

From a vantage point of longevity certain changes in my thoughts and understanding are noticed, which in the short haul are virtually imperceptible. One of those changes is a soul-drawing to the Book of the Revelation, particularly the letters to the seven *ekklesia*¹.

In the early 80s, because of a steady diet of the Word, I began to suspect there was something wrong with the old denomination of which we had been a part for many years. As time and circumstances evolved, we were squeezed out of that one, only to have spiritual highs and lows for the next 7 years (an interesting number...) in a variety of groups from neo-charismatic, full gospel to oh-so-proper non-denominational. After an event in 1992 we found ourselves “out” of all large gatherings known as ‘churches’.

As spiritual serenity began to settle on this East Texas ranch, I began to “see” we indeed had been in the Laodicean ‘church’ with all its variations of bells and whistles. The trappings and airs began to be all too recognizable as I began to be drawn to the seven letters to the seven *ekklesia*. Here in this carelessly trodden book of the Revelation were hidden nuggets of gold. Thus came the sense I had left Laodicea and “fit” in Philadelphia.

Now in this particular group were people like me; one day I heard Jesus (a rarity) addressing me as “knowing my works”, unqualified, nothing more; no chiding, no praise, no nothing; just that He knew my works. Additionally, He had given me an ‘open door’, and made a point of saying I had little power, I had kept His Word and not denied His name. All these rang true, causing the “fit”. Moreover, I had kept His word (command) of patient endurance to the circumstances around us. All was this fine and good.

Realizing this transfer, as it were, from Laodicea backwards/upwards to Philadelphia, it dawned on me there were also five more groups ‘backwards’ in the Word, if you will. Ephesus was at the beginning of the seven, where Jesus was their ‘first love’. But here I was in Philadelphia, some five positions away from Ephesus, with no experience as to what ‘first love’ might be. Since I had departed the group at Laodicea to the one in Philadelphia, was there indeed a possibility of moving even further ‘backwards’ (or upwards) to and through the other five? Was there indeed a regression within the seven?

The Book of the Revelation has several levels of meaning², all the way from the letters being written to physical *ekklesia* in Asia Minor, to having ancillary meanings to groups within various other (prophetical) time frames, and lastly being applicable to individuals in their separate walks. You may picture these as physical, mental and spiritual realms if you wish and be correct. As such, this brief paper is intended only to be a beginning probe into the subject matter, namely the spiritual levels relative to Christ.

¹ The “called out ones”. The ‘church’ building itself had no existence prior to 325 A.D. by Constantine. I Cor. 12:12, the *ekklesia* is the organic body of Christ, the corporate Christ. It is a spiritual organism, not an institution, much less a building; hence His hatred of the Nicolaitans, the organizers/destroyers. The word ‘church’ was **invented** during the pre-Catholic regnum. See www.aggressivechristianity.net.

² Dake, Finis, *Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible*, Dake Bible Sales, Inc., pg. 287, note c.1.

From Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, it is one thing to be completely out of the picture of Grace, as was the character Christian; it is quite another to be yanked by the hair of one's head, once there. Such was the case with the attendees of the *ekklesia* at Ephesus. Now if one assumes Ephesus represents the time/spiritual frame closest to Jesus Himself, whether in time or space, then Ephesus *prior* to the reprimand should be our ultimate model. Conversely, the behavior of the group at Laodecia would be *the* one to avoid.

For our study we find two models from which we may gain some insight. One is the pattern from secular history³ itself, wherein most civilizations in the process of disintegration (in such are we) undergo a three pairs and a half series of rout-rally/rout-rally/rout rally/rout, the final rout being the death-blow to the civilization. (The event of 9/11 would be classified as a rout, occupying Iraq a rally.) The number seven speaks of completion and fulfillment.

The second is the pattern illustrated by the nation of Israel during the time of the Judges. Here Israel repeatedly endured short-lived periods of blessing and prosperity, then a falling away, winding up in the throes of God's judgment into slavery, crying out to Him. He then granted deliverance from their enemies, returning them into a time of blessing and prosperity. They would fall away again, only to repeat the sequence again seven times. Unger⁴ makes the comment, "They seemed incapable of grasping the idea of a Divine and invisible King", a theme addressed well in the book of Hebrews. This rings all too true of today's mentality regarding an actual relationship with God, particularly those who deny the spiritual, whether angels, demons or the Holy Spirit.

Both of these examples have symmetry to them⁵, whereby "there are seven apostasies, seven servitudes, and seven deliverances." Unger continues, "there is a parallel in church history, ...in the rising of sects and the forfeited sense of unity in the Holy Spirit." Indeed such is the case not only with us today, but the eventual decline in most *bonafide* movements of the last 1900 years, and early in the seven *ekklesia* of the Revelation.

- What do the descriptions and oscillations of these in-and-out, up-and-down, apostasy-deliverance, sunny-and-dark, positive-and-negative letters mean?
- How indeed does Satan invade our privileged domains and turn our Sunshine into a place of darkness where Jesus must correct, chasten and reprimand us?
- Are there sign markers along the way that alert us to this invasion?

