

A Call To Arms

By Jim Rector

It is quite interesting that the book of Revelation, chock full, as it is, of such strange and mysterious prophetic symbols, should actually commence with a series of short, seemingly simple letters to seven churches in Asia Minor.

The apostle John writes in Revelation 1:10 that he was "in the Spirit on (or in) the Lord's day." Since this final book of the Bible concerns itself almost exclusively with great world-shaking religious and political events destined to occur at the end of this present age, it seems highly unlikely that John is here referring to a particular day of the week. Numerous commentators have assumed that this phrase must indicate the first day of the week, but this conclusion is totally illogical, even ludicrous.

The time setting of this enigmatic book is not a Sunday or any other weekday. It is the LORD'S DAY, or as the Scriptures so often bear out - the great and terrible DAY OF THE LORD!! This often difficult book coordinates perfectly with so many of the detailed and otherwise inexplicable prophecies of the Old Testament, virtually all of which describe or point toward a coming time in the future known as the "Day of the Lord" - that momentous period when Almighty God will openly and actively take a direct hand in the affairs of man, intervening dramatically and sending His Son back to this earth to put down all rebellion, banish Satan the devil and establish the long promised and awaited Kingdom of God. It is to this great series of events that the book of Revelation most eloquently speaks.

The letters to the seven churches found in chapters two and three have always posed a problem for Bible scholars. Why are they even in such a book in the first place? Is there a reason for them being positioned at the beginning of the book? Perhaps, most significantly, are they meant to be understood in a typical or symbolic manner, and if so, precisely how? And finally, is it possible that these seven letters, like many other areas of prophetic Scripture, could have a dual or maybe even multiple interpretations and applications?

I realize that, for the most part, the churches addressed in the letters have been taken as a representation of the historical Church through the ages, from the first century (Ephesus) until the return of Christ (Philadelphia and Laodicea). This paper is, in no way, intended to counter that argument. I do, however, feel that the letters open themselves up to more than one explanation. Since the setting is latter day, and the prophecy itself is futuristic in its fulfillment, it only stands to reason that the address to the seven churches could easily be symbolic not only of the historical Church, but also of the end-time Church itself. I believe that this may be so and, if correct, then the seven letters should take on an increased personal significance for all of God's people today. The Messiah Himself, speaking in the first person, begins by saying, "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last*" (Rev. 1:11). John then turns to see Him standing in the midst of seven candlesticks with seven stars in His right hand. The interpretation of these symbols is given in verse 20 as follows:

"The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches; and the seven candlesticks which you saw are the seven churches"(Rev. 1:20).

It seems perfectly clear to me that Christ is telling us through John that this important book is being written about events that will transpire and affect the world at the end of the age, and that it is the latter-day Church of God that must be made acutely aware of what is contained in this lengthy prophecy. In other words, when John begins, in chapter 2, with the letters, he may well have been addressing, not primarily the physical congregations of his own day, nor even primarily the historical Church, but the Church of God that would be extant when these great end-time events actually unfold on the world scene.

I am aware that a number of possible explanations exist concerning these letters. I am not necessarily opposed to any of them. It is likely, in fact, that I subscribe to several. I have no problem with the fact that there are other interpretations, because this is often the way the Word of God is written and intended to be viewed. I do, however, wish to take a look at the letters from a latter day perspective. I believe that we can gain a great deal of insight into what God has foreseen would be the conditions and problems facing the end-time Church. Indeed, taking these seven churches to be representative of the Church of God in the last days seems to me to be far more in line with the subject matter and time setting of the whole book. Without getting into long quotations, here is a brief summary of the major points raised in each letter:

EPHESUS: This church had left its FIRST LOVE. This was the overwhelming problem facing its members. To its credit, however, this church refused to follow those who were claiming to be apostles, and had proved them to be liars and false prophets. This church also hated the wicked deeds of the "Nicolaitans," whom we will notice again in the letter to Pergamos.

SMYRNA: It is noteworthy that this particular church was given no direct correction by Christ. It had good works. It was poor. It was persecuted by those who claimed to be JEWS, but were not. Satan was active in casting some of the members into prison. This Church was predicted to have tribulation for 10 days.

PREGAMOS: The church at Pergamos was the location of SATAN'S SEAT. There was some persecution, even martyrdom occurring there, but the two major problems facing this group were the deceptive and oppressive doctrines of the NICOLAITANS and of BALAAM.

THYATIRA: This church had good works, love, faith and patience, with their latter accomplishments exceeding their former. So this church rebounded spiritually. But there were grave problems in Thyatira, namely JEZEBEL! This false prophetess was seducing and deceiving the church and misleading the members, causing some of them to commit fornication.

SARDIS: Here we have a church that was quite imperfect - greatly flawed, in fact - having a name, but no real spiritual power - possibly even near death! The members were not being diligent and watchful and, as a consequence, many of the previous good things were being eroded away and destroyed.

PHILADELPHIA: This is the good church, with absolutely no criticism being leveled by Christ. This church had been strong, not denying His name. They had suffered at the hands of the SYNAGOGUE OF SATAN. They were not, of themselves, powerful, but they were patient and faithful. Consequently, they were promised protection during the time of great trial and tribulation to come. They are the only group promised this kind of special security.

LAODICEA: Finally, the end of the line - perhaps the worst church of all - lukewarm and proud, vain and spiritually blind. This church stood in great jeopardy of being utterly rejected by Christ, and must be greatly tried and purged to purify and strengthen it.

