

RAY C. STEDMAN

Adventuring Through the Bible

A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible

New Enhanced Edition



Adventuring Through the Bible

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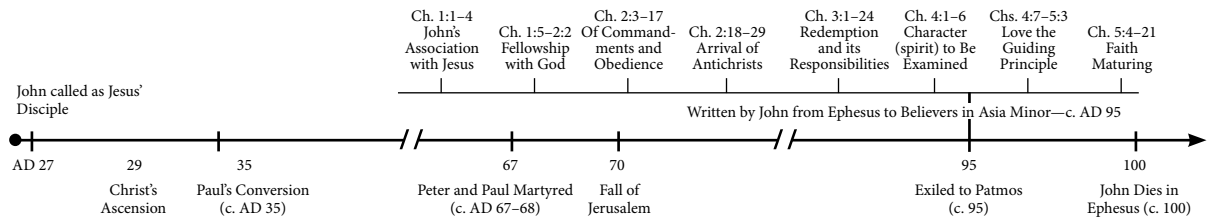
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Authentic Christianity

Jesus had two disciples I truly wish I could have known. One was Peter, the other was John. I love to read about these two disciples. They were very different from each other in character and personality, yet both were close to the Lord Jesus.

Simon Peter was erratic, impulsive, and brash. Whenever he entered the scene, it was with a crash and a thud. Yet the Lord chose to make him a steady, stable, dependable “rock” (which is what his name, Peter, literally means). He became a rallying point for first-century Christians in those days of intense persecution.

John was another disciple who was dramatically transformed by his encounter with Jesus. In fact, many Bible scholars believe John was a teenager when he met Jesus, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years of age. The gospel record shows he was a hotheaded young man, given to sharp and impulsive speech and a tendency toward blowing off steam—hence Jesus’ nickname for John and his brother James: “Sons of Thunder.” That was our Lord’s gentle way of labeling John’s problem. He just kept the thunder rolling all the time.

Amazingly, however, “Thundering John” ultimately became known not for his thundering but for his gentleness and goodness. We have no record that John ever married; history indicates that he devoted himself to a life of serving Jesus.

John, “the apostle of love,” authored 1, 2, and 3 John. First John was among the last of the New Testament books to be written, and may have been written after the gospel of John. It was penned near the close of the first century in the city of Ephesus, where John spent his later years. John wrote this epistle to Christians living in a godless and sexually perverse world. It was written to people just like you and me.

Three Marks of Authentic Christianity

John’s primary concern in this letter

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter we examine the theme of 1 John, authentic Christianity. John, the beloved apostle, shows that authentic Christianity consists of three vital ingredients: truth, righteousness, and love. These three ingredients are more important than ever in an age when “truth” is considered subjective, morality is relative, and love has grown cold.

is authentic Christianity. He reminds us of the three aspects of our faith that make the Christian life vital and effective: truth, righteousness, and love. These three aspects are what he focuses on in 1 John 2:18–4:21.

But first, John describes one's relationship with Jesus Christ from which these three qualities flow. It's a relationship of oneness with Him. Apart from that relationship, we cannot live lives of truth, righteousness, and love.

The teachings of Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Confucius, and Buddha contain much of the same advice for living that you find in the New Testament. In other words, if all you need is good advice, you don't need the Bible. But one thing these philosophers do not give you is the power to live out their wonderful advice. The world has enough good advice, but the power to do what we know we should do is in short supply.

We all know the Golden Rule of our Lord Jesus: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Though it is also expressed in other religions, Jesus goes a step further and empowers us to live by the Golden Rule. How does He do that? By showing us the secret of unity with Him.

Fellowship with the Lord Jesus gives us the power to live out the advice He gives us. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The indwelling presence of Jesus, the most intimate relationship in human experience, gives us the power to live out the precepts of our faith.

First Mark: *Truth*

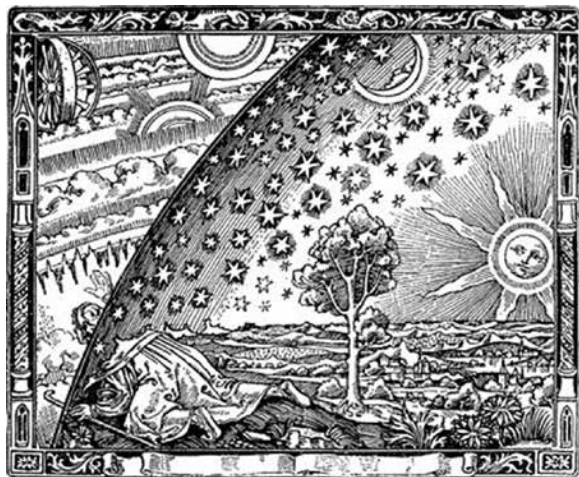
Throughout this letter, John emphasizes

the fact that Jesus actually appeared in history and is both God and man.

This message was diametrically opposed to the pseudo-Christian heresy that arose in the first century called Gnosticism. The nearest thing to Gnosticism today is Christian Science, which is almost pure Gnosticism. Gnostics believe that matter is evil and spirit is good, and that our good human spirit is imprisoned in an evil material body. They say that the purpose of life is to teach us how to rise above the evil of our bodies and release the good spirit from the prison of the material body, so that it may achieve spiritual perfection.

John says, in effect, "Don't be deceived by Gnostic heresy, because Jesus has come in truth. He is the God-man, eternal Spirit bonded to a human body, and anyone who denies this truth about Jesus Christ is a liar."

John did not write this letter to refute those who were bent on stamping out Christianity. He was warning against a more subtle and crafty attack on our faith than any outright, fire-breathing opposition. The Gnostics simply wanted to "improve" upon



Artist's depiction of Gnosticism, Flammarion (1888)

Christianity. So they played down the truth of Jesus' humanity and subtly twisted and distorted His teaching so that their image of Jesus fit their Gnostic beliefs.

The seductive, snaking tendrils of Gnosticism are still with us today, though these ancient falsehoods come disguised as "new truth." Our bestseller lists are crowded with self-help authors who are making fortunes peddling the latest navel-gazing heresies. Most of these do-it-yourself spirituality books have a lot in common with ancient Gnosticism.

They teach that the spirit is good, and

that the material world holds our spirits back. They appeal to the shallow mentality of those who say, "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious" (which means, "I reject Jesus and the church, but I like to make up my own religion"). They teach that you should feel free to believe anything you like (as long as it's not biblical Christianity). They speak disparagingly of "doctrine" and "dogma" (code words for biblical Christianity) while extolling the virtue of "process" and "becoming." They use phrases like "follow your bliss" and "express your beingness," and they claim to be sensitive to "energy fields" and "vibrations." They say

it's okay to believe in Jesus—just not the Jesus of the New Testament. Instead, follow the “Jesus of your contemplation,” the Jesus you make up in your own imagination.

The message of 1 John is as urgent today as ever. John says: Do not be deceived. Don't be tricked by distortions of the gospel story. You'll end up following the Gnostic lie to your own spiritual destruction.

Second Mark: Righteousness

Truth is important, but it takes more to be a Christian than simply mentally assenting to a certain doctrine or creed. Truth is meaningless if it doesn't change our behavior, so to our truth we must add righteousness.