There are certain characteristics within the seven letters worth noting. These would be the **nature of declension** from one to the next. In this **nature** seem to be hints of how Satan invades our inner sanctum. By default, usually through our own affections, or ignorantly, we are carried progressively into destructive behavior. Jesus' central issue(s) against them and the severity of His reprimand are included for clarity.

³ Toynbee, A.J., *Study of History*, 1947, Oxford University Press, New York.

⁴ Unger, Merrill, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 1957, Moody press.

⁵ Unger, Merrill, op. cit. Nos.1 &7, 2 & 6, 3 & 5, no. 4, middle.

Let us compare the despicable condition of the Laodicean group with those of Ephesus. Laodicea's 'faults', being rich and prosperous and in need of nothing, are in the physical realm.⁶ But Jesus says instead they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked, all nominally physical terms, but His meaning is obviously figurative, intended to apply to the spiritual realm. Jesus simply exposes the spiritual conditions underlying their physical states.

On the one hand is this Laodicean condition and on the other Ephesus, who at one time had been in love with Jesus and all for which He stood. Though Jesus severely reprimands them for leaving their first love (for Him), He does commend them for what they **are** doing right, namely:

their works,
their patience,
not tolerating evil men,
their trying of false apostles,
having borne (trials),
labored and not fainted.
hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans (organizers, institutions, hierarchies,
instigators of levels of power and influence).

Wow! This is one impressive list. Ephesus has in all ten commendations; the next highest list is Thyatira with five, one a duplicate. Laodicea has *none*.

But let me examine myself:

Works ?	- I take care of my family, tithe and go to the nursing home and play dominoes; big whoop...
Patience?	- about as long as my finger.
Tolerating evil men?	- I usually wind up making them feel at home.
Trying of false 'apostles'	- see how far that gets you.
Borne trials	- a hangnail is about as bad as it gets.
Labored and not fainted	- somewhat, until I break a sweat.
Hating the deeds of Nicolaitans	- ah, this I do with vigor !

So I get one of seven- that's a failing grade in anybody's class. Throw in loving Him above anything else, and I'm toast.

⁶ *These attributes are ominously similar to today's neo-charismatic 'churches' that emphasize, choreograph and cater to the physical five senses. These are the "buttons" the leaders have learned to push. This is accomplished almost imperceptibly in the typical service designed to appeal to the sensual; seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling. The Romanist hierarchy and her "protestant" offspring are little different. The physical objects delivered to the masses consisting of motions and sensual perceptions are substitutes for the spiritual (amusement/entertainment if you will). Most never notice their entire lives being robbed of spiritual food nor experience Christ for themselves. The Word says the flesh is of no avail. The old 'organized' churches are equally as blasphemous, just in a different expression, works.*

Now I can pontificate *ad nauseum* about the positive and negative characteristics of the remaining four, but I trust the reader gets the message. We can list the habits for which Jesus praises the remaining four. That will emphasize the point, namely, how far from the mark we find ourselves, relative to Jesus' expectations. These are:

- Number 2, **Smyrna**: works, tribulation, poverty (but rich), blasphemed, encouraged not to fear, be faithful in tribulation, to be given a crown of life.
- Number 3, **Pergamos** works, dwelling where Satan dwells, holding fast His name, not denied the faith.
- Number 4, **Thyatira** works, charity, service, faith, patience, more works.
- Number 5, **Sardis** strengthen the things that are on the point of death. Not a single good trait.
- Number 6, **P'delphia** knows their works (?), given an open door (?), aware of little power, kept His Word, not denied Him, kept His command of patient endurance.

(A comment here re: 'works'; as I understand it, these 'works' are those things done for Christ, in His name, and for His recognition. They are **not** those efforts that elevate the individual)

We see from this brief outline the things He considers important. We also begin to see His love for us, and the necessity to guide and correct. Of the positive, I find myself lacking nearly all, even in part. But I suspect I am about to learn some...

Let us now look at those things which He considers offensive.

- Ephesus: leaving their first love (for Him)
- Smyrna: no reprimands
- Pergamos: have them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, which is:
- eating things sacrificed to idols
- committing fornication
- those that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans
- Thyatira: you suffer (tolerate) Jezebel who is teaching them to:
- commit fornication
- eat food offered to idols
- Sardis: He has not found their (dead) works satisfactory
- Philadelphia: no reprimands
- Laodicea: lukewarm, (pitiful) works, wretched, miserable, poor, blind, naked.

In addition to the symmetry, we see two items that are repeated in two groups, eating food offered to idols and committing fornication. These letters are: 1. physical, 2. prophetic, and 3, individual (figurative to our own spiritual walk). One can "eat" in several ways, such as 'digesting' evil sounds, pictures, carriage, personalities, celebrities and their evil doctrines.