These seven little first century church congregations on the old Roman mail route in Asia Minor are of immensely more significance than their relative obscurity would seem to indicate. The Saviour specifically had John direct the grand finale of the entire inspired Scripture to these particular churches - because they were to stand forever as types of the Church as a whole - historically and, most especially, the end-time Church of God - the Church of God TODAY!

I believe that if we just allow each of these letters to speak to us, we can learn crucial facts, indeed even profound lessons, concerning the Church in the latter days. These letters reveal the major spiritual problems and tendencies of the end-time Church, as well as certain other important aspects that are applicable to our present situation. Notice carefully therefore what Christ says to the Church of today.

THE PROBLEMS

A thorough reading of Revelation 2 and 3 discloses a pattern of problems that Christ predicted would face the end-time Church. As we delve into each category, please do not consider this study merely some sort of intellectual exercise, perhaps interesting, but nothing to get too excited about! This proclivity itself is, in fact, one of the chief characteristics of the Church today - its lack of zeal and desire, an unwillingness to be stirred and moved to repentance, to action, to real commitment and involvement! It is a shame and a tragedy. The letters to the seven churches detail the problems that we, you and I face at this very moment. The information, though nearly 2000 years old, is utterly VITAL AND PRICELESS, so please approach this study with some seriousness and focus.

A. LOSING ONE'S FIRST LOVE

The churches both at Ephesus and Sardis, as well as Laodicea, all were charged with this grievous sin. What does it really mean to lose one's first love? Is it one of the significant identifying signs of the end-time Church? Do we recognize it within our midst today?

Although these letters refer to serious spiritual matters, I find it most intriguing that Christ chose the words "first love," because this phrase certainly has a particular human connotation -that of a love between a man and woman. When two people are in love, at what point in the relationship would that love normally be at its most passionate, its most self sacrificing state? Isn't the answer obvious? It would almost always be at the beginning. In fact, many a couple has longed to somehow recapture that seemingly magical time when they first met and fell madly in love. Well, believe it or not, the very same principle holds true in the Spirit.

When a person is first called by God and led to repentance and baptism, he or she is usually ecstatic, caught up in the excitement of God's Word, basking in the many revelations of truth, the opportunity of meeting brethren of like mind, etc. Do you recall your own former days when your spiritual love was hot and passionate? Do you remember how you would do virtually anything to please God, pull out all the stops to serve, allow no hurdle or barrier to inhibit you? In those days, you always found time to study the Scriptures diligently and you were excited over discovering new gems of spiritual truth. And when you prayed, you did so fervently and God heard you and answered often. Your zeal was perhaps at a fever pitch. Your desire to fellowship with God's people was insatiable - you just couldn't get enough! Your level of commitment and involvement was probably at an all time high.

Ah, those were the days! That was the blush of your first spiritual love, and that feeling of intimacy and closeness, of intensity, focus and urgency, that return to the first works is precisely what God desires from each one of His children today. This very problem, one of growing tired and lethargic, of losing the zip and steam, of taking God, His truth and the Church for granted, of allowing things to just gradually slip away, is the first and perhaps the foremost identifying characteristic of the latter day Church

Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews, put the brethren in mind of their own former love and zeal by saying: *"Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times, you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. SO DO NOT THROW AWAY YOUR CONFIDENCE; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised. For in just a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved" (Heb. 10:32-39).*

Does any of this sound familiar? It should. There was a time when many, if not all of us, would have literally given our lives for the sake of Christ, so great was our faith and enthusiasm, so fervent was our zeal. We would have willingly endured anything, suffered all for the glory of God. But somehow those things tend to slip away, do they not? As we settle down into the routine of life in the Church, we begin to fall into the carnal patterns of life so that the routine puts us to sleep, the fire dies down and our relationship with God begins to cool off. Paul warns us to remember that first love and RECAPTURE IT!

We can learn so much from studying the Old Testament and the classic example of ancient Israel. We must recall that the Lord or Yahweh of the Old Testament was actually married to the nation of Israel, but something happened. His beautiful bride LEFT HER FIRST LOVE! In a most poignant recollection of that painful departure, God says: *"I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of the harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them...What fault did your fathers find in Me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves"(Jer. 2:2-5).*

Yes, unfaithful Israel let the former things slip away too. The fire went out, the magic in her passionate relationship with God vanished. In an especially moving passage of Scripture, God laments:

"Then I passed by and saw you kicking in your own blood, and as you lay there in your own blood, I said unto you, Live!...Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of My garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord, and you became mine. I bathed you with water (Holy Spirit) and washed the blood (sin) from

you and put ointments on you. I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals (peace) on you. I dressed you in fine linen (righteousness) and covered you with costly garments. I adorned you with jewelry (character - gold, silver, precious stones);

I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck...But you TRUSTED IN YOUR BEAUTY and used your fame to become a (spiritual) prostitute...you did not REMEMBER THE DAYS OF YOUR YOUTH (first love)... So I stretched out My hand against you" (Ezek. 16:6-26).

What caused Israel to lose her first love? God gave her such a magnificent start in life. He was the perfect husband. What went wrong? The answer is simple and it relates directly to our own spiritual relationship as well. Israel began to take her beauty, her blessings, her high standing and special calling for granted! As this subtle change occurred, the priceless value of God's precious things began to lose their luster. She started trusting in herself more than in God and that led to her becoming a friend and, increasingly, a lover to the world around her - and as a consequence, the fire of her love for God subsided. It was gradual. She probably never really was that aware of the erosion taking place. All along, she thought that she was pleasing God - but to no avail!