The message of John is this: If you really have Jesus Christ living in you, you can't go on living in sin. You must change your way of life. But the Gnostics said, in effect, “If spirit is good and matter is evil, then the only thing that counts is the spirit. What you do with your material body doesn't matter, so if you want to indulge your lusts, go ahead because your actions won't affect your spiritual standing with God.” John responds to this error:

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God (3:9).

John also warns us that if we profess to be Christians while living an unholy life, we are (to put it bluntly) liars:

The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him (2:4).

Third Mark: Love

Truth and righteousness are difficult to master, yet these two aspects are relatively easy compared with the third: love.

Many Christians can say, “I know the truth and I stand on it. My doctrine is sound. And what's more, I've given up the sins and attitudes of the world. I used to drink and carouse and cheat in my business dealings and read the worst kind of magazines and see the worst kind of movies, but I don't do those things anymore.” We should never minimize the changes in the life of a person who becomes truly committed to Jesus Christ, upholding His truth and forsaking sinful behavior.

But if truth and righteousness are the extent of your testimony, you'll soon find that others are unimpressed. Most of the things you don't do anymore are things people in the world love to do and don't want to give up, so if your gospel consists of, “I have the truth, and I don't drink and smoke anymore,” you'll find that most people shrug and turn away. They'll say, “That's nice for you, but I like drinking and smoking, so I don't want your faith.”

The world is not impressed by what you *don't* do. That's negative. The world is impressed by what you *do*. That's positive. And the positive action that impresses the world and makes our gospel attractive to the people out there is our love. That's why John says the third mark of a genuine Christian is *love*.

The love John speaks of—in fact, the love that is presented to us throughout the New Testament—is a special kind of love. The New Testament Greek language calls this love

agape (pronounced “uh-GAW-pay”). This is a love that is based on will, not emotions. It is a love that is based on a decision to seek the good of others, not on whether or not other people are “lovable.” In fact, *agape* love is aimed primarily at those who are the hardest to love!

Anyone can love someone who is lovable. But it takes a special effort of the will, plus the strength of God’s empowering Spirit, to love those who hate you, mistreat you, ignore you, and attack you. It takes a special effort to love those who are wretched, suffering, smelly, dirty, poor, needy, unsightly, and unpleasant to be near.

It’s not hard to love the beautiful people who invite you to a lavishly catered garden party. But it takes effort to love the toothless derelict, smelling of cheap wine, holding his paper plate in line at the downtown mission.

Yet that’s the kind of love God calls us to, the kind of love 1 John teaches.

It’s the same kind of love Jesus demonstrated when He reached out to the lepers, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the poor, and when He forgave those who pounded the nails into His hands and feet, as well as the crowds who jeered Him in His dying moments. That is why John writes:

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother (4:19–21).

Fellowship with the Lord Jesus means that we will gradually experience an opening

“HE WHO HAS THE SON HAS LIFE”



We cannot attain eternal life through a mere intellectual exercise. We do not become authentic Christians by intellectually comprehending and accepting the historical facts about Jesus. Nor do we become authentic Christians by grasping the theological implications of his death and resurrection. We do not become authentic Christians by adhering to certain moral and ethical standards which Jesus taught. Nor do we become authentic Christians by trying to relate to God apart from Jesus Christ.

Our lives must be joined to His life. We become authentic Christians by asking Jesus to come in as Lord and Master, and by trusting Him to accomplish and fulfill His eternal life in us by means of the Holy Spirit. When that happens, a miracle takes place—even though that miracle may be of a quiet, almost invisible kind. A new quality of life—eternal life—is imparted to us and we are “made alive in Christ.” It is this divine action that makes us authentic Christians. Nothing else can do it. “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12)

It is that simple.

Ray C. Stedman
Authentic Christianity
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of our hearts, like the opening of a flower in the morning sunlight. As His love shines on us, we will become more open to others, allowing the fragrance of our love to attract those around us to the good news of Jesus. As the power of Jesus changes us, we will grow not only in truth and righteousness, but in love toward our Christian brothers and sisters and in love toward those who are outside the faith.

Our Assurance: “We know . . .”

John closes his first letter on a note of assurance: What God has told us is true and unshakable. What He has revealed about the world is absolutely certain. Three consecutive verses—1 John 5:18–20—begin with the confident phrase, “We know.” John writes:

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (5:18–20).

We know, John says, that we are of God, that we possess the very nature and being of God, and that the whole world is in the power of the evil one. That is why the world cannot engage in *agape* love. The world talks about love and hungers for love, but it doesn’t understand the very thing it seeks. The world lacks the power to practice love because the world does not know the One who is love personified.

God is love. Since we are of God, John writes, He has given us the understanding to know Him and the power to experience eternal life.

What a declaration that is! We live in an age of moral relativism, where people claim we cannot know anything for sure, where uncertainty and confusion abound. But *we know* that we are children of God. That’s why we can stand firm and secure in a world that is falling apart.

Modern-Day Idolatry

Here is John’s final word, and at first sight it may seem irrelevant in our high-tech, sophisticated age:

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols (5:21).

We don’t have wooden or stone gods in our homes today, do we? So we don’t have to worry about idols today, do we? Wrong. The fact is, we are more imperiled by idolatry today than ever before! We so easily give our devotion to things that are lower than God. Idolatry means loving anything more than God.

If you took an hour to go through the register of your checkbook and your credit card statements, you would find out what some of your idols are. What do you spend your money on and what do you save your money for? What do you spend your time on? What do you think about when you wake up in the morning and when you go to bed? What is most important to you? Whatever it is, that is your god. If your god is not God Himself, you are practicing idolatry.

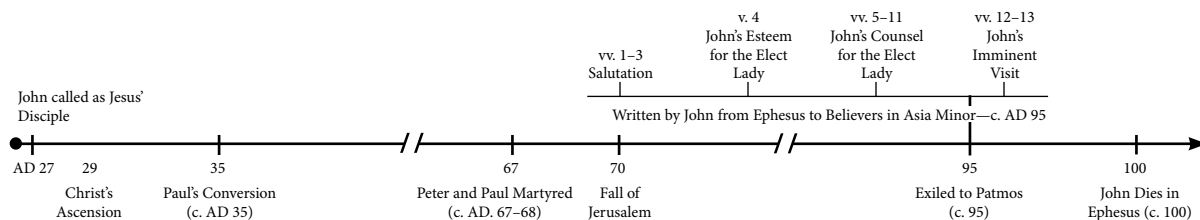
For some of us, our god may be narcissism, the god of self-love, of self-centered ambition and an obsession with success or self-beautification; of having others admire, desire, or envy us for our beauty or our lovely possessions. For some of us, our god may be Venus, the goddess of love and sex; or Bacchus, the god of revelry and pleasure, eating and drinking, substance abuse, and mind-altering drugs. For some of us, our god may be Mars, the god of war and competition, vanquishing the opposition, winning at all costs, or cutting the throats of those who oppose us.

What is your idol? The danger of idolatry is no less real for us today than it was for Christians in the first century. Let us be vigilant against the reality of idolatry in our own lives.

