

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 99-27

Dear Reader

God brings out the truths and practices as to His Assembly in so many ways that we find ample material for the Newsletter from many books of the Bible. In the next five issues we will look, the Lord willing, at the first three chapters of Revelation to seek to glean important practical assembly truths from God's letters to the seven local assemblies of Asia Minor (modern western Turkey). Much of the material is summarized from the book *God's Performance Review of the Seven Churches of Asia* by R.P. Daniel, Believers Bookshelf.

We all are rated on our performance, whether by a report card in school or a performance review at work. God also gives performance reviews to local assemblies, as seen in Revelation 1-3. We'll look at these reviews.

Revelation is intentionally full of symbols or word-pictures which transcend all languages and cultures. These symbols are explained or interpreted elsewhere in the Bible. The letters to the seven assemblies are no exception.

These letters have two meanings. First, as might be expected in a prophetic book, they give a prophetic history of the professing Church from the time of the apostles (Ephesus) to shortly before the Rapture (Laodicea). The seven assemblies were divinely chosen because their internal spiritual condition in AD-95 matched the various stages of the spiritual condition of the professing Church as a whole, throughout its history. A recommended book on this aspect is *The Prophetic History of Christendom* by R.K. Campbell, Believers Bookshelf. Second, these were literal assemblies in fellowship with each other and with the apostle John when he wrote Revelation. We can learn much practical truth from what the Lord *commended* and *condemned* in their functioning.

We therefore should consider these seven letters to be direct messages from the Lord to us personally and to those local assemblies with which we express fellowship. Every local assembly contains spiritual elements, good and bad, which match at least some aspects found in each of these seven assemblies. Therefore, may these next Newsletters search our hearts and reinforce what we are doing right and help bring about changes in what we are doing wrong.

BACKGROUND REMARKS FROM REVELATION ONE

Verses 4 and 10 show that the whole book of Revelation is directed to the seven assemblies. They are greeted most kindly from the One who loves them and gave Himself for them (Eph.5:25). The Lord is the Speaker (vv.6-9); so is the Holy Spirit because we read at the end of each letter that the message is what *He* said to that local church.

The Seven Golden Lampstands

John saw seven golden lampstands (v.12) which are symbols for the seven churches. In the Tabernacle (Ex.25 and 37) the gold lampstand *held up the light* so it could shine into all the corners of the Holy Place — the place where the priests were privileged to perform their service for the Lord. Christ is the Light of the world. Today, the local assembly is the public vessel to righteously uphold the light of Christ both to believers and to the lost world, for the glory of God (Jn.1:9; 8:12; 1 Jn.1:5; Rev.21:23-24). So, the lampstands represent the local assemblies as vessels of public testimony for the glory of God. Here, each lampstand stands on its own base: *each has an individual responsibility to the Lord and can be individually removed*. Each is judged on its own merit.

John Sees the Lord Jesus in the Midst

Verses 13-16 show the extremely holy Lord Jesus, prepared to judge, *in the midst of the lampstands*. Note on a map of Asia Minor that these seven assemblies formed a rough circle. From the time of the Garden of Eden

(Gen.3:8-10) onward, God has desired to be in the midst of His people (Mt.18:20). However, the Lord *must* discern and approve or disapprove what His people are doing, both as individuals and in their church-associations. The golden girdle about His chest (v.13) indicates the affections of Christ constrained by His righteousness. The Lord does not support the idea of displayed affection regardless of whether the person or assembly is sinning. The Lord's white head (v.14) indicates *maturity of judgment*, while His eyes as a flame of fire indicate a *discernment and judgment of sin* wherever He sees it. Brass always speaks of judgment. When He discerns the state of His local assemblies (Rev.2:1), His purity doesn't allow any excuse from those found sinning (v.15). His voice should be heard above all the multitude of worldly and satanic voices vying for our attention today.

A sharp two-edged sword (v.16) goes out from His mouth. "The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God" (Eph.6:17). The Word of God cuts: it discerns even the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb.4:12). With the Lord there is an *exact* discernment of everything. We can't fool God! Are we deceiving ourselves?

The Seven Stars; The Angels of the Assemblies (v.20)

In His right hand, the hand of power and authority, are seen *seven stars*. God defines the stars to mean the "angels of the seven churches." Stars are heavenly objects. The persons referred to as *stars* are heavenly minded. They have their eyes on Christ. Stars shine. These people should be shining for Christ. Stars shine subordinate to the sun, which speaks of Christ (Mal.4:2). Thus, the "stars" of each of these seven assemblies were those persons in each assembly who had the God-given place of responsibility, the vessels of light through whom He chose to act on the collective conscience of the local church. They were leaders. See issue 98-15 on *elders*.

Since the stars are the angels (v.20), the expression *angel* should confirm the meaning of the symbol *stars*. *Angel* means *messenger* or *representative*. We are not to think of these angels as spirit-beings sent from God to watch over each assembly, but in a *symbolic* sense. Rather, they are persons directly connected with each local assembly whom God uses as messengers to touch the assembly's conscience — the spiritual element in the assembly.

