

Revelation - Commentaries by Alfred Henry Burton

Christian Truth: Volume 35, Smyrna (2:8-11)

Revelation 2:8-11

We have here a very special period of Church history. It may be called the persecution period. Taking the history of the Church as a whole, it covers about the first two centuries. During that time, under the Roman emperors, persecution constantly broke out, inflicted not by professed Christians, as happened later on, but by the heathen world.

The Lord reveals Himself here to His tried and persecuted people in a character that was specially calculated to sustain and strengthen their faith.

"These things says the first and the last, who became dead, and lived" (that is, after having died). J.N.D. Trans.

Deep and important truths which are constantly Satan's point of attack are wrapped up briefly in these words. In the first place, He who speaks is none other than God, for of God only can it be said that He is First and Last; God is unaffected by all time limits, and is beyond, as even He was before, all that pertains to time, whether it be prisons, persecution, or even death itself.

But more, He who here speaks, our adorable Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, was Man as truly as He was God-He "became dead." This was one of the reasons for which He took part of flesh and blood- He "was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death." Heb. 2:9. But He was risen from the dead-He "became dead, and lived." How large the circle of truth contained in this short passage! The deity of Christ, the humanity of Christ, the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ. Glorious, amazing truths which may well bow the soul in worship, and sustain in danger's hour.

"I know thy tribulation and thy poverty; but thou art rich." J.N.D. Trans.

In the first place, it is to be observed that in this address to Smyrna there is nothing to condemn, no leaving of first love drawing forth a call to repentance. Persecution may limit the number of outward disciples, but it likewise induces intense reality in those who are true. There is no playing at being Christians when the fires of martyrdom are being lighted. It must be one thing or the other, but no neutrality, no half-and-half confession.

On the other hand, days of persecution are not days of great activity in Christian work; hence, in these addresses, "works" are left out. At Ephesus there were many works, but first love was wanting. At Smyrna hearts beat true to Christ, but "works" were not in any prominence. They were a poor and afflicted people, despised by the world, no doubt, and poor in the eyes of men, but in God's sight how rich!

But not only was there persecution from without, there were dangers within. The Judaizer's were at work in the midst of the assembly. This had been a source of trouble even when the apostles were alive. The epistle to the Galatians furnishes an inspired antidote to their pernicious teaching. Very early came the effort to destroy the peace and liberty brought in through grace, and based upon the accomplished redemption at Calvary; but apostolic power was present to keep this in check (see Acts 15). No sooner, however, had the apostles been removed than these Judaizer's began to form themselves into a compact body.

"I know... the railing of those who say that they themselves are Jews, and are not, but a synagogue of Satan." J.N.D. Trans.

This that began so early has spread and spread to such an extent that it almost characterizes the whole Church. For we must remember that while each of the seven assemblies portrays successive stages, yet seeds of evil once implanted take permanent root.

In Smyrna we cannot say that those Judaizer's characterized the whole Church. There was the beginning of a system, small at first but rapidly to increase, which soon swamped the whole in legal bondage.

Are not masses of even true children of God today practically on Jewish ground? They are put under the law by their very religious exercises, and those who never were intended by God to be so are kept constantly groping in bondage and darkness. The sacerdotal and clerical system in vogue today is but a revival of Judaism. Here in Smyrna we see its commencement as a system- the formation of a party, a persecuting party, a veritable synagogue of Satan.

"Fear nothing of what thou art about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days." J.N.D. Trans.

Dark days are in store. There were gathering clouds of trial and persecution. And yet by all this God was accomplishing His purposes of grace toward His people, recovering them from that fatal torpor of waning first love.

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give to thee the crown of life." J.N.D. Trans.

Martyrdom in some cases would take place. How graciously the Lord prepares His people for the coming storm! Sufferings they would have, imprisonment, too, all the malice of Satan let loose upon them, even a martyr's death-but, if so, they would have the martyr's crown, the crown of life. This was a special reward for faithfulness amid special circumstances of tribulation, and this reward will be bestowed upon

multitudes who in after years, whether in the Middle Ages or more recently, have laid down their lives for Christ.

The promise to the overcomer in this case was of a special kind, and most suited to the martyr period.

"He that overcomes shall in no wise be injured of the second death." J.N.D. Trans.