Prayer of Deliverance

Our prayer of deliverance from these forms of idolatry must be, "Lord, deliver me from the false gods that would rob me of my faith, my love for truth, my love for righteousness, my love for my Christian brothers and sisters, and my love for lost humanity. Make me fall deeply in love with the Lord Jesus, who is truly God, who has come to give me an understanding of myself and the world around me, and has come to teach me truth, righteousness, and love."

You have found the true God, John says, so keep yourselves from idols, from substitute gods that would steal your love away from Christ. Give yourself completely to the One who can fulfill all your heart's desires.

The Vital Balance

Second John is the only letter in the New Testament that was written specifically to a woman. We gather from the letter itself that it was written to a mother with several children, perhaps a widow, to answer her questions regarding specific problems that had arisen. In those days the people were dependent on the apostles and church leaders for guidance regarding Christian truth and answers to problems.

Of course, a question then arises: How do we know if a certain leader who claims to speak for God actually speaks the truth? How do we distinguish between God's prophets and false prophets?

Evidently some who claimed to be prophets had come to this woman's home (probably in the city of Ephesus), and had raised certain doctrinal matters that disturbed her. Not knowing how to evaluate their opinions, she wrote to John and asked for his counsel.

The letter we now know as 2 John is the apostle's response to her question. As we go through this letter, we will see how it also answers many questions we have today, especially the question of how to

deal with people who teach spiritual concepts that are not in line with God's truth.

A Balance of Truth and Love

The first six verses of the letter present both the problem and John's approach in answering it:

The elder,

To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth—because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love.

It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter examines the second letter of John, a brief communication written to "the chosen lady and her children," to answer her troubled questions about certain false teachers.

LEFT: Nazareth



Ruins of the Library at Ephesus

walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love (vv. 1–6).

Here John sets the stage for the answer to this woman's problem. He is highlighting two factors that must be taken into consideration when facing questions about true and false teachers: truth and love. Notice how he links these two in verse 3: "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love."

Truth and love: These two qualities ought to characterize our lives as Christians. These are the same qualities Paul commends to us in Ephesians 4:15—"speaking the truth in love." The great challenge we face in the Christian life is the challenge of learning to keep truth and love in balance.

Someone once said that a well-balanced Christian life contains salt and sugar. Salt is truth. Sugar is love. Some Christians want only the salt, and so these salty Christians go around scattering their salt wherever they go. They are all truth, no love. They are full of doctrines, dogmas, and laws. They are cold and judgmental, having no concern for the feelings, needs, or hurts of others. They defend the truth at the expense of love. In fact, they have no problem speaking the truth in cruelty! The truth is all that matters. These people are nothing but religious saltshakers.

Others are sugar bowls. They are all love, no truth. They would never confront anyone caught in sin because that would involve telling that person a hard truth—even if it were for that person's own good and for the good of the church. We all know people who

only want sugar from their brothers and sisters; they run from the salt of truth. They say, “Give me grace, love, acceptance—but don’t hold me accountable, don’t confront me when I stray. If I sin, say, ‘That’s okay. Don’t feel bad. A little sin never hurt anybody.’ Don’t tell me I have to change; that’s too judgmental! Don’t be honest with me. Just be nice to me. Keep your salt. All I want is sugar.”

Our goal as Christians should be to keep truth and love—salt and sugar—in balance. The Lord Jesus provides us with a perfect example. He walked in truth and love. He dealt tenderly with sinners and outcasts, and he dealt truthfully with the arrogant Pharisees.

When He met the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Jesus truthfully told her all the sins she had committed, yet He dealt

lovingly with her and offered living water for her thirsty soul. In John 8, after He lovingly saved the adulteress from being stoned and assured her that He did not condemn her, Jesus truthfully confronted her with her need to change. “Go,” He said, “and sin no more.” Jesus spoke the truth in love. He kept truth and love in perfect balance, and so should we.

Deceivers and Antichrists

In the next section, John answers the woman’s question regarding the reliability of those who claim to be spiritual teachers and leaders:

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that

you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son (vv. 7–9).

Two statements in this passage describe the two fundamental forms of false teaching. In fact, all Christian error and heresies arise from one of these two forms of falsehood:

1. Deception regarding the person of the Lord Jesus. He is the one who came from God into the world and became human; He is the only Messiah. The incarnation is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. If you trace someone's origin from birth and discover the person entered the stream of humanity through the normal reproductive process, yet claims to be the Savior sent from God, you can disregard this person's claims. Many false christs are in the world today, and John clearly warns us not to believe them.

Many people distort the truth about Jesus. One of the most common distortions is the claim that Jesus was a good person, a good moral teacher, but not truly God. This sounds nice, because it's an affirmation that Jesus had many good things to say. This claim, however, ignores the central message of Jesus, because His message was Himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). If Jesus was not God, then his claim is a lie—and a liar cannot be a "good moral teacher."

Jesus claimed to be both God and man. Anyone who denies either His divinity or His humanity makes Him a liar. Anyone

who denies the incarnation of the Son of God is a deceiver and does not speak for God. In fact, John says that anyone who makes such a claim is an "antichrist," and is opposed to the truth about Jesus.

2. Deception regarding the teaching of the Lord Jesus. John says that anyone who does not continue in the doctrine or teaching of Christ does not know God (v. 9). This revealing statement addresses people who say the Bible is not an adequate revelation of God and that we need some additional revelation from another teacher, guru, or book. These people may be very persuasive, and might seem very sincere, but if they do not agree with the teaching of Jesus Christ then they do not know God.

Now notice the danger in these two forms of falsehood: "Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully" (v. 8). What do you lose, as a Christian, if your faith becomes polluted by cults, heresies, and the watered-down liberal theology so prevalent today? Will you lose your salvation? Not if you are truly born again, of course. Salvation rests upon the work of Christ. You are not going to lose your place in heaven, nor your redemption, nor your part in the body of Christ.

But you will lose a great deal, as John makes clear. You will lose the value of your life spent here. You will have wasted the time God gave you to serve Him effectively and obediently. Your religious activity will be revealed as nothing more than wood, hay, and stubble to be consumed in the fire of God's searching judgment. You will lose your reward.

The Response to False Teachers

How, then, should we respond to those who approach us with false doctrines and heresies regarding the Lord and His teaching? John replies:

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work (vv. 10–11).

John is not suggesting that our hospitality be subject to some doctrinal litmus test. We would be very offensive people if that were the case, and we would certainly have little impact in our witnessing. After all, who would we witness to if we could talk only with those who are doctrinally pure?

What does John mean? He is telling us that truth should be spoken in love, and love should be balanced by truth. In other words, we are not to receive deceivers in such a way that we appear to endorse or accept their teaching. In John's day, itinerant preachers and teachers stayed in private homes. If you received a certain teacher, you were seen as endorsing and subsidizing their message. John is saying

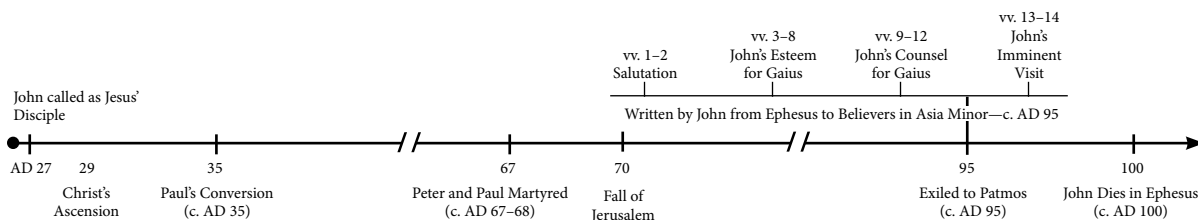
that we should never allow ourselves to be placed in a position of appearing to support or subsidize the teaching of an antichrist.

