

THE CHURCH IN THE LAST DAYS

“...in the last days perilous times shall come.” — 2 Tim. 3:1

If you are a Christian, you have placed God above all and love Him with all your heart, soul and mind. (Matt. 22:37) In the past, this confession often required courage sufficient to endure cruel persecutions, suffering and even death. Today however, religion in this country has become fashionable for a people dwelling in comfort and abundance. There is no fear of being thrown to the lions or burned alive for confession of one’s faith. Still, the Scriptures are clear, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” 2 Tim. 3:12

The perilous times for the Christian today take on a more subtle character. The faithful are marked as extremist if they insist on weeding out tradition, errors and human philosophies from their worship. These are told that nobody knows what the Bible really teaches and that they are better off just accepting what the clergy presents, since they should know best. Most will succumb to these arguments and conform to Church dictates and society’s relative view of morality and truth. But true Christians will be willing to stand up for principle in the face of persecution no matter what form this may take.

They will be committed to truth and righteousness, because Jesus, their example, “loved righteousness and hated iniquity.” (Heb. 1:9) Christians throughout the Gospel Age have been hated for this same cause.

SEVEN STAGES OF THE GOSPEL AGE CHURCH AND THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

The second and third chapters of the *Book of Revelation* are devoted to the seven stages of the Church throughout the Christian or Gospel era until the *time of the end*. Of each stage is written what is commendable of those who were faithful and what is condemnatory of those claiming to be Christ’s Church but were not. Likewise, in the parable of Matthew 13:24-30 these true and false Christians are characterized as *wheat* and *tares* which were to grow together until the *harvest*. Jesus identified himself as the one who sowed the good seed and the devil as the one who sowed the bad. (vs. 37, 39) Tares look very much like wheat but actually are weeds which sap nutrients from the soil and choke the wheat.

During the first six stages of the Church, the wheat and the tares were allowed to grow together. But the parable goes on to illustrate that at

the *end of the age* these would be separated “...the harvest is the end of the world [Greek meaning *age*].” Matt. 13:39

The first stage of the Church, *Ephesus*, began at Pentecost, when the followers of Jesus were given the holy Spirit. This was the sowing of the *good seed*, and John the Revelator speaks of them thus: “I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars...” (Rev. 2:2) Thus, the early Church had a solid foundation, and when the tares were sown among them, they recognized them for what they were and found great discomfort being in their company. Eph. 5:11

In the second through the sixth stages of the Church, the true Christians remained *faithful unto death* (Rev. 2:10) while the false actually brought upon the true severe persecution—like tares which choked the very life out of the wheat. True Christians never did—nor ever will—persecute others in any manner. All persecution stems from the spirit of Antichrist.

The sixth stage of the Church was that of *Philadelphia*. (Rev. 3:7) In this stage were the Reformers who sought to remove creedal errors and wicked practices by a return to the oracles of God’s Word. The Reformation came about because the faithful Reformers, such as Luther and Melancton, sought again “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) Their cry was “the priesthood of all believers!” But, sadly, as prophesied in the parable, the tares grew together with the wheat and soon the spirit of clergy versus laity and creedal errors choked out the freedom that had been achieved for the true believer.

The final, or seventh stage of the Church is known as the *Church of Laodicea*. (Rev. 3:14) Note the Revelator’s description of this time period: “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot... because thou sayest, I am rich [thinking themselves to be righteous], and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked [lacking the covering of Christ and trying to stand in their own righteousness]...” Isa. 64:6, Rev. 3:15, 17

Most Christians today would agree that these are the *last days*, and therefore, this is the final, *Laodicean* stage of the Church. According to



“Fear not little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” — Luke 12:32

Jesus, the end of the age was to be a time when there would be *“distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth.”* (Luke 21:25, 26) With intercontinental ballistic missiles, hydrogen bombs, germ warfare and radiation pollution facing a hate-filled world, there is little question that this is the end of the age. For Christians this means a time of separation — an unwillingness to be grouped with those who are not wholeheartedly God’s. At last, the *end of the age* has come and with it the time for *harvesting* the wheat from the tares!