Here we get the assurance in the very strongest language that death in its final form as the judgment of God would never be theirs. The unbelieving sinner who dies must die twice, and the second death will be his final doom-not extinction, not annihilation, but the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). But for the saint it will never be so. He may pass through tribulation, but the period is limited-"ten days"-it will not be the endless tribulation of the ungodly.

How comforting while passing through times of suffering for Christ's sake, to know that all is in God's hands, and even though persecuted, His people are never forsaken. How brightly the crown of life will shine on many a brow that now lies cold in death! How near a place will the crowd of martyrs have to Him who became dead but lives! What a special link will exist, and that forever, between Him who died in love to us, and those who have been actually and in their bodies conformed to His death! We shall not grudge them their special recompense.

Christian's Library: Volume 7, Brief Notes on the Seven Churches. (3:1-6)

SARDIS.

It is important to observe, that while it is true that the principles set forth in the seven Churches may be found at any particular time, yet, as the coming of Christ is mentioned in one way or other in the last four, it is evident that these states go on concurrently till the end of the Church's history on earth. We have already seen the gross corruption and evil of the Middle Ages rise to its height in Thyatira, but in Sardis we find quite a different state of things. There is a kind of new start; it is no longer gross evil, but formality without life — a name to live, but dead.

The Lord Jesus is before us here as "He that hath the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." It is not exactly the same as in Ephesus, "He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand," where all was still in its order before Him: nevertheless, although disorder and gross evil had come into the Church, He has all power and the fullness of the Spirit; there is therefore a complete resource in Him. The dark ages had passed away, though the principles and the system of Romanism which characterized that period still remained, and will remain till the end; the light of the Reformation had dawned, and a new responsibility attached to the Church as having received from God fresh light and truth. This is a most important point to consider, because God always holds both the Church and the individual responsible up to the light He gives. The Reformation work was truly a work of God, though mixed up with human failure and worldly motives in some cases, yet a work for which we ought to be deeply and everlastingly thankful. The power of the sacramental system, which had conferred such immense authority on the clergy, interposing themselves more and more between God and the soul, was now to a great extent broken. Men were brought once more into direct dealing with God and His Word. Sacerdotal tyranny was shaken off. The value and efficacy of the work of Christ, justification by faith instead of by works, the authority of the Word of God instead of the Church — these and other blessed truths were once more brought to light. But, as soon as the first energy of the Spirit which produced these great results, and enabled many witnesses to lay down their lives for Christ and the true gospel, had passed away, the Church relapsed into a worldly, formal state. Instead of turning to God and His Word, they fell back on the secular power as a resource in setting right the disorder which had come in.

As time went on Protestantism failed in separation from the world; indeed it never had been truly separate. It failed also in not going on in the energy of faith in dependence on God. They had got clear of a vast amount of Romish corruption, they had a name to live, but, alas! there was spiritual death.

We may find an analogy to this in the case of the restored remnant of the Jews brought back from Babylon. They had given up idolatry and much of the grosser forms of evil; but as soon as the first energy, which was manifested in the rebuilding of the temple and the city, had faded away, they relapsed into a dead, formal state, and remained so till the Lord came.

If we consider the perplexed state of the Churches in the present day in view of the advance of Ritualism, Higher Criticism, &c., is it not true that a great part of the efforts to combat these evils are in reality an attempt to meet a carnal system with carnal weapons? There is not the turning to God in a spirit of true and humble dependence on Him; hence the powerlessness to meet Satan's artifices effectually. In Sardis even "the things which remain" were "ready to die"; such was the withering effect of want of spiritual energy and dependence on worldly resources for power. "Remember," He says, "how thou hast received and heard; and hold fast and repent." They had received much, and God always calls back to the original place of blessing, to the starting-point from which the Church has declined. Then again, "If, therefore, thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." What a solemn way His coming is here presented! It is not as the hope and privilege of the Church calling forth the ready response, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus"; but it is just the way He will come upon the unbelieving world in judgment, as we read in 1 Thessalonians 5, "But ye are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief." A thief is an unwelcome visitor, and he does not give notice of his coming; he comes when least expected. How solemn this is, considering the light and truth they had received; but such is the result of failure to go on in the energy of faith, and of the Church finding its resources in the world and from the world.