John underscores the importance of his warning against receiving false teachers when he writes:

I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete (v. 12).

In those days, mail was slow and uncertain because it had to be hand carried by travelers who were going to certain cities. Like most of us, John found it difficult to sit down and write letters. So he said, in effect, "I have a lot to tell you later, when I see you in person—but this matter of false teachers is so urgent it couldn't wait. I just had to write now to warn you about these deceivers and antichrists." Then he concludes with greetings from the Christian family he is evidently staying with.

Truth and love together—that is the vital balance we must seek in the Christian life. That is John's goal in this brief but powerful letter.

Believers and Bosses

Third John gives us an intimate glimpse into the life of the early church. It is an important accompaniment to John's second letter, which was written to a Christian woman regarding how to deal with false teachers.

This letter was written to a Christian man regarding how to care for the true teachers who traveled widely to minister God's Word. It also shows how to deal with a troubling personality type that is as common in the church today as in the first century AD. Thus, we see both a contrast and a similarity between 2 John and 3 John.

Third John gives us insight regarding the problem of personalities in the church, as illustrated by three people: Gaius (to whom this letter is written), a Christian of grace and generosity; Diotrephes, a problem personality; and Demetrius, a trustworthy and truthful Christian. These three people represent three kinds of Christians found in the church in any age.

This is the shortest book in the Bible—but is profoundly relevant and instructive to us as believers today.

Gaius: A Christian of Grace and Generosity

Third John was written to encourage and strengthen a believer named Gaius, and to warn him against a faction headed by a dangerous man named Diotrephes. But who was Gaius?

There are several people named Gaius mentioned in the New Testament. There was Gaius, a traveling companion of Paul during the apostle's journey through Macedonia (see Acts 19:29). There was a Gaius from Derbe, named as a companion of Paul who waited for him at Troas (see Acts 20:4). There was a Gaius whom Paul baptized at Corinth (see 1 Cor. 1:14). And there was a Gaius referred to near the end of Romans (see Rom. 16:23). We don't know if these passages, plus 3 John, referred to the same Gaius or a number of different individuals with the same name. Obviously, Gaius was a fairly common name in New Testament times.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter looks at John's third letter, which was written to address the problem of difficult personalities in the church—and especially the ever-present problem of church bosses.

But we do know that the Gaius mentioned in 3 John is a good man and a man of faith. John knew him well, because he addresses Gaius warmly in this letter. Gaius is clearly a gracious and generous individual, based on three things John says about him in this letter. First, Gaius was strong of soul. John writes:

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well (v. 2).

That is a wonderful thing to say about someone, isn't it? John says, in effect, "I wish that you may be as strong in body as you are in your soul." It would be interesting to apply this test to people today. If your physical appearance reflected your spiritual and emotional state, what would you look like? Would you appear robust and strong—or weak and sickly? John commended Gaius as a spiritually vital and vigorous man.

Second, Gaius was a consistent person, a man of integrity. His way of life matched his honest profession of Christian truth. John observes:

It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth (v. 3).

Gaius demonstrated the truth of Jesus Christ through the way he lived. He did not preach cream but live skim milk. He walked in the truth.

Third, Gaius was generous in his giving. John writes:

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God (vv. 5–6).

One sign that a person has been genuinely touched by God is that the pocketbook loosens up. He or she becomes a cheerful giver. John says that Gaius was "faithful" in his giving. This means he was a regular and systematic giver. He didn't just give when his emotions were moved—he made a conscious, regular habit of giving. So, John commends Gaius as an openhearted believer, full of grace and generosity.

Diotrephes: A Church Boss

Next we come to the problem personality in Gaius's church, a man named Diotrephes. John writes:

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God (1:9–11).

This is the first example in the New Testament church of a church boss, someone who feels it is his or her job to run everything and everybody in the church. A church boss might be an elder, a deacon, a pastor, or even a layperson who has no official role in

the church. Often, it is a wealthy, influential person, respected or even feared in the church and the wider community.

Church bosses often represent the real but hidden power base of a church. While the pastor and church board may be the *official* leadership center of the church, the *real* (but *unofficial*) power may reside in another person who actually calls the shots. That, of course, is not how the church of Jesus Christ is supposed to function.

A church boss can be a man or woman. In the 1947 motion picture *The Bishop's Wife*, the bishop (played by David Niven) is forced to kowtow to a domineering church boss, a wealthy widow named Mrs. Hamilton (played by Gladys Cooper). The bishop wants to build

a new church, and he must take orders from Mrs. Hamilton or she will cut the purse strings for the project. There is a priceless scene where the bishop and Mrs. Hamilton discuss a stained glass window in the new church, to be dedicated in honor of Mrs. Hamilton's late husband.

"I will not have his name on some horrid little brass plaque," she says.

The bishop, eager to please the demanding woman, replies, "His name will be incised in marble, in large letters—gilded."

"It will be the large window, the one depicting St. George and the Dragon. I should like the face of St. George to suggest the countenance of my late husband."

"I see. And who do you see as the dragon?"

Fortunately for the bishop, Mrs. Hamilton doesn't realize who the bishop sees as the dragon!

The dragon in Gaius's church was Diotrephes. Apparently, Gaius's church maintained a membership roll. If boss Diotrephes decided he didn't like somebody, he would scratch that person's name off the list and put the individual out of the church. This, says John, is wrong. Diotrephes was guilty of four particular wrong attitudes and actions.

First, Diotrephes was selfish and domineering. He insisted on being first in the church, an attitude that is a dead giveaway that he was acting in the flesh. This is always the demand of the flesh: "me first." In doing that, he robbed Jesus Christ of His prerogative in the church. Jesus had the right to preeminence, but it was Diotrephes who claimed the honor and glory. Unfortunately, we see plenty of people in churches today with the spirit of Diotrephes.

Have these modern versions of Diotrephes ever read 3 John? If so, did they recognize themselves in John's description? Dr. H. E. Robertson, an outstanding leader among the Southern Baptists and a noted Greek scholar, once wrote an editorial about Diotrephes in a denominational publication. The editor of the magazine reported that twenty-five individuals from various churches wrote to cancel their subscriptions, feeling they had been personally attacked! If only they would cancel their bossy ways instead.

Second, the apostle says Diotrephes slandered John and rejected his authority as an apostle. "Diotrephes . . . will have nothing

to do with us," says John, adding that he is continually "gossiping maliciously about us."

The apostles had a unique role in the history of the church. They were to lay the foundations of the church and had authority to settle questions within the church. The apostles are no longer with us, but their Spirit-inspired words have been handed down to us in God's Word. When Diotrephes slandered John and rejected his apostolic authority, he was slandering the Holy Spirit's message as spoken through John.