Additionally, one can commit fornication, figuratively, with any of the above as well as with anything *verbal* that is evil according to the Word (politics, doctrines, false religions, organizations, even intellect). In Roget's Thesaurus, the word fornication is included in a package of words dealing with Moral Practice and Affections. It is associated with other words such as impurity, carnality, dissipation and defilement. It requires a state of being intimate, to join, to be as one. All of these metaphors in the spiritual sense mean the same thing; to be as one, to be intimate. In other words to agree, to assent, to accept, to be joined with another's illegitimate doctrines, beliefs, and actions that are contrary to what the Word says. **This is fornicating.** Hiding behind a strictly physical (or intellectual) interpretation of 'fornicating' or 'idolatry' to absolve ourselves of condemnation is as cowardly as one can get. No wonder we are worthy of little else than to be spewed out of His mouth.

A third thing that is repeated is the issue of the Nicolaitans, a group already asserting themselves in the first century to organize and to create a hierarchy within each group. This essentially removed Jesus out of the picture as being **LORD** of all the activities, direction, thoughts and plans of the group. The word *ekklesia* connotes this 'gathering concept, headed by **the** LORD. The word "church" does not. The whole concept and air of meeting (in buildings) became man-centered, with a select few being exalted. This implicitly, if not explicitly, sent a message of some knowing more than the others, always being in front. Religious writers in the second and third centuries began to expound and spread this 'different gospel'.

Howbeit did the Holy Spirit all of a sudden quit giving understanding and insight to the other individuals ?

When did one man get so anointed he alone had 'the Word' to give to everyone else?
- every week?

After 1800 years of this tradition, the pew warmers do not think themselves smart enough to hear the Spirit, or able to read the scriptures for themselves. Alas, little opportunity is afforded them to share with the rest of the Body what they had experienced or heard, if anything at all. Now some of this is due to the wants of the people themselves, being easier to 'leave it to the leaders', and hide behind the fellow in the pew in front. But most is due to sheer ignorance and blind carelessness. As Viola⁷, Edwards⁸ and others have commented, this format and structure has made the Body of Christ spiritually sterile and impotent, unable to reproduce the works of Christ.

Now to a final point, and that is how Satan enters our sanctuary and leads us downward into perdition. Essentially it is **through our thought processes.** The evil path begins via a single initial thought, commonly at the boundary of our experience where we are poorly prepared to examine things marginal. If it is not challenged and processed by the Word as being true or false, the (evil) thought then develops progressively down the wrong path into an argument, eventually into a stronghold.

⁷ Viola, Frank, *Pagan Christianity*, 2008, Barna, (Tyndale Publishing) Highly recommended.

⁸ Edwards, Gene, *Revolution.*

An argument, high thing, or obstacle exalting itself against the lordship of Christ is a thought bolstered by associated affirming thoughts, forming a center point surrounded by a fence of supportive elements.

The other common foyer for Satan to enter is the polar opposite to our experiential boundaries. This entry point is **where we pride ourselves the most**. Common examples are physical attributes such as looks, height, charm, sexuality, hair, social poise, military training, and so forth. Others might be the ability to orate, debate, reason, persuade, intellectualize, level of education, IQ, etc.

Once either of these this patterns form, it case-hardens, becoming a wall, creating what is known in II Corinthians as a stronghold⁹. From this tier of error a support group usually forms, all with similar ideas. One of the premier characteristics of this process is that the idea “sounds good” to the ears, emotions, intellect, current worldly views, pride or ego.

This process is what happened in the case of the Nicolaitans, which put forth the idea of having order in the local group, namely a leader, with associated helpers of lesser but nonetheless superior positions to the common folk. This sounded good to the laity, for it removed the burden of individual obedience and responsibility.¹⁰ (See footnote 4.) Such was the case of the Israelites when they wanted a king in Samuel’s day, or the Israelites under Moses’ direction. We are no different today depending on a “pastor” to “lead” us, rather than experience Jesus for ourselves, or (gasp) examine the Word to get direction.

Applying the above to the issue at hand of the seven *ekklesia*, we find all of the faults and errors for which they were reprimanded by Jesus, could and should have been checked by the Word. Such is the case for us today. All the roots for the reprimands are in the Book. The sign markers proving we have fallen from our high position are all there in black and white. Basically the roots of those markers are those thoughts we failed to take captive to Jesus’ obedience. But, most of us do not even know what the Word says about issues, sicknesses, nor troubles that affect us every day. So we fall for Satan’s deception formulated to our IQ, emotions, traditions, strongholds, affections, and/or perceived strengths.

From whence have I fallen?

- until a few years ago, I did not know I had even fallen. That’s how far away I was. Maybe there is still time, hopefully a measure of Grace remaining to begin a climb. At least I can stem the falling.....

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⁹ II Cor. 10:4-5

¹⁰ This is largely the reason for the acceptance of the mode of presentation of the typical “church” service.