Brethren, do you see the clear and present parallels for spiritual Israel today? When Christ wrote the Ephesian church that they had left their first love, He Himself was recalling the bitter days of old, when physical Israel fell out of love with Him and He was forced to divorce her. And He is insisting that this same situation not be allowed to continue in the Church, especially and primarily the Church of God today!

He desperately wants His people today to see just how far afield they have strayed and return to Him with great repentance and fervor. What kind of attitude is really missing in so much of the visible Church today? The kind King David had when he wrote:

"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul THIRSTS for God, for the living God" (Psa. 42:1-2).

We must search and seek for God just like someone dying in a desert searches for water. If we don't, we will surely perish. We must DESIRE our God and His ways, His mind and His righteousness. You have to ask yourself - Just how much do I truly want to be like God? The prophet Isaiah once wrote:

"Yea, in the way of your judgments, O Lord, have we waited for you; the desire of our soul is to your name, and to the remembrance of you. With my soul have I desired you in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek you early...O Lord (Yahweh) our God, other lords beside you have had dominion over us; but by you only will we make mention of your name" (Isa. 26:8-9, 13).

Almighty God is calling His chosen people today - calling them BACK! - back to the flame, back to a rekindled spiritual love affair with Himself!! He wants zeal, He wants repentance and He wants complete and total submission and dedication of our lives to Him and His urgent work. David, once again, conveys perfectly what God deeply wants from each of us today:

"O God, you are my God; early will I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see your power and your glory, so as I have seen you in the sanctuary. Because your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise you. Thus will I bless you while I live; I will lift up my hands in your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the night watches. Because you have been my help, therefore in the shadow of your wings will I rejoice. My soul follows hard after you; your right hand upholds me" (Psa. 63:1-8).

I urge all who call themselves members of God's Church to seriously consider your own personal relationship with God. Is it real? Is it genuine? Is it intimate and close like that of a young bride for her husband? Is it growing and being profoundly nourished? Is it really bearing spiritual fruit? Is it truly pleasing to God Himself? Go before your Creator and examine yourself. Do as David did and call upon God to "search you and try you." Don't give up until you get the answers to all these pertinent questions. You have to know precisely where you stand with God. Most people simply make the same old assumptions - confusing their connection with a particular church group or organization with a real, powerful one-on-one affiliation with God the Father. If you or I do not have a strong sense of where we truly stand with God, then we will begin a gradual downhill slide, and before we even realize it, we will be in deep spiritual trouble.

Do not, I plead with you, permit the error of ancient Israel or of the church at Ephesus or Sardis to creep into your life and into what should be your special relationship with God and His Son. NOW is the time to assess your stance, your position, your standing with God - and to really do something about it. Please consider the strong warning that Christ gave the Church in this first letter.

B. THE DOCTRINE OF BALAAM

In the letter to Pergamos, the Messiah spoke of something called "the doctrine of Balaam." In Revelation 2:14, we read:

"But I have a few things against you, because you have there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication."

One of the most enigmatic individuals in all of Scripture is a man by the name of Balaam. The Biblical narrative is found in Numbers 22-24. While the entire episode is quite interesting and well worth your personal study, I will simply summarize the events and go straight to the spiritual implications involved.

Balaam was a heathen diviner, a Midianite, who was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse his enemy Israel after their stunning military success against the Amorites. Balaam's fame preceded him and it had gone to his head. He had become conceited and covetous. Three times Balaam attempted to curse Israel, only to be thwarted by God and forced to pronounce only blessings, going so far as to even utter a Messianic prophecy (Number 24:17)!

Moses later accused Balaam of teaching King Balak to corrupt the people of Israel. He could not successfully curse them, so he sought to lure them into fornication with the Moabite prostitutes (Num. 31:15-16). The seer was eventually slain in battle when he sided with the losing cause of the Midianites.

What then exactly is the "way of Balaam" or the "doctrine of Balaam" to which the New Testament refers? In II Peter 2:15, we read: *"Those which have forsaken the right way and are gone astray, following the WAY OF BALAAM, the son of Bosor, who LOVED THE WAGES OF UNRIGHTEOUSNESS."*

It is not too difficult to figure out just what this "way of Balaam" really is, if we will just take a look at the context of the passage in II Peter 2. Verse 15, quoted above, comes at the conclusion of a longer discourse that Peter commenced by saying:

"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be FALSE TEACHERS AMONG YOU (the Church!)...And MANY shall follow their pernicious ways (Gk. 'lascivious'); by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoke of. And through COVETOUSNESS shall they with FEIGNED WORDS MAKE MERCHANDISE OF YOU" (II Pet. 2:1-3).

The Living Bible renders verse 3 in such clear, unmistakable common vernacular that I think it appropriate to also quote it here:

"These teachers in their GREED will tell you anything to GET HOLD OF YOUR MONEY."!!! These are false teachers and leaders of the true Church of God who were predicted to be in the END-TIME CHURCH! Verse 2 states that many will be led astray by their "pernicious ways." This word should best be rendered "lascivious," as most manuscripts read. The word "lascivious" means "filthy and wanton," and has a strong connotation of sexual impropriety. It is said that because of such sins among these church leaders that the way of truth will suffer - in other words, the preaching of the gospel will be brought into disrepute in the eyes of outsiders because of the wickedness of these false teachers.