Third, Diotrephes refused to welcome the brethren who came in the name of the Lord. Diotrephes, however, would have nothing to do with them and refused to allow them to speak in the church.

Fourth, Diotrephes put out of the church anyone who showed hospitality to these brethren. Diotrephes indulged in what we call today "secondary separation." He objected not only to the missionaries who came to the church, but even those who would have received them. This has been one of the curses of the church ever since. Because of this tendency to refuse fellowship to someone who likes someone you do not like, the church is still divided and lacking in the power that oneness in Christ brings.

How, then, should we deal with church bosses? John's counsel is twofold. First, church bosses should be confronted and exposed for their own good and the good of the church. "If I come," says John, "I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us." The church must exercise its legitimate authority to deal with sin in its ranks. If pastors or elders behave arrogantly, the other elders must confront them. If lay members behave

as bosses, the church leadership must show them their error and restore them, gently and lovingly but firmly—even if it means risking the wrath of wealthy donors.

The process for confronting sin in the church is found in such passages as Proverbs 27:5–6; Matthew 18:15–20; and Galatians 6:1–3. Most important of all is John’s principle of dealing with the matter openly: “I will call attention to what he is doing.” Church bosses tend to operate in the shadows; when their deeds are brought into the light, they lose their power to intimidate and control others.

The second word of counsel John gives Gaius is to avoid becoming like Diotrephes. He does not advise Gaius to organize a split away from the church or to attempt to wrest power from Diotrephes through subtle strategies or hidden agenda. He doesn’t suggest a whisper campaign against Diotrephes.

Instead, he counsels Gaius to avoid becoming contaminated by the attitude and spirit of Diotrephes: “Do not imitate what is evil but what is good” (v. 11). If you become like Diotrephes, then he has defeated you. He has turned you away from becoming like Christ and caused you to become like him.

Remember, Christ was not a boss; He was a servant.

Demetrius: A Christian of Trust and Truth

The third personality we discover in 3 John is a man named Demetrius, of whom John writes:

Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true (1:12).

John writes as an apostle with the gift of discernment. He says, in effect, “I want to underscore what everybody thinks about Demetrius. He’s someone you can trust. He’s a person of the truth.” Demetrius was apparently the mail carrier, the bearer of this letter to Gaius, and likely was one of those missionaries who traveled from place to place. John characterized such missionaries (whom he calls “the brothers”):

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth (vv. 5–8).

These words describe the first group of traveling missionaries, and Demetrius was evidently one of this group. As they went from place to place, they enjoyed the hospitality of various churches and labored as church-supported evangelists in each area, reaching out into places where the church had not yet gone.

John says three things of these missionaries: First, they had gone out; they had left behind the comforts of home. Second, they had given up income and security to obey a higher calling. Not everyone is called to missionary work. Some are called to this special task on behalf of the Lord Jesus. Others, such as Gaius, were to stay and support those who were sent out. And third, they labored in the name of Jesus. John writes, “It was for the

sake of the Name that they went out” (v. 7). The name of Jesus was very special to these early Christians.

In Old Testament times, the Jews treated the name of God in a unique way. The name, Jehovah, appears throughout the Old Testament and is referred to as the Ineffable Tetragrammaton. *Ineffable* means indescribable or unutterable, and *tetragrammaton* means four letters (YHWH).

Whenever the Jews encountered these four Hebrew letters for God, they did not dare speak them. Even the scribe who wrote the tetragrammaton would change pens and continue writing with a different pen. Scribes also changed their garments in reverence for God’s name before they would write it. When they wrote the words of Deuteronomy 6:4—“Hear, O Israel: THE LORD [YHWH] our God, the LORD [YHWH] is one”—scribes would have to change clothes twice and change pens four times to write that one line, since the tetragrammaton occurs twice.

In the New Testament, a high measure of respect and devotion is reserved for the name of Jesus. The apostle Paul says,

God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9–11).

Love for the precious name of Jesus has been the motive for sacrificial missionary efforts ever since the first century. Men and women have suffered and died for the beautiful name that people all over the world need to hear. Even if we are not called to go out into the world as missionaries, we can still evangelize our neighborhoods and workplaces in the name of Jesus. We can be witnesses in His name wherever we are. And we can be partners with the missionaries who are telling His story around the world, as John says:

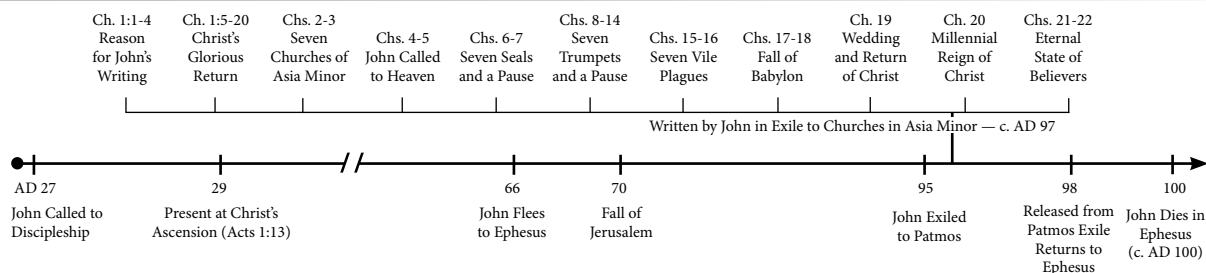
We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth (1:8).

Next, John closes his letter with a warm and personal conclusion:

I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name (1:13–14).

So ends a powerful, intimate letter that seems to come not only from John, but from the Lord Himself. Whenever I read these words, I feel as if I am hearing the Lord Jesus Christ tell me, “There is much that I’d like to say to you, but I’d rather not write it in a letter. Instead, I’m coming soon. We’ll talk face-to-face then. In the meantime, I leave my peace with you. Love always, your friend, Jesus.”

The End—and a New Beginning



What is it that makes us want to read the last chapter first?

For some reason, many people begin reading the Bible with Revelation. That's understandable—but it's usually a mistake. While Revelation is vivid, dramatic, and exciting, this book plunges you into a confusing swirl of dragons and trumpets, vials and seals, and strange Old Testament symbols and imagery. If you begin with Revelation, you might give up on the Bible, thinking, "I can't make any sense of it!" Without a background in both the Old and New Testaments, Revelation will leave you baffled.

But the book of Revelation is not impossible to understand. If you are familiar with the rest of the Bible, you'll be able to relate events in Revelation to the entire pattern of prophecy in God's Word. With careful, patient study, it will all make sense.

Revelation is the capstone of the Bible, strategically placed at the end of the Bible. It's the climax of the entire revelation of God to His people. It's also the lens through which human history and Bible prophecy come into focus. This

book shows us how all the events of human history have been pointing toward a single event: the return of Jesus Christ to establish His kingdom.

The book of Revelation is the only book of prophecy in the New Testament, though other New Testament books do contain prophetic passages. The Gospels contain prophetic utterances of Jesus, and the prophetic revelations given to Paul are found primarily in his letters to the Thessalonians. Nonetheless, Revelation is the only book in the New Testament that is primarily devoted to prophecy.

The title of the book is contained in the first verse of the book:

The revelation of Jesus Christ . . .