Nevertheless there was a remnant — a few in Sardis who had not fallen into the general state of deadness and worldliness which marked the Church as a whole, and the Lord says, "They shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy." To him that overcomes the reward is that he "shall be clothed in white raiment," which typifies, as we are told elsewhere, the practical righteousness of saints — just the contrast to being defiled by worldly associations; also, "I will not blot out his name out of the Book of Life." The "Book of Life" here takes in all who profess to be Christians; it is taken from the idea of a general register of names: those who were real and who had witnessed for Him amidst the professing mass, would not be blotted out. This is more negative, but then there is the positive side, too, in the reward to the overcomer who

confessed Him down here. Christ Himself would confess his name before His Father and before His Father's angels.

Christian's Library: Volume 7, Philadelphia. (3:7-13)

THERE are two Churches against which no word of reproach is spoken by the Lord — Smyrna, where we find persecution and poverty; and Philadelphia, which was marked by weakness but faithfulness to Christ.

A state of spiritual death, as we have just seen, characterized Sardis; and this state, as that of the last four more particularly, goes on till the end. The Lord does not present Himself in so much of a judicial character to the Church at Philadelphia as to some of the others, but rather in quite a new way and in a most personal manner. He is the Holy One and the True One. Holiness in His nature, as well as in separation from all the defilements around, ever distinguished our blessed Lord. Then, again, He was "the truth": and all His ways were marked by truth. The Father's word, which was the written or oral expression of the truth ("Thy word is truth") governed His whole life, so that all His ways and actions manifested the truth in this world. The Church should be the reflex of Christ down here; she should maintain the light and truth of God, not only in doctrine but in practice, in the world. The Lord says, "I know thy works," but adds nothing more about them except to say that He knows them; for this Church was not distinguished by any remarkable zeal or energy as some were. Nevertheless it is blessed to realize that He knows and estimates truly all that is really done for and to Himself; and He can say, "Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My word, and hast not denied My name." The word "My" occurs eight times in the address to Philadelphia; it shows how closely Christ Himself is identified with those who are true to Him. It was, in fact, just what was perfectly exemplified in Him; for He perfectly manifested the Father's word, and He ever faithfully witnessed to the Father's name. If unholiness in practice or unsoundness in doctrine is allowed or sanctioned in any Assembly of Christians, it cannot be said that they keep Christ's word and do not deny His name, for it is altogether incompatible with His title as the Holy and the True.

Speaking historically what answers to the Church state here described, is to be found, doubtless, in the remarkable revival of long-lost truth and light which took place at the early part of the last century. Now, one thing which was then brought out prominently was Christ Himself, what He is in Himself in all the various relationships in which He is seen in the Scripture, whether with Israel or with His Church. It was not so much abstract doctrines or truths, important as these are in their place, but the truth in its connection with Christ Himself. This is most important, because truth can only retain its vital power and freshness in the soul, and service and testimony can only be maintained in the measure in which Christ fills the heart.

It is a sure sign of weakness and failure in an Assembly to get occupied with itself instead of with Christ; and it is ever Satan's aim to divert the eye from Him, either to ourselves or our Church position, or our service, or something else. However, there is much to encourage in what the Lord says to this Church: it is "He that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth and no man openeth." All power and all authority is in His hands, and He can use it, even on behalf of those who have but "little strength." We need to practically realize this, that when He opens, none can shut. This is most encouraging, and, moreover, it casts us entirely on Him. But there is the solemn side also: when He shuts, none can open. And so He says, "I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." It was just what was true of Christ, "to Him the porter openeth"; God, by His Spirit, in His governmental ways, so overruled all that transpired in this world, that His purposes of grace might be worked out in the whole service, both in life and in death, of our blessed Lord. Here, the Lord holds open the door, and no power either of men or devils can shut it. It is most essential that we should learn wherein the true source of power lies, in an evil day. It is not in showy gifts or eloquence or display before the eyes of men; it is in that spirit of humble dependence and obedience, that conscious weakness which casts us over entirely upon Him as our resource. It is only as the eye is single, as Christ is the only and undivided object before the soul, as we learn our own weakness and His all-sufficiency in the secret of His presence, that we shall be enabled to keep an even course amidst the shoals and quicksand's which the reasonings of the mind of man and Satan's craft have cast along our way.