Are your eyes open to the END-TIME IMPLICATIONS of this passage? Do you know some among the so-called leadership of God's people who are guilty of such grievous sins? I do, and I quite imagine that you do as well! Even the very mention of their names can immediately put the true Church in a bad light in the eyes of many. Almighty God HATES such sins and will not tolerate them forever! Church leaders who are guilty of hidden (and not so hidden!) sexual sins, among other wrongdoings, need desperately to profoundly repent of the dirty sins they ASSUME have been neatly swept under the carpet. Don't they know that God sees everything and cannot be duped? He will not be mocked nor will He forget.

These very false leaders of whom Peter writes are the same those who have the "error of Balaam" in verse 15. They are the ones who have been covetous - who have desired the easy, comfortable life that money can provide. And so

they have become the typical HIRELING, commercializing the gift of God - preaching for money and power and influence and purposes of ego. And they never get enough. Their appetites are insatiable! Truly Christ was right when he said:

"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep (how many sharp-dressed Church leaders would do this?). But that is an HIRELING (a paid man) and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches them, and scatters the sheep. The hireling flees, because he is an hireling and cares not for the sheep" (John 10:11-13).

Jude, the brother of Christ and one of the original apostles also characterized these same false leaders by saying:

"Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, 'and exhort you that you should EARNESTLY CONTEND for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into LASCIVIOUSNESS (a license to disobey, by compromising and watering down the truth!)... Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and RAN GREEDILY AFTER THE ERROR OF BALAAM FOR REWARD, and perished in the gainsaying of Core" (Jude 3-4, 11).

These men are those who follow the principle mentioned by Paul in his first letter to Timothy, "Who think that Godliness is a means to FINANCIAL GAIN" (I Tim. 6:5). Do you know any Church leaders who seek you money, who look to numbers, the bottom line, to size and profit and percentages of increase as the yardstick of their success? Do you know any Church leaders who have abandoned the difficult, challenging way of Christ and Peter and Paul, and instead have lavished upon themselves the perquisites of power and money? Do you know any Church leaders who even today, this LATE IN THE GAME, are still greedy for their empires, their precious building programs, their laid-back lifestyles, while the real preaching of the gospel goes lacking in power and emphasis?

The "doctrine of Balaam" anciently involved seducing the Israelites to commit fornication, to intermix with heathenism, to abandon Godly separation and a pilgrim character in favor of conformity with the world. THINK ABOUT THIS VERY SERIOUSLY!!

To commit spiritual fornication is to merge the ideas of paganism or the carnal world with the truth of God. The end-time Church, because of its corrupt leadership, has compromised and weakened the Word of God and caused its members to err and sin. Today, the doctrine of Balaam is actually being embraced by many in the ostensible Church of God - doctrines of the Trinity, portraying the Church as the Kingdom, permitting marriages outside the faith, espousing the worldly concept of faith without works, denying the reality of Israel's true identity, sanctioning divorce for virtually any reason, denying the healing power of Christ and blatantly lying in public about the Church's past stand on many issues - all in an attempt to court the favor of both the secular and religious communities of the world. Almighty God condemns this backsliding into spiritual fornication, saying:

"My people are bent to backsliding from Me; though they called them to the Most High, none would exalt Him...Return, you backsliding Israel (Church), says the Lord" (Hosea 11:7, Jer. 3:12).

In concluding this portion of our study, let me say that one of the most serious sins of the end-time Church may be something that doesn't readily come to mind, namely the lax manner in which the holy Sabbath is kept and the cowardly refusal of Church leaders (many of whom also break the Sabbath!) to correct the problem. Many brethren are openly working on God's holy day, something that simply would have never been tolerated a few years ago. Are the temporary things of this world so important to some that they will dishonor their Creator and spit in His face by flagrantly breaking the one day He made holy, on which we are to rest from ALL OUR LABORS? If so, then I suggest to those who are guilty of such a sin to take a long, hard look at what their labor has earned them, every possession, every comfort, every uncomplicated, unchallenged turn on easy street, and say to themselves - WE ALREADY HAVE OUR REWARD - HERE AND NOW!! Remember that those who persist in laboring for the meat that perishes are doomed to suffer the loss of everything including, if they are not careful, their own eternal salvation.

Brethren, we must be pure before God. Stop working on the Sabbath day. Take care of your business during the work week. Prepare for the Sabbath, whatever it takes. Trust God in all matters and make the changes you must in your own lives. If you must lose a job or change jobs in order to obey God, then so be it. Do it praising God all the way! I myself have been there. Who is our God? How strong is He? How perfect? He will take care of you, but you must ACT! Continue to sit on the fence and you will fall. The end of this age is upon us and the time to get serious about our calling is NOW! Aside from working on the Sabbath, far too much personal pleasure is done as well. Many also continue to buy and sell on the Sabbath day, in direct violation of the Scriptures (Neh. 10:29-31; 13:15-21).

Don't allow the weak-will ministers to tell you what you can and cannot do. Get on your knees before God, open up the Bible and let the Holy Spirit convict your mind of the truth. You must make your own decisions. Don't let someone else make them for you. That is the way many of the Church leaders want it. Just get on the bus and leave everything else to the experts! Well, brethren, WE NEED TO BECOME THE EXPERTS!!!!