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

We come to the last chapter of this book and the last act of human history. Our goal is to clear away the sensationalism and confusion surrounding the book of Revelation, and reveal God's final word on world events. Though this book is filled with strange symbols and imagery, the book of Revelation can be brought into clear focus. These pages will serve as the lens.

LEFT: Island of Patmos

BOOKENDS OF THE BIBLE



It is no accident that the book of Revelation appears as the last book of the Bible. Revelation gathers all the threads of historic events contained in the rest of the Bible and weaves them into a seamless whole. The entire scope of human history—and of eternity itself—comes into brilliant focus in the book of Revelation.

Someone has rightly observed that the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation are like two bookends that hold the entire Bible together. In Genesis we have the story of the origin of human sin; in Revelation we have the complete and final victory over sin. Genesis presents the beginning of human history and civilization; Revelation presents the end of both. In Genesis we learn the beginnings of God's judgment and His grace toward mankind; in Revelation we see the awesome result of His judgment and the triumph of His grace. The great themes of these two books are intricately intertwined.

Ray C. Stedman

God's Final Word: Understanding Revelation
(Discovery House Publishers, 1991)

Notice, it is not *Revelations*, plural. This is a singular revelation of a singular person, Jesus Christ. John continues:

. . . which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John (1:1).

God the Father gave this revelation to Jesus Christ. Jesus then revealed it to John through an angel. The purpose of this revelation is to show the Lord's servants—that's you and me and all other followers of Christ—what must soon take place. The book was written by the apostle John, sometime around AD 95, when he was an exiled captive on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

John says that he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when he began to see visions of things that must soon come to pass. So this is clearly a predictive book.

God's Use of Symbols in Revelation

Notice that statement at the end of 1:1: "He made it known by sending his angel." The words, "He made it known," are a translation of a Greek word that means, "He signified it." Notice that the word *signified* can be broken down this way: "He sign-ified it." That is, God made this revelation known by signs, by symbols.

Why did God use symbols? Why didn't He just reveal the future in plain language? One reason is because He was dealing with future events, which were beyond the imagination and understanding of men and women of the first century: nuclear warfare, biological warfare, worldwide plagues, information technologies, and space technologies. How could these concepts be explained to a generation that knew nothing about computers, missiles, nuclear energy, or aerial warfare?

The symbols we find in Revelation are consistent with symbols found in other

prophetic passages of the Bible. They are part of the overall prophetic tapestry of Scripture. So if you want to understand Revelation, you should begin by comparing Revelation with Daniel, Ezekiel, and other parts of the Old and New Testaments.

I believe the Holy Spirit knew that this book would be difficult for many, so we find these words at the beginning of the book:

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near (1:3).

We who seek God's blessing on our lives and who want to understand the shape of things to come are eager to understand the symbols found in God's book of Revelation.

The Background of the Book of Revelation

Revelation is addressed, first of all, to the seven churches in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). There were more than seven churches in that region, of course, but these seven churches were selected because they were representative of the churches of every era of history, including our own.

These letters come not from the apostle John, but from the triune God who has inspired these words. In an introductory passage, John sets forth the triune nature of the divine author of these letters, although it must be read carefully to be understood:

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Ruins of an ancient church at Sardis



Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come [that's God the Father], and from the seven spirits before his throne [signifying the Holy Spirit in His sevenfold plenitude of power], and from Jesus Christ [the Son], who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:4–5).

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit jointly gave these seven letters to the seven churches—and to us. The triune God also gave the amazing prediction that follows. As is the case with most modern books, the ancient book of Revelation contains a dedication:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen (1:5–6).

Revelation is dedicated to Jesus Christ, the One who laid the foundation for all human blessing. Next, the theme of the book is introduced:

*Look, he is coming with the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and all the peoples of the earth will
mourn because of him.
So shall it be! Amen (1:7).*

This is a book about the second coming of Jesus Christ—how it will be accomplished, the events on earth that accompany this event, and what will happen afterward. The Lord then adds His personal signature as the book's author:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8).

This book was written during a time of intense persecution of the church, during the reign of the vicious Roman emperor Domitian, who declared himself lord and god of the Roman people. The Christians of the time were desperate for encouragement and assurance, so they welcomed this message from the Lord, the one who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. They needed to hear that all of history, including their time of suffering, was under His control.

Outline and Divisions of the Book of Revelation

The framework for the book is given in 1:19, where John records what the Lord told him: “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.” The book falls into these three divisions: (1) the things John saw—chapter 1; (2) “what is now,” current conditions as expressed in the seven letters to the seven churches—chapters 2 and 3; and (3) “what will take place later”—future events as described in chapters 4 through 22.

I believe that the phrase “what will take place later” refers to the events following the departure of the church. While chapters 2 and 3 cover the entire present age (from John's time to our own), all of the chapters that follow concern the culmination of human events. Elsewhere in the Bible this startling event is called the great tribulation, or the time of the end, or Daniel's Seventieth Week. All the frightening turbulence of our

own day is moving toward this event, and in this chapter we will touch briefly on some of the highlights of this unfolding of God's plan.

Seven Letters to Seven Churches

In chapters 2 and 3, we have the letters to the seven churches, which should be viewed on three levels. First, they are addressed to actual churches and deal with actual problems in those churches. Second, these churches symbolize the various types of churches that have existed and will exist throughout history. Your own church undoubtedly fits the pattern of one of these churches. Third, these churches represent the seven stages in the process of the history of the church, from the first century until today.

Let's look at each of these seven letters.

The church in *Ephesus* (2:2–7) was outwardly successful but was beginning to lose its first love, that driving motivation so necessary for effectiveness in the Christian life. When we look at this letter from the viewpoint of church history, we see that many churches began to lose their first love during the period immediately following the death of the apostles.

The Ephesian period of church history covers the years from AD 70, when the temple at Jerusalem was destroyed, to about AD 160. During that time, literally hundreds of churches had drifted from their warm, compassionate ministry to the world toward a formal, unloving institutional religion. As a result, the church of that era became rife with conflict and theological arguments.

The word *Smyrna* means “myrrh,” a fragrant spice or perfume obtained when the tender bark of the flowering myrrh tree is pierced or crushed. It is a fitting name for the first century church of Smyrna (2:8–11), which gave off a fragrance of Christ throughout the region, because it was a church that was often afflicted.

Historically, the church in Smyrna represents a period called the Age of Martyrs, which lasted from about AD 160 to the rise of the first so-called Christian emperor, Constantine the Great, in AD 324. To call this period the Age of Martyrs is not to suggest that this was the only time in history when Christians have been martyred. Rather, this was a time when Christians were persecuted with unequaled cruelty.

Pergamum means “married” and was a church (2:12–17) that had married the world. It was trying to cohabitate with the godless world system that surrounded it. All the attitudes and value systems of an unbelieving world had infiltrated the processes of the church at Pergamum.

The Pergamum stage of church history is that period of time between the accession of Constantine the Great in AD 324 to the sixth century, when the era of the popes began. This was the time of the first “marriage” between church and state, when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. During this time, the church enjoyed considerable popularity. It was viewed not so much as a family of faith but as a worldly kingdom, much like any other kingdom. As the church's political influence grew, its spiritual influence waned.