The Key to the Timing of Revelation

Verse 19 gives the timing for the whole book of Revelation. There are three main divisions: the things which *you have seen*, the things which *are*, and the things which will take place *after these things* (JND). In chapter 1, we have the things which John had already seen. In chapters 2 and 3 — our current study — we have the history of the professing Church on earth. "The things that are" of John's day (about AD 95) are *still* our things as we approach the year 2000. The Church is still going on. Then, in chapter 4:1, we have the significant expression "After these things ..." and immediately we see John and symbolically the Church caught up to heaven.

THE PROPHETIC STANDPOINT

We will briefly cover the prophetic aspect of Revelation 2 and 3. *Ephesus* pictures the Church in its energy for the Lord at the time John wrote. But there was internal decline: they had left "first love" (Christ being their all). *Smyrna* pictures the Church under Roman Empire persecution from shortly after John wrote, up to about 330 AD, the time of the Roman emperor Constantine. Then Christianity became the state religion. *Pergamos* represents the further decline when the world and the professing Church came together, making Christianity an *easy* religion.

The decline that resulted from Pergamos led to *Thyatira*, the Church in the Dark Ages (500-1500) under Roman Catholic domination. Most truths of Christianity were lost during this time. Out of Thyatira came the Reformation of the 1500's. The main truth rediscovered was that "the just shall live by faith" (Hab.2:4; Rom.1:17; Gal.3:11; Heb.10:38), and the Bible was printed for the first time. But the Reformation degenerated into state-churches and other denominations with much the same type of outward ceremony as Rome, but with more truth. *Sardis* pictures this decline from about the 1500's to the 1800's.

Then in the early 1800's, God opened up His Word like it hadn't been opened for over 1300 years. The Bible was

studied and proclaimed somewhat like in the days of the apostles. The Headship of Christ and other truths of the Lord's true Church were rediscovered and put into practice by many. The truth of the Rapture (1 Thes.4:13-18, etc) before the Tribulation judgments of Matthew 24, also was rediscovered. This revival was a wonderful mercy of God which we still benefit from. The local assembly at *Philadelphia* represents this condition. The name means "brotherly love."

Satan attacks everything that is of God. In *Laodicea* we see the sad decline of the Church just before the Lord returns — the time in which we live. Laodicea means *peoples' rights*. Even among Christians, the "me-generation" is growing. Today, its too often *my* rights, not *God's* rights. Christians have much truth available, but little *commitment* to that truth. This condition of Laodicea will end with the Rapture of all true believers to heaven, while millions of mere professing Christians will be left on earth to await the judgments to follow.

Nothing today specifically relates to the first three assemblies. But we see the *continuing condition* of the final four. *Thyatira* continues with the Roman Catholic Church; *Sardis* continues with the protestant "state churches." *Philadelphia* continues wherever Christians desire to meet according to divine truths, to the Lord's name. *Laodicea*, being the final condition of lukewarmness where God's rights are given up, although professing to maintain those rights, brings us to the Rapture. Laodicean conditions are seen everywhere in Christianity.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR WHAT FOLLOWS

Imagine yourself gathered with fellow-believers in some building. Suddenly, the door opens and in walks the Man described in Revelation 1. A pin-drop can be heard. Every eye is riveted on Him. He walks into your midst and looks each one in the eye and each feels that his or her innermost self is known. Suddenly, He speaks! "I know your works." You *know* He knows! For those who prefer worldly pleasure and materialism to the things of Christ, or for those who harbor resentments or hidden sins, beads of perspiration are evident. The room seems very warm. He says, "I have against you." Then He says, "You have persevered." The performance review of your local church has begun: it's *your* performance review too!

THE LORD'S REVIEW OF THE ASSEMBLY AT EPHESUS: Please read Revelation 2:1-7

Ephesus means *one desire* or *full-purposed*. Paul wrote some of the highest truths found in the Bible to the Ephesian assembly, declaring the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), but now it is about 35 years later. There still was a functioning local assembly in Ephesus, even though from 2 Timothy 1:15, there probably had been a major defection in that assembly by about AD 67.

The Lord reminded the Ephesian assembly that He held *His* servants in that assembly in His right hand, the hand of power or authority. They are under the authority of the One who restrains and sustains them (v.1). The Lord also reminded the Ephesians (and all assemblies) that He walks from assembly to assembly to carefully observe their conduct and attitude. He is within the circle of assemblies because He loves to be among His people.

The Lord knows ... and He keeps a record (v.2)! With Ephesus, knowing their works was generally a *commendation* because the Ephesians generally had that "one desire" to serve their Lord. There was no wrong doctrine that needed correction, and their works pleased the Lord. And they *labored*; they worked hard at it. It wasn't 80% for self and 20% for the Lord ... if it was convenient to give Him that much! They were interested in eternal matters. Further, they *persevered* (v.3). They didn't quit when the going got tough. Do we quit?