God hates the laid-back, liberal, lazy approaches and attitudes of His people, especially those at the top. He despises their blindness and arrogance, no matter how righteous they may APPEAR TO BE! The doctrine of Balaam is alive and well in the Church of God today, just as Christ accurately predicted it would be. It is one of the major problems facing God's people today. I have spent years in certain organizations of the purported Church and watched as the leaders lived like kings of the earth, lavishing things upon themselves that the likes of you and I can only begin to imagine! I have been there when the horrible sexual improprieties have been committed by certain Church leaders and for years conveniently swept under the rug, covered up and kept out of sight. It is still going on even at this moment:

Approaching the letters to the seven churches from the perspective of the latter day Church can help us to more clearly see that Christ has carefully and precisely delineated many of the major sins and weaknesses of the Church today. This should assist us in focusing more directly upon the problems and in applying the Scriptures to ourselves. We are the ones under the looking glass!

C. THE DOCTRINE OF THE NICOLAITANS

The origins and significance of the Nicolaitans is admittedly very obscure. Our research reveals only a paucity of valid information. Were they an actual ancient sect in Asia Minor, followers of some deviant form of Christianity? There does seem to be at least some superficial evidence to suggest that this is true, but nothing can be ascertained with any degree of authority. Clement of Alexandria states that there was such a group claiming the deacon Nicolaus of Antioch (Acts 6) as its founder, but this cannot be substantiated, and even if correct, tells us absolutely nothing about this group or their doctrine. How then are we to understand this reference to the Nicolaitans?

A possible explanation is that the word "Nicolaitan" may be a cryptic designation, rather than the name of a particular group or sect. In other words, it may be a symbol. It may be that "Nicolaitan" is the result of the etymological play on the Hebrew name of Balaam (lord of the people), which was then rendered into the Greek as "Nika Laon" (He has conquered the people). Such a play on the word "Balaam" was not at all uncommon in the first century, as both the Talmud and the writings of Philo Judaeus testify. So this explanation should not be dismissed out of hand.

If this understanding is correct, then the term "Nicolaitan" could very possibly refer to the problem of elders and leaders "lording it over" the flock of God, against which both the Saviour (Matt. 20:25-28) and the apostle Peter (I Pet. 5:2-3) strongly warned. Perhaps this is the reason we see that the "deeds of the Nicolaitans" are mentioned in the letter to Ephesus (Rev. 2:6), where they could very well be connected with those who claimed to have been apostles, but were proved to be liars (Rev. 2:2).

The problem of undue ministerial control and domination over members has been one of long standing in the modern-day Church of God. In some cases, it has taken the form of an heavy-handed, rod of iron type dictatorship. In other instances, a more subtle form of control and mind game has been prevalent. No matter which you may wish to look at the situation, the problem has been and remains a very real and painful one for many of God's people.

Jeremiah was inspired by God to prophesy of this very type of condition in the Church, by saying: "*Among My people are wicked men who lie in wait like men who snare birds and like those who set traps to **CATCH MEN**. Like cages of birds, their houses are full of deceit: they have become **RICH AND POWERFUL** and have grown sleek and fat. Their evil deeds have no limit; they do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it, they do not defend the rights of the poor...A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: the **PROPHETS PROPHECY LIES, THE PRIESTS RULE BY THEIR OWN AUTHORITY**, and my people **LOVE IT THIS WAY!** But what will you do in the end?" (Jer. 5:26-28, 30-31).*

What a damning indictment from God Himself! The desire of Church leaders for control has been the source of many deep and disturbing problems within the Body. It has been perhaps the single most divisive issue among Church members over the years. Ministers have, at times, ruthlessly and unscrupulously put countless numbers of people out of God's Church (or so they think!!) and driven many others to conscientiously leave in protest. The prophet Jeremiah once again prophesies concerning these sins of the latter-day Church by saying:

"Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord (Yahweh), God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; You have scattered my flock and driven them away, and have not visited them; behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings...The anger of the Lord shall not return, until He has performed the thoughts of His heart...in the LATTER DAYS you shall consider it perfectly" (Jer. 23:1-2, 20).

The prophet Ezekiel goes even further in his denunciation of the end-time leaders of God's Church. He declares:

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say unto them, Thus says the Lord unto the shepherds: Woe be to the shepherds of Israel, that do FEED THEMSELVES! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You EAT THE FAT AND YOU CLOTHE YOU WITH THE WOOL; you kill them that are fed; but you feed not the flock.

The diseased you have not strengthened, neither you healed that which was sick, neither have you bound up that which was broken, neither have you brought again that which was DRIVEN AWAY, neither have you sought that which was lost; but with FORCE AND CRUELTY YOU HAVE RULED THEM. And they were scattered, because there was not a shepherd; and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill; yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them" (Ezek. 34:2-6).

Another possible connection along this line of reasoning is the fact that the city of Pergamos, where the effect of the Nicolaitans was most strongly felt, was also the place of "'Satan's seat" (Rev. 2:13). This most likely refers to the extensive emphasis placed on the worship of the chief pagan deity - Zeus, for whom a magnificent temple had been constructed outside the city.

Now granted, this information by itself may not tell us much, but there is more. You will notice that John's third epistle is addressed to a man named Gaius, but the city is not identified. Since John was the leading Church official in Asia late in the first century, making his home at Ephesus, he surely would have written letters to the very same churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3. I now wonder if indeed the epistle of III John might not have been written to the church in Pergamos, for we encounter this man named Diotrophes who, of all things, was opposing the apostle himself and even excommunicating true believers who would not bow to his rule (III John 9-10)!! In other words, here we have perhaps the most blatant example of a possible Nicolaitan attitude, undoubtedly the very situation faced by the Christians in Pergamos itself.