The church in *Thyatira* (2:18–29) was going through a period of spiritual adultery. It had lost its purity and needed to purify itself lest the Lord Himself purify through discipline. It was the most corrupt of the seven churches.

The Thyatira age was a dark and corrupt period in Christian history—better known as the Dark Ages, when the church lost its zeal and purity, and became infiltrated with superstition and paganism. The Dark Ages lasted from the seventh century to the sixteenth century, when the Reformation began.

The church in *Sardis* (3:1–6) rediscovered the truth of God, but it lacked vitality. The church had built a good reputation, but was really dead and corrupt inside. Today, we would call the Christians at Sardis “nominal Christians”—nominal from the root word for “name.” The Christians at Sardis were Christians in name only. Jesus told them, “You have a reputation, a name for being alive—but you are dead!” Apparently, the church at Sardis was made up largely of people who outwardly professed Christ, but possessed no real spiritual life.

This is a picture of the period of the Reformation, from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century. Although the Reformation churches began in a flaming fire of zeal, they soon died down to the whitened ashes of a dead orthodoxy.

The church of *Philadelphia* (3:7–13) is a wonderful church. The Lord has no criticism whatsoever of this church. He commended the Philadelphia church because it was faithful to the Word. It had a little strength, He says,

speaking of the quiet inner strength of the Holy Spirit, as contrasted with the overt power of the world’s political structure.

This church typifies the church age of the nineteenth century, the great evangelical awakening, when the Christian church focused less on acquiring political power and more on obeying its inner strength, the Holy Spirit. The church of that era was stirred to action, and it expanded into the far corners of the earth in a great missionary movement.

The church of *Laodicea* (3:14–22), the rich church, says, “We don’t need anything at all from God. We’ve got money, influence, and power. That’s all we need.” And God says, “You blind fools! Don’t you know you don’t have anything—that you are wretched, poor, pitiable, and blind? Buy from me gold refined by fire.” The Lord pictures Himself standing outside the door of the church, knocking for admittance. “You are neither cold nor hot,” says the Lord. The Laodiceans were not like the church at Sardis, which was as cold as death. Nor were they like the church at Philadelphia, which was hot, alive, and vital. They were merely lukewarm.

Each of the seven churches of Revelation represents a specific time in church history. Looking back across twenty centuries of church history, we can see how accurate each of these prophetic symbols has been. As both history and prophecy clearly confirm, Laodicea symbolizes the church of the last age—our own age! Yes, we live in Laodicean times, when the church

considers itself rich, but is really poor. The church of our own age is lukewarm, neither hot nor cold.

Of course, this is a generalization. We see many vital churches, many on-fire Christians, even in our lukewarm age. Our challenge is to make sure that we live as Philadelphian Christians even in a Laodicean age. Even if every other church around us seems infected with Laodiceanism, we can still choose to burn brightly and hotly, giving off the light of Jesus in this age of the church. If we do so, then Jesus says that the concluding promise of Revelation 3 is ours:

“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (3:21–22).

What Will Take Place Later

The book of Revelation takes an abrupt turn at chapter 4. Notice the key phrase in verse 2: “in the Spirit.” This phrase occurs four times in Revelation: in 1:10, where John is on the Isle of Patmos and hears the trumpet-like voice that introduces this vision; here in 4:2; in 17:3, when an angel carries him into the desert where he sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast; and also in 21:10, when John is carried to a mountain and shown the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. Whenever John says he is “in the Spirit,” it signals that something highly significant is happening.

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before

me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it (4:2).

This juncture is significant because the scene shifts now from earth to heaven. By heaven, I don’t mean somewhere out in space. In the Bible, heaven is the realm of the invisible—another dimension, if you like, wherein God reigns hidden from our eyes but present among us. It is a spiritual kingdom that surrounds us on every side, but one we cannot taste, touch, or see. The heavenly realm is utterly real—more real than this plane of existence that we call “real life.” What we think of as reality is a mere vapor compared with the reality of the spiritual dimension.

The kingdom of heaven is opened to John, and he sees a throne and one who sits upon it. Immediately John knew who it was; he did not need to be told. It was the throne of God, and God was in control of all history. John saw a remarkable vision of the powerlessness and weakness of humanity contrasted with the limitless might and authority of God.

John then sees a Lamb standing in front of the throne—a Lamb with its throat cut. That may seem a strange symbol for the Son of God, but it is an apt one—a slaughtered innocent lamb, a sacrifice. As John watched, the Lamb turned into a Lion, and John saw that this Lamb-turned-Lion was also the king of all. He stood before the One upon the throne, who held in His hand a little book.

This little book is enormously significant in the book of Revelation: It is God’s program for the establishment of His kingdom on earth. In heaven, God rules unchallenged; on earth, His will is constantly being challenged by puny humans who dare to lift their fists

against the Creator-God of the universe. But God is going to change all that, and He is going to do so by means of the Lamb who is the Lion, the one who alone has the right to take the book (actually, a scroll) and open it.

The Seven Seals

The scroll is kept shut by seven seals. As the seven seals of the book are loosened, the scroll unrolls until at last its text is plain to all. John weeps when he first sees the scroll because he thinks that no one has the right to open it. But then he sees the Son of Man, and he knows that Jesus alone is entitled to unfurl the scroll that will bring about God's kingdom on earth.

The number of seals on the scroll—seven—is significant. The number seven appears frequently in this book, and it is always a significant number. We have already seen the seven churches. Now we see seven seals, each one revealing a new power at work on earth. The seven seals are followed by seven trumpets and then seven vials (or bowls), which are full of God's wrath.

In Revelation 6, we witness the beginning of this seven-year period that is the culmination of human history, according to the prophet Daniel. All the worldwide events of our present day are moving toward a seven-year period called the great tribulation, which will be ushered in by a worldwide preaching of the gospel, as we learn from our Lord's talk to the disciples on the Mount of Olives:

"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come"
(Matt. 24:14).

The book of Revelation first considers the church as a unit, then turns to historical events concerning the rest of the world. In light of this, I believe that the church is caught up to be with the Lord prior to the period of the seven-year tribulation. The first event of that age is the worldwide preaching of the gospel, symbolized by the first of these seven seals:

I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest (6:2).

White always symbolizes divinity and deity, as well as purity and holiness. The bow represents conquest. This is a picture of the gospel's conquest of the world.

The second seal means war. John writes:

Another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword (6:4).

Could that great sword symbolize the terrible power of nuclear weapons? Or even conventional warfare on a previously unimaginable scale?

The third seal and the third horseman symbolize famine, which is inevitable in the wake of worldwide war.

The fourth seal and the fourth horseman bring calamitous death by four means—sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts:

I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill

by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth (6:8).

In the second, third, and fourth seals John describes the forces at work in humanity to produce the events of history in the last days. Human power is therefore prominent throughout this time, and we see that God allows the sinful human race to unleash horrible events.

The fifth seal is an expression of the inward power of humanity, the prayer of the martyrs. This is followed by cosmic disturbances, which provide a key to the entire book:

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place (6:12–14).