The tare class seeks to compromise with the world by making truth and righteousness relative to the society and era in which they live. But the wheat know that there are absolutes clearly manifest in the Scriptures. Statistics indicate that immorality in the church is rampant today. *“One in ten ministers have had affairs with members of their congregations, and about one in four have had some kind of sexual contact with parishioners.”* Christianity Today, April 9, 1990

HARVEST OF THE LAODICEAN CHURCH

Sincere Christians lament the worldliness they see in their church and the commercial atmosphere that overshadows their worship. They often confess the sad lack of spirituality in the membership and lack of doctrinal teaching from the pulpit. Further, there are ever increasing appeals for donations.

Those who are sincere in their love of God are so appalled at the lukewarm attitude of so many in their midst that they do not know where to turn. John the Revelator continues: *“...I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve [of the beauties of God’s truth], that thou mayest see. ...Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”* Rev. 3:18, 20

Truly, this seventh stage of the Church is a time for separating the Christian wheat from those who are lukewarm tares, who claim to be Christians but are so in name only. We now see the binding of the tares into bundles taking place. (Matt. 13:30) From everywhere people are being gathered into sects, denominations, organizations and cults. Under this irresistible mass appeal to conform, the binding into bundles continues against the hour when the fire of trial shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. (1 Cor. 3:13-15) Notice that it is the *work* that will be burned and not the person. The promise to those whose work was tried in the fire as gold which does not perish, is that Christ will bring the nourishment of truth for their hungering souls.

The response of true Christians is active, not passive — *buy of me gold... anoint thine eyes... hear my voice... open the door...* Christians have a responsibility to *work out their own salvation* and *study to show themselves approved unto God...* (Phil. 2:12; 2 Tim. 2:15) In other words, Christians are not to rest on the laurels of the clergy, nor are they to believe that a particular denomination is as a ship travelling to heaven and as long as they are in it, they are safe. No, each Christian has an

individual relationship with God and no one speaks between God and the Christian except through Christ. The Bible says, *“God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”* (John 4:24) The true Christian, in placing God above all, dedicates his life to know and to preach God’s truth in word and conduct.

“COME OUT OF HER, MY PEOPLE”

Set in the same prophetic time frame as the wheat and the tares parable is the call to *“Come out of her [Babylon, the counterfeit church], my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”* (Rev. 18:4) The true Church is spoken of

as a *virgin* espoused to Christ and the false church as a *harlot* who has not remained unstained from the world. Verse 3 states that the nations of earth were drunk with the *“wine of the wrath of her fornication.”* Thus, Babylon is depicted as a *harlot* and the rulers of earth as her paramours. Verse 23 tells that once the *“light of a candle”* [the Word of God] shown in her. Finally, verse 24 fixes her guilt by pronouncing that the *“blood of prophets, and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth”* was found in her.

In the days of the Reformation there was no question about who *Babylon* was. There was only one

church system claiming to be the virgin bride of Christ, yet mated with the kings of the earth. Only one church was so cruel and unremitting in her bitter persecution of those who would not submit to her dictates. Jesus said, *“My kingdom is not of this world.”* John 18:36

Originally, all Christians held to this view. They knew their purpose was not to try to remake the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of God. They knew they were neither to enter world politics, nor to enter its wars. They knew better than to lead bloody crusades in the name of Christ. They knew their allegiance was to Christ and his coming Kingdom — awaiting his return as espoused virgins. The unholy union of the false church with the kings of the earth is commonly referred to as *Christendom* or Christ’s Kingdom, but it is certainly not the true Kingdom. The true Kingdom of Christ will only be a reality when the *King of kings* reigns in power and great glory upon the earth. This great King will have no part in these old, ineffectual civil or religious governments of earth. He has promised to *“make all things new.”* Rev. 21:5; Dan. 2:44.

The day is past when true Christians are expected to reform the corrupt church systems. That has already been tried. Babylon will not be healed. (Jer. 51:9) Only one course remains: Forsake her — *“Come out of her, my people.”* Not only are God’s people directed to come out, but the Lord in his mercy warns that those who do not come out will *“receive of her plagues.”* This means the wayward of his people shall share the sorrow and affliction shortly to come upon the system of Babylon. Inasmuch as the false church is in league and friendship with the world, in its politics, in its social affairs, in its economics, God must call His people out. But where should they go?