Aside from this possible link, the name "Diotrophes" is Greek and means, of all things, "NOURISHED BY ZEUS"!! Since Pergamos was the chief center of Zeus worship in all of Asia, indeed constituting Satan's very seat, perhaps there is good reason to relate the two accounts.

Whatever else the Nicolaitans represent, we may never know. It does seem, based strictly upon certain comments by a few of the early church historians, that the Nicolaitans may have been associated with an antinomian (against the Law) movement within the Church. If so, this would certainly be consistent with the current situation where a number of God's Laws and principles have indeed been compromised or undergone extensive weakening, and the Church as a whole has been led away from the diligent keeping of God's commandments.

D. COMPLACENCY AND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Another major category of spiritual problems in the letters of Revelation 2 and 3 is lukewarmness and self-righteousness, especially as it is disclosed in the letter to Laodicea. This church was big and it was rich. It placed great emphasis on material wealth and possessions and considered the accumulation of these as the measure of their good standing with God. Their interest in physical things, in an easier, laid-back lifestyle, caused them to let down spiritually. The condition of being lukewarm, complacent and sleepy was the result, and it so sickened Christ that He threatened to vomit that church out of His mouth (Rev.3:16)!

The description of the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-17) is THE tell-tale sign of the end-time Church. Spiritual slumber abounds among God's people today. Most of the members simply have not had the kind of strong spiritual leadership so necessary for a church to keep up the pace of growth and service. Many congregations have either had a dictator "lording" it over the flock or a spiritual wimp, with whom almost anything has gone.

A true minister is one who, first and foremost, is HUMBLE and fully submitted under the mighty hand of God. His is courageous and fearless when it comes to preaching the full truth and he will not compromise God's Word in order to please other people, whether they be his "superiors" or among the laity. He is patient and understanding and

encouraging to every member and plays no favorites - having at all times their best interest at heart, not his own. He does not do spiritual labor simply for money, neither does he seek or desire recognition. He is not on some sort of power trip, but he does set the pace. He is willing to stir and rally the members. Above all, his calling is real and genuine. He personally stays close to God, repents and changes when he is wrong, does not act as if he knew it all, and is motivated by Godly love in all his service to the Church. There are ministers of this caliber in the Church, but not nearly enough of them!

Today's focus on the physical comforts and blessings of this life have made most of us spiritually soft. Not everyone is or perhaps even can be in great physical shape, but we all should be in excellent spiritual condition. The desire for an easier lifestyle, a less complicated, less challenging, less confrontational way of living has been espoused by the leadership of the Church for years. Only the very best that this world has to offer has been good enough for them. The carnal example they have set is an abomination to Almighty God, and it has poisoned the membership, which has blindly and gladly followed right along. The Church has thus become merely a carbon copy, a mirror image of its leaders. Their attitude, their approach, their lifestyle have all been emulated and adopted by the brethren. Oh, what a sorry state of affairs much of the ostensible Church of God is in today.

And the result - A Church that has, to a great extent, GONE TO SLEEP SPIRITUALLY, a Church that does not really SACRIFICE or truly put itself out to serve, a Church that no longer spends quality time in fervent prayer and deep study of the Scriptures, a Church that seeks to avoid any hard, difficult, negative factors - compromising the truth in order to sidestep any possible persecution, retribution or embarrassment, a Church that is no longer growing spiritually - whose knowledge and understanding and wisdom in the Word has come to a virtual standstill!!

God is not pleased with much of His end-time Church. Like Laodicea, the Church today has been led to ASSUME that it is spiritually rich and is serving God. Like Laodicea, much of the Church today is fat and sleek and complacent - a magnificent CORPORATION that focuses on the bottom line and is at ease spiritually. The prophet Amos strongly prophesies against this problem, saying:

"Woe to them that are AT EASE IN ZION (Church) ...You that put far away the evil day (Teach that the end is not near!), and cause the seat of violence to come near; that lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall, that chant to the sound of the viol...that drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments; but they are NOT GRIEVED FOR THE AFFLICTION OF JOSEPH (both physical and spiritual Israel). Therefore now shall they go captive with the first that go captive, and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed" (Amos 6:1-7).

So many of God's people today live their lives every single day in the same, old routine fashion as they always have. We need to BREAK THAT ROUTINE - CRACK THAT MOLD!! We need to receive a true spiritual awakening, a real shot in the arm, and stir up the gift of the Holy Spirit within ourselves. We must reach that state where we are genuinely spiritually ALIVE, spiritually AWAKE and spiritually AWARE!

As long as we are willing to tolerate a spiritually sleepy state, our experience with God will never be as REAL as it ought to be. Oh yes we have, like Job, heard with the hearing of the ear. We have indeed listened to many sermons, read many articles, watched many telecasts, but what we really need is that great breakthrough where we come to SEE with our spiritual eyes the true immensity of our calling. The level of spiritual awareness in the Church is dangerously low. We are, in so many cases, just simply too close to the world around us and, to our shame and detriment, many of us prefer it this way. It has become increasingly difficult for many of God's people to discern what is wrong with the Church or the world around them or even their own lives. Unfortunately, many of our favorite activities and attitudes, even our conversation, is strongly influenced by the world we live in. We should be COMING OUT of that system, but on too many occasions, we much prefer to keep one foot firmly embedded in the world and just continue kidding ourselves that everything is just fine.