It is remarkable that we find in the address to this Church, reference is made to the working of the same evil principle of Judaism which we have already noticed in Smyrna. Just about the very same year as the Spirit of God was first bringing out in a most manifest way many precious truths long lost to the Church, Satan had his counter-movement in what is commonly known as Ritualism and the Oxford movement. The roots of this system of subjection to ordinances, sacraments, and the teachings of men must be sought at a very early period in the Church's history. It is spoken of in the message to Smyrna as "the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan." It was again revived concurrently with the state described in Philadelphia, where we read of "them of the synagogue of Satan which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie." These would be forced to acknowledge that the Lord did indeed love those feeble witnesses to whom, in grace, He had confided His truth, and who had kept His word and not denied His name.

Then He says, "Because thou hast kept the word of My patience." What is meant by keeping the word of His patience? In chapter 1. we find "the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ," and in 2 Thessalonians 3. "the patience of Christ" (margin). Christ loves His people too much to leave them always here, and so He is coming to take them to Himself. He has not sat upon His own throne yet, but upon His Father's throne; but He waits — waits patiently until that moment when, according to the Father's will, He will arise and shout that quickening word which will transform these bodies of humiliation into the likeness of His body of glory. Now, it is as though He said, "I want you to be participating in My patience." We know also that the long-suffering of our God is salvation; He is extending the day of grace to sinners. And in grace the Lord answers to this waiting attitude, for He says, "I also will keep thee out of the hour of trial, which is about to come upon the whole habitable world, to try them who dwell on the earth." It is well known that this latter phrase — dwellers on earth — does not mean merely people who live in this world; it is often used in the Revelation to designate those whose interests, hopes, &c., are settled and rooted in this world, and who have no portion in heavenly things. For all such there is an hour of trial coming — what shape or form it may take we do not know, but it is coming. This is not the same as the "great tribulation" of which our Lord speaks (Matt. 24:21), which is confined more especially to the land of Judea; it is over the "whole habitable world." Those who kept the word of His patience would be kept from (literally "out of") this hour of trial — and how? The whole context shows that it is by His taking them to Himself. They are seen as patiently waiting for a heavenly Christ; their interests and hopes are in heaven, instead of being rooted and settled on earth; and so He takes them to heaven before the judgment falls on the earth.

“Behold, I come quickly,” He says. Four times in the Revelation we find Him thus presented — it is personal — it is Christ who is coming, and that without delay. Meantime there is the solemn word of warning, needed or it would not be there, “hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.” No mental power, no knowledge of truth even, or of the letter of Scripture, can enable us to “hold fast” in the face of all the craft and subtlety of Satan and the deceitfulness of the heart. Nothing but that true humble dependence and obedience, that feeding on the Word of God which characterized our Lord Himself, can preserve the soul in the face of all that is around, so well calculated either to seduce or to turn us aside from the attitude and the hopes proper to the Christian.

The promise to the overcomer here answers to the state of the Church. They had little strength, but they had faithfulness to Christ, and so He says, “I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God.” A pillar is the emblem of stability and strength — it is as much as to say, “If you have stood for Me, however feebly, in the face of opposition down here, I will make you an immovable pillar up there. If they had not denied His name here, He would write upon them” the name of My God.” Note here how He identifies His people with Himself; it is “My God.” If they were surrounded by those of the synagogue of Satan, false judaizers, He says, “I will write upon him... the name of the city of My God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from My God.”

In chapter 21. we have the description of “the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.” Her origin, her character, and all that distinguishes her is heavenly, in contrast with the false, professing worldly Church, the “synagogue of Satan,” which merges into “Babylon” later on. Here the overcomer is identified with that which is adorned with the glory and the presence of God, and which is essentially of a heavenly character. And then the Lord adds the word, “My new name.” He has various names linked with His personal and official place, but His title as Redeemer specially belongs to Him as the One who has passed through death into the glory from whence He came. It is this new and heavenly title with which He identifies the overcomer here.