The Ephesian assembly wouldn't fellowship with evil-doers (v.3). There also were imposters. The Ephesians put them to the test of God's Word: they refused to simply accept man's claim. There were many false prophets, some even claiming apostleship (2 Cor.11:13, 26; Mt.24:24). While many Christians would never claim apostolic authority, some pridefully consider themselves "*the* spiritual man" in their local assembly and think they must approve all points of doctrine and practice. Ephesus rejected all such claims. God will make the truth of any matter plain. Ephesus was careful and God appreciated it. The Ephesians didn't *spare* the sinning persons. While not trying to offend, we are responsible to God and to other believers to call sin "sin" and to act against it.

The Lord's name stands for all He is personally. Also, His name is intimately connected with all He expects of His Church, which is so important to Him (Eph.5:23-32). After all, it's *His* Church! We are to gather "to His name" (Mt.18:20). The Ephesians worked hard (*persevered*) and *endured* to simply obey the Lord's Word and to maintain His rights in all that was associated with His name (v.3). The Lord appreciated this and noted it in His performance review. Isn't it nice to know He both knows and cares?

Sometimes one gets tired of the spiritual warfare necessary to maintain the truth. We *are* in a spiritual warfare (Eph.6:10-18; 1 Tim.6:12; Jude 3). Yet it's easy to retreat from the front lines and let the battle go on without us. But God's way is for us to *constantly* have on that full armor of Ephesians 6 and *win* the battle or at least hold the line against the enemy's attack. The Ephesians were doing this; they had not become *weary* of the battle (v.3).

Nevertheless I Have This Against You, That You Have Left Your First Love (v.4)

The Lord always tells the whole truth. It's easy to *commend*, but more difficult to *reprove*, and sometimes we won't confront the real problem. The Ephesians had a problem and the Lord refused to ignore it. Ruin begins *within*, and with the basics. The word *first* as used here has the thought of order of priority or importance. *Christ* was no longer the entire motive for what they were doing. This is the beginning of all departure! How could this be true of the Ephesians after all the good things said about them? As an example, our material possessions can become an end in themselves. When this happens, spiritual coldness sets in, slowly at first, then more rapidly.

Remember Therefore from Where You Have Fallen; Repent and Do the First Works (v.5)

God desires us to turn back to Christ. We need to remember the freshness when *He* was everything to us. Such remembrance will produce a longing for Christ. Then we will *want* to take the necessary steps to get back to Him. There needs to be humiliation, confession, repentance. What will we do? God told Ephesus that a change in *practice* was required. *Christ*-works were needed — those works which are spiritually produced when Christ is everything to us. Is lack of first-love seen among us ... in the lack of participation, in the empty seats, in where we are instead, in what we are doing, in what we talk about, in our attitudes concerning our brethren in Christ?

Remove Your Lampstand ... But This You Have (vv.5-6)

The local assembly is supposed to be the public lightbearer for Christ in this dark world of sin, while the Sun of Righteousness (Mal.4:2) is absent. If that light grows dim, the Lord threatens to remove that local assembly as a place of testimony in this world. Many once-prosperous assemblies have ceased to function; others are dying.

After so solemn a warning, lest discouragement and inaction set in, the Lord returns to commendation. He said they *hated* the deeds of the *nicolaitans* which I also hate (v.6). We covered this portion in detail in issue 97-8 so we will just refresh your memory here. We are to hate some *things* (not people) because God hates them. In some cases we aren't to be easy-going, conciliatory or tolerant. The word *nicolaitan* is untranslated Greek from *nikao* (to conquer, prevail) and *laos* (people). *The Lord hated the works of those who were attempting to become the spiritual superiors to the common people — to conquer the "laity" as the average Christian is called today.* This is today's clergy-class, but no such class is found in the New Testament!

He Who Has an Ear, Let Him Hear What the Spirit Says to the Churches: The Overcomer (v.7)

We all have physical ears, but that's not the point here. Worldly Christians *can* hear, but don't want to. Self-occupation and materialism overpower God's quiet voice. It's amazing how people can sit through powerful ministry on their most blatant problem (which is so plain to everyone else) and seem to be unaffected or even more resistant to change. Are *we* the same way? Not if our spiritual ears are open!

The overcomer isn't some special breed of Christian: all are overcomers to a greater or lesser degree (1 Jn.5:4). "I will grant to eat of the *tree of life* which is in the paradise of God." The fruit of the tree of life in the Garden

of Eden (Gen.2:9) was to sustain Adam and Eve and their descendants forever, but they sinned, and God drove them from the Garden. Christ is *our* Tree of Life and we will enjoy and be sustained by Him forever. That Tree is to be enjoyed in the Paradise of God (Rev.22:2), in heaven (2 Cor.12:2-4). The many wonders of Christ will satisfy us for eternity. We will never tire of Him. What a wonderful future awaits us!

RPD