WHICH IS THE ONE TRUE CHURCH?

God has never called his children to join an organization. His calling is, as the Psalmist so beautifully expressed it, *“Gather my*



saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice." (Psa. 50:5)

The word Church was first used in the New Testament and is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means *a calling out*, or a selection. Jesus said to his disciples, *"I have chosen you out of the world."* (John 15:19) The Church is a company of believers who, in accepting the invitation of Christ, have become *sanctified* or separated from the world and worldly pursuits. The Apostle Paul defines the Church as the *body of Christ* with Christ as its head. Eph. 1:22, 23; 1 Cor. 12:12, 13

Thus, the true Church is not a building, a denomination, nor even a place. Those of the early Church bore no denominational names, but were simply identified by their location. *"Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, ...sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints..."* (1 Cor. 1:2) Yes, saints were any who had consecrated and sanctified (set apart) their lives to God.

It is a misconception that one *joins a church*, or is baptized into a certain denomination. Becoming a *member* of the Lord's Church depends upon him; *"... the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."* (Acts 2:47) Paul emphasized that the body members of Christ were baptized only into Christ and not into a person or denomination. (1 Cor. 1:10-13) Paul states that there is but *one baptism*, and that is into Christ. Eph. 4:4-6

Having heard the call, there are steps indicated in the Scriptures for those desiring to answer that call. First, one must have a sincere recognition of the fact that we are members of a sin-cursed and dying race and could therefore have no standing before the Lord in our own righteousness. (Mark 2:17; Acts 26:20) Next, we must personally accept Christ as our Savior, realizing that only through the merit of his shed blood can we be acceptable to God. (Acts 13:38, 39; 16:31; Rom. 3:22; 5:1) Upon our confidence in the merit of his sacrifice, we are then invited to present ourselves in unreserved devotion to do the will of God and not the will of ourselves or of man. (Rom. 12:1,2) *"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."* (Matt. 16:24) Those who accept this invitation lay down their lives in sacrificial service. As Paul described it: *"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?"* (Rom. 6:3) Our baptism into Christ is the burial of our will into his. Thus, since we willingly follow his leading, he becomes our head and we the members of his body.

WITNESS OF SONSHIP

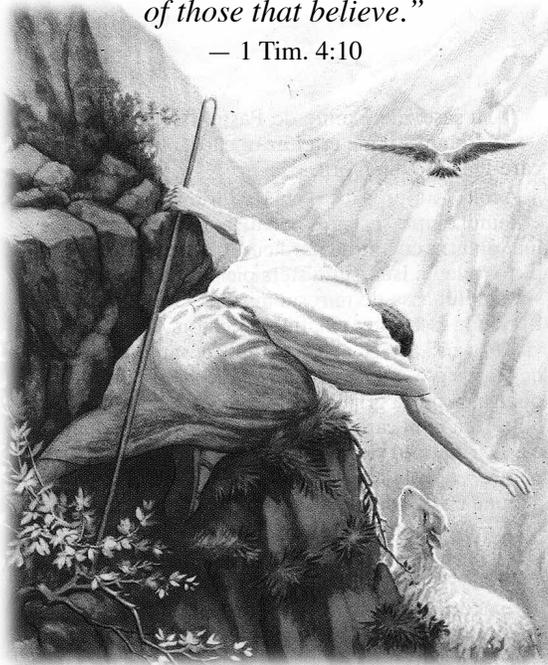
There are several Scriptural evidences of the witness of the spirit which God grants to those accepted into Christ's body. *"The spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God..."* Rom. 8:16

One of these evidences is that *"old things [of interest to the flesh] are passed away; behold, all things are become new."* (2 Cor. 5:17) We find our greatest joys in the new hopes, aims and ambitions of the Lord, his word and his people. Another evidence of *sonship* is

that we have a desire to know *"the deep things of God."* (1 Cor. 2:9,10; John 15:15) God promised that when His spirit would come upon the Church, it would lead them into all truth. (John 16:13; John 15:26) God will lead, but we must continue to follow. Yet another evidence of our entrance into this body of believers is that we will have a desire to preach the good tidings to others and as a result, we will receive persecution as we take a stand for truth and righteousness. (Matt. 5:11,12; 2 Tim. 3:12; John 15:19, 20, 27) Still further witness of the Lord's spirit is a love of his people and a desire to be with them in prayer, study and fellowship. *"And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."* Acts 2:42; John 15:12-13

"We trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe."