F. G. B.

Christian's Library: Volume 7, Laodicea. (3:14-22)

THE last phase of the professing Church on earth is, perhaps, the most solemn of all. It is not marked by that gross corruption which we see in Thyatira, where Jezebel was as a teacher and instructor in evil; nor is it distinguished by lifeless formality as in Sardis: it is neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm. Indifference to Christ and His claims, and boastfulness of its own prosperity and knowledge, characterize this Church. We have just seen that the state at Philadelphia was marked by a little strength, yet faithfulness to Christ — a keeping His word and not denying His name. Laodicea is a complete contrast; they were lukewarm. This would lead one to think that once things had been different; but they had cooled down — they were not either cold or hot. Nothing is more nauseous to Christ than indifference. There was also an utter lack of a consciousness of their true state — thou “knowest not” that thou art wretched, &c. We may find a state somewhat similar in the condition of the Jews which preceded the first coming of Christ, as shown in the prophet Malachi. There was departure from God, insensibility as to His love and claims, yet they took the place of being the true people of God, and having all the privileges of that place.

The aspect in which the Lord presents Himself to this Church is very instructive, and it comes in particularly suitably when the professing Assembly had utterly failed as a true testimony for God on the earth. He is the Amen. In Christ all the promises of God are Yea, and in Him Amen (2 Cor. 1:20). The Church had failed as a witness; yes, all had failed as committed to the first man in responsibility; but all will be made good and effectuated in the Person of the second Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. If everything connected with man, with the first creation, is found in a state of departure from God; if the Church, which really belongs to the new creation, has not been true to her position, He is the beginning, the source and origin, as well as the Head of the new creation — the creation of God. Along with indifference and lukewarmness there goes pride and self-complacency. Nothing conduces to this state of things more than a great amount of truth or doctrine held in a cold intellectual way, and which, not being kept connected with Christ Himself in the experience of the soul, has lost its living power and freshness. Truth learned in the soul, in the heart and conscience, in communion with God, always humbles, because we see in the light of His presence how little we practically enter into it and carry it out in practice — where intellectual knowledge, on the other hand, puffs up and fosters pride and boastfulness. It is a bad sign to see the Church occupied with herself and speaking of herself “thou sayest I am rich,” &c., instead of being occupied with Him, and learning in the presence of the Lord what it is to be a subject of grace and a debtor to Him for everything we possess.

In truth, they lacked everything, for they were “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked;” and yet they knew it not, they felt it not! Is there not much of this in the spirit of indifference to what is due to Christ, linked with pride in spiritual things, as it often is in the present day? It is the spirit which pervades Christendom, and it is on the increase. This Church lacked in everything which was most essential — gold, divine righteousness before God; white raiment, practical righteousness in our walk before men; eye-salve, to discern their own real state as well as what was due to Christ. What a sad condition! Then there is the call to repentance; and if the Lord rebukes and chastens, it is in love and for their blessing. Even here Christ does not give the Church up till the very last. He is outside, knocking at the door; but He makes the appeal, and if any man hears His voice and opens the door, He is ready in His infinite grace to “sup with him and he with Me.” It recalls the grace and forbearance, yea the longings of God’s heart after Israel: “How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee, Israel? How shall I make thee as Admah? How shall I set thee as Zeboim? Mine heart is turned within Me, My repenting’s are kindled together” (Hos. 11:8). His grace still lingered over them, as He does with His unfaithful Church; and He is ready to come in and to have intimacy and fellowship with any who open the door to Him. To the overcomer — the one who did not succumb to the general state of lukewarmness and indifference — He holds out the reward of sitting with Him on His throne, as He also overcame, and sat down with His Father on His throne. This promise, though it is by no means the highest of the rewards to the overcomer in the Churches, is truly the giving of a place of wonderful privilege, and an expression of the riches of divine grace.

These charges to the seven Churches give us, therefore, in the addresses to seven Assemblies which actually existed in Asia Minor, a complete outline of the history of the Church from the beginning to the end. The whole picture is portrayed with the most perfect accuracy, and a perfect knowledge of the true condition of each phase of the history of the professing Church on earth. The instruction given in this portion of Scripture is most important and essential for all true Christians who desire to learn God’s mind, and so to be kept in the midst of all

the snares and difficulties around, whilst waiting for the Son from heaven, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come. F. G. B.

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