right,  
A cavalcade of nobles, all in white".*

The spiritual "overcomers" in Sardis—and in Sardis-like circumstances of other times—were promised to be clothed similarly in God's "Day of Triumph"; and their names would not be removed from the *Book of Life*, but would be personally vouchsafed by the Lord Messiah himself before his Father and the observing angels.

### ***The Church in Philadelphia***

The city of Philadelphia derived its name from Attalus, in the second century B.C., whose loyalty and devotion to his brother, Eumenes, won him the cognomen "*Philadelphus*". The city was only about thirty miles from Sardis, and it was a cause of some

astonishment that people continued to live there because of the many earthquakes which had devastated it at times.

Philadelphia was basically a Greek church with a Jewish community in it. Both groups had to understand the significance of the divine message addressed to them. A small church, with a small and faithful witness, they were to be encouraged by the evident sign of the presence of Jesus the Messiah among them.

*"I know that you have a little power; you have followed my teaching and have been faithful to me. I have opened a door in front of you which no one can close. As for those who belong to Satan, those liars who claim that they are Jews but are not, I will make them and bow down at your feet. They will all know that I love you."*

The spiritualized Alexandrian occultic heresy would be exposed for the deceit that it was. The *"synagogue of Satan"* comprised those rabbinical Judaisers who put their *Traditions* above the words and commands of God of Moses (*"which say they are Jews but are not"*). The *"overcomers"* with Messiah-like qualities will inherit the blessings foretold by the prophets; but those with only Judaistic beliefs will inherit the same judgement as the pagan Gentiles.

Philadelphia had only a small (*"a little strength"*) but active (*"kept my word"*) church—yet it was to them that the Lord God revealed himself as *"the one who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no man can shut, and what he shuts no man can open"*. These words are part of a prophecy of Isaiah, who went on to say *"he will become a glorious throne to his Father's house"*.

To those Philadelphian *"overcomers"* who have remained obedient to the faith, even when under severe persecution, the Lord Messiah promises that he will sustain them in the predicted tribulation about to come upon the whole world as a test for all its inhabitants regarding their relationship with the Creator. To those who endure to the end there is the promised crown, reigning with the Messiah in the new heavens and new earth. The *"overcomers"* will be made *"pillars in the Temple of God"*, they will have God's Name written on them, the name of the New Jerusalem, and the Lord's own new name. The pillars of the Temple were not only for support, but were

also imprinted memorials to the respected and reputable the nearer one approached the central Sanctuary.

The “*overcomers*” are those having an intimate fellowship with the Messiah, those who are closest to this administrative centre in the future *New Jerusalem*, where they will be associates in rule with the Lord God, whose “*own new Name*” written on them clearly distinguishes them as his associates in their divinely-bestowed authority. The “*non-overcomers*” will be outside the favoured elite and without such rewards - endless regret for opportunities spurned in life. They will have received whatever rewards they merited from their meagre exercise of faith on earth, where they were content to be saved from hell, but not sufficiently enthused to strive for Messiah-like perfection in their churches and for the inheritance and glories of heaven.

### ***The Church In Laodicea***

Laodicea, with nearby Hierapolis, was known as “*the Gate of Phrygia*” because of their strategic location in the Meander Valley, and for the spectacular calcinated waters of the famous hot springs falling in great cliffs and cascades of brilliant white terraces and sky-reflecting blue pools. Before the Romans arrived, Laodicea was only a small, nondescript place; but the Romans brought their impressive network of roads, with administrative and banking systems, making it into an important junction city. Laodicea had become rich through the profits derived from these financial services, and from the exports of a widely popular black wool found only in the Laodicean and Colossian regions.

Laodicea was also the original home of the Phrygian native god, *Men Karou*, and there were famous temples to both *Men* and *Aescalupius*, the god of healing. The medicines in great demand were an ointment for the ears made from the spice nard, and one for the eyes made from Phrygian stone pounded into a powder. These were exported all over the world, and had made Laodicea famous.

The cosmopolitan character of Laodicea, derived from its financial and export systems used by many races, made it a city of compromises at every level. Jews compromised with Gentiles,

Romans compromised with Greeks, Phrygians compromised with Lydians, and so on, for mutual materialist gains.

This spirit of compromise infected the church in Laodicea so that they were *"neither cold nor hot"* in their witness—neither too Christian, nor too pagan; neither too committed nor too complacent. The anger of the Lord God—awesomely described as *"the Amen, the Faithful and True witness, the Ruler of God's creation"*—is directed against their lukewarm attitude, and he warns them to come to him for true spiritual wealth and true healing for sins. He also made it clear that such mercy and grace depends on their being willing to hear and to respond in repentance.