— 1 Tim. 4:10



THE ORGANIZATION OF THE NEW CREATION

The Scriptures indicate that the *called out* ones in the early years of Christianity had very simple arrangements. Their meetings were not without order, however, and various privileges of service were assigned to different ones according to their abilities. Jesus was universally recognized as the Head. *One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren."* (Matt. 23:8) Following Jesus were the twelve faithful Apostles who were given special authority to speak and write under inspiration of God's holy Spirit. The apostle Paul confirmed that the Lord provided other servants in the Church who would be given special guidance to assist their fellow body

members. *"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ..."* (Eph. 4:11-12) Teachers and pastors were *elected* by the congregation by a vote. A careful study of the arrangements for the Church indicates that these were not to be lords over God's flock, but servants. Liberty was granted to each group to determine for themselves the best arrangement regarding who would lead, and for what they would spend their funds. All were to be governed by love and respect for each other, working as a family.

Jesus said, *"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."* (Matt. 18:20) The early Church should be our example, since it was closer to the instruction of Christ and his Apostles who set up her simple, quiet fellowships. Together the young Christians studied the writings of the prophets and Apostles, and the eye-witness accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. There was no pomp and circumstance. No elegant robes were worn by their teachers. They heard no constant calls for money. There were no large choirs and no magnificent edifices. There was only the *"simplicity that is in Christ."* 2 Cor. 11:3

Thus, the true Church has always been wherever two or more are gathered together in Jesus' name. And, today, even where there is just one, there can be fellowship with others via mail, phone or the Internet. *"God shall supply all your need, according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."* Phil. 4:19

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

At Jesus' death, a new era began — the Gospel Age. God's plan has not been to convert the world now, but He has been selecting out a little flock — a people for His name. Luke 12:32; Acts 15:14

THE PRESENT MISSION OF THE CHURCH

1. **Character Development:** The Church is being developed as individual New Creatures in the graces of Christian character through trials and experiences. These experiences have been teaching them sympathy for the poor groaning creation who as yet, have not accepted salvation through Christ. James 1:3-4; Rom. 8:17-23

2. **Trial and Strengthening of Faith:** The faith of each member of the Church is being severely tried that they might prove faithful and receive the prize of the *high calling* to live and reign with Christ. (Rev. 2:10) "...the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire..." 1 Pet. 1:7

3. **Bearing Witness to the Truth:** The Church is being fed the beauties of the truth that they might witness to others and gather the remaining grains of *wheat*. (1 Tim. 2:3-6) Bearing witness to this truth was the cause for which Jesus came into the world, suffered and died. The Church, as part of his body, share in this cause. The effect will be to draw some to the Church and repel others. (John 18:37) It will also bring upon the true Church bitter opposition and

often persecution from the worldly minded. "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." Phil. 1:29



THE FUTURE MISSION OF THE CHURCH:

Once every member of the Church is tried, proven faithful and entered into his or her heavenly reward, the work of the completed Church will change. It is God's plan to instruct the world in righteousness through Christ and the Church. (2 Tim. 2:12, Isa. 26:9; Rev. 20:6) Every experience of every member in the Church will be used to train the world in righteousness and provide an opportunity for them to attain everlasting life. The heavenly reign of Christ and his Church will extend down and fill the entire earth. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is done in heaven." (Matt. 6:10) As Christ was a sympathetic high

priest, so the Church will sympathize with the struggles of those climbing up the highway of holiness. Heb. 4:15; Isa. 35:8-10

When this work is complete, peace and harmony will finally exist through all of God's creation. "And let the Spirit [Christ] and the bride [his body, the Church] say Come, and let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will [all who have ever lived], let him take the water of life freely." Rev. 22:17

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