The earthquake in this passage gives us a clue to understanding this book. The final event shown in the sixth seal is a global calamity marked by a great earthquake, hail, and fire. This event signals the end of the seven-year period Jesus described when He said, “Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken’ ” (Matt. 24:29). This will happen just before Jesus Christ returns with His church.

The seventh seal summarizes the events of the last half of this seven-year period, which are unfolded for us in Revelation 10 and 11.

There again we encounter the earthquake when the seventh trumpet sounds:

Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm (11:19).

The Woman, the Beast, and the Dragon

Chapters 12 through 14 introduce several larger-than-life characters who act out the terrifying drama on earth. First, a woman (easily recognizable as Israel) brings forth a man-child, whom history has already informed us is the Son of God. The fallen angels of the devil and the great dragon called Satan are arrayed against Him for battle. As John watches, a beast rises up out of the sea, and John recognizes that the beast is a form of human government linked to Rome, the fourth great world kingdom spoken of by Daniel. In some form, the Roman Empire is to exist until the end of time.

If you look at our Western world, you can see how true that is. Every nation of the Western hemisphere was settled by a member nation of the Roman Empire. We are Roman to the core; the whole Western world is Roman in its thought, philosophy, and attitude. Associated with this beast out of the sea is another beast, or religious leader, who rises out of the earth, whom many Bible scholars link with the Antichrist.

The Vials of God’s Wrath

Chapters 14 through 16 deal largely with a description of the vials of God’s wrath. These containers of God’s wrath are

exactly the same as the terrible judgments of which Jesus spoke when He said that “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” At that time, God’s wrath would be poured out upon the earth.

In the latter part of chapter 16 and continuing through chapters 17 and 18, we find the judgment of the great religious harlot called “MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT.” Babylon was the source of ancient idolatry, and is used as a symbol of what we might call “religious godlessness”—something that looks godly and spiritual but is essentially godless. It is a religion that exercises political power through religious authority.

If you read this passage carefully, you will see that “Mystery Babylon” is not any one system, institution, or denomination but rather an attitude that permeates the entire church. Wherever you find anyone acting religiously, trying to gain political power or authority, you have mystery Babylon, and it is found in all churches. As Jesus said, referring to the weeds planted among the good wheat, “Let both grow together until the harvest” (Matt. 13:30). And the scene in Revelation 19 is that harvest. John also has a vision of the harvest of the earth in chapter 14:

I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one “like a son of man” with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, “Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe” (14:14–15).

This harvest occurs when Jesus Christ returns to earth:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty (19:11–15).

By this time, all the nations of the earth have gathered in that battlefield called Armageddon, in the land of Israel, and this is where the Son of God appears with the armies of heaven. Now at last, all the supernatural forces—forces that human beings have so long and arrogantly denied—suddenly reveal themselves to human eyes in such a way as to eliminate all the opposition of entrenched evil against the will and authority of God.

A New Heaven and a New Earth

The book of Revelation closes as the Son of God sets up His kingdom on earth, just as He promised. After the judgment of the dead comes a new heaven and a new earth, and the city of God, the New Jerusalem, descends from heaven. There, God makes His habitation with the human race. It is the fulfillment of the prayer Jesus taught us to

pray: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

This city is astoundingly beautiful. John sees no temple in it, for it does not need a temple, nor does it need the sun or moon to shine upon it. The light within it is the presence of God Himself. Its gates shall never be shut day or night. The entire universe is at last cleansed of human rebellion, and there is nothing to be feared. All the beautiful dreams of the prophets are fulfilled at this time. Swords are transformed into plowshares and spears into hooks for pruning the fruit-laden trees.

And war shall be no more.

“I Am Coming Soon”

At the end of the book, we are admonished to wait for the coming of Jesus and to work for it, to be diligent and faithful and obedient until the Son of God returns. You may be surprised to know that this is a book of hope and optimism. Although Revelation is better known for its scenes of death and mass destruction, it does not stop there. Revelation looks beyond the tribulation, beyond Armageddon, all the way to the final victory of God, more sure than tomorrow’s sunrise.

C. S. Lewis writes this commentary on that glorious coming day:

God is going to invade, all right; but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else—something it never entered your head to conceive—comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of

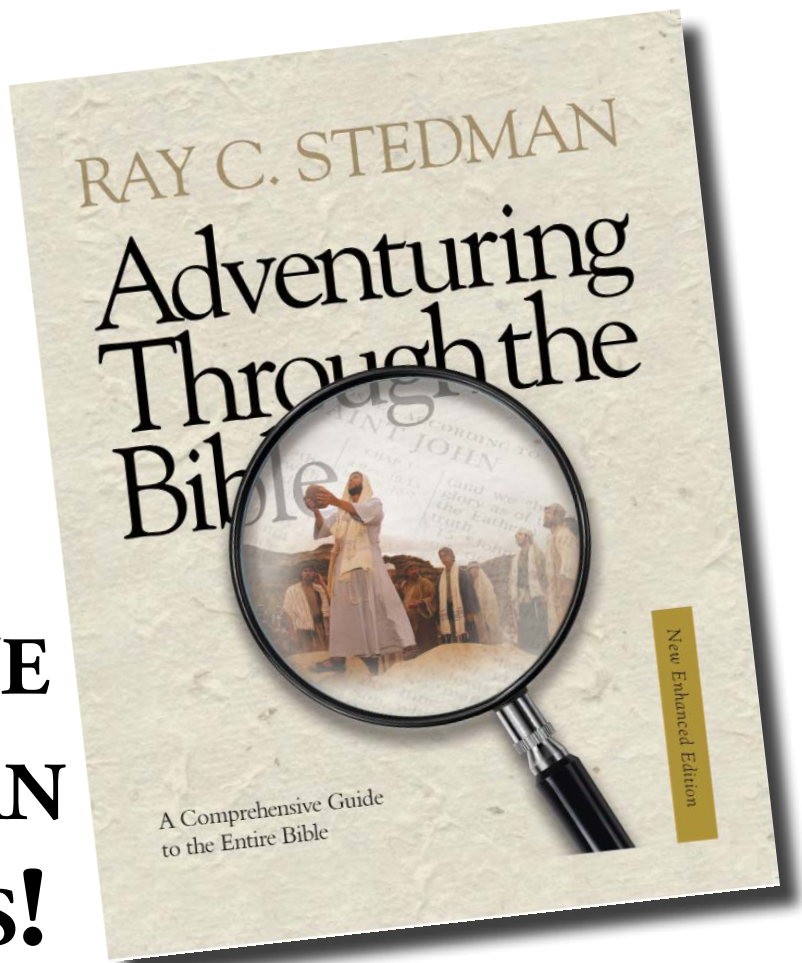
us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it (*Mere Christianity* [1943; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1960], 66).

Revelation is filled with encouragement. It is a book that will either inspire your faith or fill you with fear. It will give you great comfort and encouragement if you know the Lord of all time and all space. But it is also a solemn book designed to make us understand that the One who unrolls the scroll is the One who died on Calvary’s cross, the Lamb led to slaughter so that He might win the right to be the Lion, the king of all the earth.

The Lord is coming, and it won’t be long now. Those who know Him welcome that day and work and pray to hasten it. People who don’t know Him either scoff at that day or dread it. The book of Revelation concludes with this promise of Jesus Himself:

He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen (22:20 –21).

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