Compare, if you dare, the time you and your family spend watching TV and movies, visiting or entertaining family and friends, playing, attending or otherwise involving yourselves in sports activities, engaging in social outings, reading frivolous magazines or other such material or just wasting time in any myriad of ways, with the actual time you spend in diligent Bible study and fervent, effectual prayer to God, and in active service to others.

Are you really satisfied that you have your priorities in the right order? Does the content of your life truly reflect the fact that you have been given the rarest, most precious possible calling from the very Creator of the universe? Paul clearly tells us to EXAMINE ourselves - proving whether or not we are even in the faith (II Cor. 13:5). Are you willing to do just that - beseeching God Himself to search your heart and try you, even as David did (Psa. 139:23-24)? Be honest with yourself and if you feel you need to make a change, remember that God is on your side, that He loves it

when His people come to this point in their lives, and that He will be there to help you every step of the way. I certainly do not mean to imply that all of God's people are in desperate shape, but so many are that I am compelled to speak out in this manner. May God help each of us to wake up and prove where we really stand with Him, and to really start doing something about it!

E. JEZEBEL

In the church at Thyatira, a formidable obstacle existed - the false prophetess Jezebel (Rev. 2:20). Her name means "Baal lives." What, if anything, does the reference to this infamous lady have to do with God's Church today?

The ministry of Elijah is a type and a forerunner of the end-time work of the Church of God. In fact, Elijah is clearly predicted to come before the great and terrible Day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5). Anciently, Jezebel taught the children of Israel to serve Baal. She had own prophets who took over the Temple service and, of course, she was the avowed enemy of Elijah. Jezebel thus became synonymous with FALSE RELIGION in Israel. She polluted God's people and His truth. In Revelation 2, this same wicked woman is mentioned as a type of FALSE CHURCH that would be present within the true Church at the time of the end! She was present in the early apostolic Church and she is present today

The presence of this evil woman in the church at Thyatira is, I feel, quite significant for us today. Notice that there are seven churches in Asia to whom the letters of Christ are addressed. The fourth church would be the one in the middle and that church is Thyatira. I believe that Christ used the symbolism of this false prophetess, located in the very middle of the seven churches, to reveal to those of us whose eyes are open in the end-time just what the spiritual state of the Church would actually be! The latter day Church will be POISONED FROM THE INSIDE!!! Paul spoke openly of this condition already overtaking the Church in his own day and offered an inspired prophecy for our day today. We read the account in II Thessalonians 2:

"Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day (of Christ's return) will not come until the rebellion (apostasy from the truth) occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed (in the Church, as well as the world!), the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God Temple (both physical and spiritual), proclaiming to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time (in the end-time Church). For the secret power of lawlessness (mystery of iniquity) is ALREADY AT WORK: but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of His mouth and destroy by the splendor of His coming." (II Thess. 2:3-8).

The mystery of iniquity is a direct reference to the false system that was, even in Paul's day, beginning to emerge within the Church. Paul warned the Christians of that first era of the Church, but the weight of his words were prophetic of the end-time, the events that would culminate in the return of the Messiah. Brethren, we must be very, very careful today. We must insist on being fully awake and aware of what is really going on, whether it be world events or things in the Church itself. Satan the devil is at work in his most assertive, yet subtle attempt to take over the Church since the first century!!

God commands His people today to wake up and COME OUT of spiritual lethargy, complacency and sin. In the days of Jezebel, Israel was seduced, just as John describes the church at Thyatira. Anciently, only 7000 faithful Israelites were able and willing to stand up and be counted for the truth of God. Only 7000 faithful Israelites steadfastly refused to bow the knee to Baal, even though their very lives were at stake!

How many of God's people, I wonder, will have the insight to see the alarming parallel between physical Israel under the sway of the original Jezebel and spiritual Israel under the seductive influence of a modern-day Jezebel? And beyond that - how many of God's people will have the courage, the fortitude, the vision, the faith and the love, to STAND UP NOW and be counted - no matter what the consequences - just like their brothers-in-arms of old?

The apostle Paul, in discussing the ultimate salvation of Israel, made a most intriguing comment about this very time of Jezebel and Elijah. It is contained in his letter to the Romans as follows: *"God did not reject His people whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah - how he appealed to God against Israel: Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me?"*

And what was God's answer to him? I have reserved for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND who have not bowed the knee to Baal. So too, AT THE PRESENT TIME, THERE IS A REMNANT chosen by grace" (Rom. 11:2-5).

This is a very illuminating passage of Scripture. Paul is clearly drawing an analogy between Israel in Elijah's day and end-time Israel. If we take this to be applicable to the Church (a safe bet!), as well as physical Israel, then we might conclude that there is a somewhat hidden message for end-time Christians. Will there indeed be only a similarly small remnant of truly dedicated believers in the latter day Church of God, just before the return of Christ?

Will 7000 once again comprise the elect of God, fully called, chosen, awakened, humbled, made zealous, committed and involved in the final work of God? The parallels and types are, I suggest to you, fully in order for just such a fulfillment to occur. I advise everyone to read the remainder of Romans 11 with the end-time Church in mind and I believe that you will clearly see that indeed a final remnant is spared while the rest of the Church is persecuted and suffers greatly - but that in the end, as Paul testifies, "All Israel shall be saved."