*"I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into his house and eat with him, and he will eat with me."*

To those *"overcomers"* in the cynical Laodicean circumstances the Messiah said he will share his Throne, in the same manner as he himself overcame in his earthly circumstances and shares his Father's Throne as Son of Man. The Thyatira *"overcomers"* had been promised *"power over nations"*, but the Laodicean *"overcomers"* are promised *"royal rule"*—to *"sit on my Throne"*. The former might be compared with Joseph, who, it is said, had authority over everything in Egypt under Pharaoh, *except the throne*, which belonged to Pharaoh alone; but the latter, like David, who *shared his royal rule* with his son, Solomon. So our Lord promises to share his royal rule with those who, like himself, suffer, are uncompromising, and eventually conquer in the cause of God.

### ***Summary of the Lessons of the Seven Churches***

As noted earlier in this chapter, these Seven Churches are not to be taken as a prophetic calendar of events put into specific and progressive time segments. They are only historical in a general backward and a forward *circumstantial* sense, and not in a sequential *dispensational* sense. Their general backward significance might be seen allegorically as: the *"tree of life"* refers backward to the Garden of Eden; the *"second death"* to the first Adam Fall; the *"hidden manna"* to Israel's desert wanderings; the *"white stone"* to the High Priest's ephod; the *"rod of iron"* to Moses' defeat of Amalek; the *"white*

*garments*“ to the Tabernacle and Temple ceremonies; the *“sitting on the throne”* to the reigns of David and Solomon.

The general forward significance is that any, or all, of the prophetic items concerning the Seven Churches will be as true of any sequential period of history to come as they are true at present of churches in places other than those specifically mentioned—which, factually, are now all Turkish ruins. They are unique in the Seven Churches of the first century AD only because they were placed in a unique set of geopolitical circumstances—many, or most, of which disappeared with time, but the spiritual significance of which will remain constant for all time.

Another important factor to keep in mind is *that there is increasing deterioration in the nature of the spiritual witness from Ephesus to Laodicea*. The virgin purity of the first century Church of the Messiah—such as was projected in Paul’s lifetime vision and goal—was already disappearing under the attacks of Satan-inspired religious Judaisers and political Romans when John visited the Seven Churches later, following Paul’s death. So one application of the *“Lessons of the Seven Churches”* is that, in the *“Last Days”*, the relative purity of the First Church Ephesus will eventually reach the deplorable conditions of the Seventh Church Laodicea—unless immediate action is taken to *“repent”* and *“overcome”*. Currently, this is evident in the spiritual deterioration of the churches in the West despite the spiritual acceleration of the churches in other continents.

Another interpretation is that, historically, the deteriorating conditions in one church will spread to others as those with self-centred interests and ambitions extend their influence. The *“Nicolaitans”* and *“Balaamites”* and *“Jezebels”*, the *“synagogue of Satan”* and *“seat of Satan”*, will all attempt to organize and dominate regions as well as churches, as happened from the second to the fifth centuries AD, until they become like *“Papal Rome”* and eventually become the integrated *“Universal Ecumenical Church”*. The divinely provided ceremonies of Moses, and the later Temple ceremonies of David, were corrupted by the Babylon-exile Scribes and the Rabbis into the unauthorised *Traditions* of Judaism denounced by Jesus, so it was not difficult to do the same with the teachings of the Messiah

into the institutional "*churchoids*" (resembling churches) of Orthodox, Roman, and Reformed witness—and their current ambitions to form a Universal Religion that will include Islam. In summary, the visible "*True Church of the Messiah*" in any village, town, city and nation is a body of believers meeting in households and streets with no organisational connection, like the 100 million "*underground churches*" in China at the present time.

All of the universal denominational integration, prophetically speaking, will take place while the organisational Church is still in the world, as the first three chapters of the *Apocalypse* makes clear. The fourth chapter opens with the words "*After these things*", and the "*Overcoming Church of the Messiah*" is shown in heaven. This event will terminate the history of the *Overcoming Church of the Messiah* on earth until after the devastations of the last days of the world when the *Overcoming Church as the True Bride of the Messiah* will return to earth to reign with him for a thousand years of peace and prosperity.

Obviously, the implication of all this is that I anticipate being one of the "overcomers", but as my death, naturally speaking, is likely to be soon and before the rapture, I will take my place with all those who "*await his (Jesus) appearing*". My anticipation when I die is that I will be like the "*poor man*", the repentant dying thief, and the Apostle Paul—in the heaven region of Hades, or Paradise.

Chapter -10 -

will be available on this site on the 1st February 2009