It is my sincere hope that each of us, including myself, will be moved to honestly reappraise our spiritual lives. It is so easy, in this world of Satan, with every possible subtle temptation and time robber all around us, to just stay in the middle of the road or sit on the fence of indecision or sort of coast through life, all the time assuming that we are pleasing God, that this is the way it has always been and always will be. Brethren BEWARE! This is the most dangerous philosophy and attitude any of us could possibly have. Peter foresaw just such a situation developing among God's end-time people. The major organizations of the Church today are beginning now to de-emphasize the nearness of Christ's return to this earth. At one time, the Church was full of infinitely more zeal and enthusiasm and was outspoken on this issue. These days, however, it seems that the various groups are far more content on acquiring more and more, getting along better in this life here and now, and just are not very excited and turned on about anything spiritual. Peter wrote in his second letter:

"Knowing this first, that there shall come IN THE LAST DAYS scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, WHERE IS THE PROMISE OF HIS COMING? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (II Pet. 3.3-4).

Has your personal enthusiasm for the return of Christ waned since you first came into God's truth. Or are you more excited than ever before? Peter concluded his dissertation by saying: *"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and Godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and SPEED ITS COMING" (II Pet. 3:11-12).*

How dangerous, perhaps evil fatal, it is for any of us to become mesmerized by the sameness of each passing day, each passing event. Such an approach lulls us to sleep. We all are aware of the cyclical nature of much of life, but this simply shows us that human beings continue to repeat the mistakes of the past, seldom learning the real lessons. This condition really ought to constitute a profound warning to us rather than putting to sleep!

Almighty God has a plan and NOW is the time for you and I to play our great part! Christians cannot afford to be taken in by the humdrumness of life. If we do, we will all backslide and slowly, but surely, begin to let our guard down, weaken the hard realities of the Scriptures, go along in order to get along, and do it all with a smile on our faces, assuming that we are just fine with God! This is utter deception and is of the devil.

Paul told the Romans of his day: *"And that, knowing the time that NOW it is high time to AWAKE OUT OF SLEEP: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day...and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof" (Rom. 12:11-14).*

Almighty God WILL call out in our day a people for His great name. There WILL be an end-time remnant of His Church that will be awake and sober and who will SEE THEIR CALLING! There Will be a few who will give up their hold on this flesh and follow after their God in serving and even in DOING EXPLOITS (Dan. 11:32-33)!! The real question, therefore, is will YOU AND I be among that special group?

Brethren, I cannot presume to speak for you or really anyone else, except myself - but this I say to you: I, for one, want to completely give myself to God, wholeheartedly and without reservation. I want to put behind me forever the pursuit of physical glory, recognition, ego, carnal endeavors, and the desire for more and more in this life. I want to stop neglecting the immensity of this calling I have mercifully received and come to positive terms with my REAL relationship with my God. And I want to be a tool in our Savior's hand - to be able and prepared to be used to the fullest extent possible - to obey, honor and please God and serve His people with all my time, energy and effort, through the power of the Spirit.

I hope and pray that every single one of you and indeed all of God's true people feel the very same way. Go to God right now, I urge you, in prayer and began asking Him to work with you in this crucial matter. We all need to receive

a true Christian CALL TO ARMS! We are to become the army of Christ, Christian soldiers, marching as to war! We need to get right with our Creator, repent and lay aside our incessant pursuit of the flesh, come together in unity and rally round our great banner - YAHWEH-NISSI.

The leaders of the current organized Church will not call you to arms! They will not stir up the people of God. They are much too busy with their own little carnal affairs, too busy maintaining their own power bases or their easy lifestyles, too busy extending their own little empires or figuring the "bottom line" of the corporate church, too busy to be bothered with such labor and sacrifice so desperately needed at this time in God's work.

I therefore issue a CALL TO ARMS TO ALL OF US! I BLOW THE TRUMPET IN OUR EARS! Not to rally you around me - far from it - but to turn our hearts to seek our God that He may awaken us and draft us fully into His final service in this life and calling.

So let the alarm sound, let the lines be drawn, let those who are ready to quit taking their calling for granted any longer STAND UP NOW AND BE COUNTED! Time is short. The spectre of tribulation is rapidly approaching. Where do you really stand with God today? Is your relationship real and strong and on fire? If not, then you see your problem and your goal. Fix your eyes on it - be riveted, be focused. Hold on, like Jacob, and don't let go until God has prepared you to fulfill our part, equipped you to take your place along side His elect, to do the final work. God says that the just must live by their faith, that they must walk that walk, not by eyesight, but by insight!! Are you NOW willing to step out on faith in the Living God - in making your life a LIVING SACRIFICE for the work, the will and the people of our God?

NOW is the time for ACTION!! Now is the time to prove to God and to ourselves that we are indeed DOERS of the Word, and not just forgetful hearers. Now is the time to put on the armor of God and be clothed with white raiment and stand shoulder to shoulder with the Messiah Himself! CAN WE DO IT? Remember that Paul tells us that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." WILL WE DO IT? ARE WE AFRAID OR WEAK? Recall, I urge you, just who our God really is:

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? That the everlasting God, the Lord (Yahweh), the Creator of the ends of the earth, DOES NOT FAINT, neither is He weary. There is no searching of His understanding. He gives POWER TO THE FAINT; and to them that have no might, He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isa. 40:28-31).

May our merciful God and Father grant to us all the grace, vision and strength to see our calling and RESPOND TO HIS VOICE WHILE IT IS STILL CALLED TODAY!! The call to arms has indeed gone out from heaven above - but what will you and I really do about it? God is waiting right now for your decision and mine.

by Jim Rector
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