

# APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE OF MINISTRY

## MINISTERIAL TRAINING COURSE

### The Seven Churches of Asia

#### Lesson One

READ: Rev. 1:9-20

THINK: Jesus dictated to John seven letters addressed to seven churches located in Asia Minor (present day Turkey). Although each of those churches existed in first century Asia Minor, it has long been recognized by the church that the letters to those churches have a much greater significance. The letters are prophetic, for each one addresses the church during a particular period in its history, from the first century to the end of the church age. The messages of these letters are profound, and paint an accurate picture of Christian history over the past two thousand years. Below we have listed the seven churches, along with the period of history each addresses:

|                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| The Church in Ephesus:             | The First Century Church         |
| The Church in Smyrna:              | The Persecuted Church            |
| The Church in Pergamos:            | The Church Influenced by Babylon |
| The Church in Thyatira:            | The Roman (and Eastern) Church   |
| The Church in Sardis:              | The Protestant Churches          |
| The Church in Philadelphia:<br>and | The End-Time Churches            |
| The Church in Laodicea:            |                                  |

WRITE: In the class Babylon The Great, the city of Pergamos figured prominently. What did Pergamos have to do with Babylon?

# APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE OF MINISTRY

## MINISTERIAL TRAINING COURSE

### The Seven Churches of Asia

#### Lesson Two

READ: Rev. 2:1-7

THINK: The first letter was addressed to the church in Ephesus, representing the first century Apostolic church.

Many strengths were listed for the early church, a couple of which we'll look at here. While all the listed strengths were important, one very significant one is that they tested false apostles and found them to be liars. Even in the early church, people would come along preaching the Gospel (or a perversion thereof) and claiming to be sent by God (apostle means one who is sent). Rather than welcoming every preacher with every new doctrine, the first century church tested those who claimed to be sent, comparing their words with the word of God. False apostles were not accepted. In later centuries, such testing was not done. As early as 156 AD, false teachers claiming revelations from God found large followings. One of these was Montanus, who altered the Babylonian trinity and taught it as Christian doctrine. The first century church would have thrown him out (Titus 3:10).

Another strength involved the Name of Jesus, which the early church used in everything they did (Col. 3:17). (We'll find this same strength listed for some of the other churches.)

One final strength mentioned, almost as an afterthought, was that the first century church hated the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which the Lord said He also hates. But who were the Nicolaitanes? And what were their deeds? It is unlikely that there was an organized group of people called Nicolaitanes. It is unfortunate that Nicolaitanes was translated as a proper noun, since this does make it sound like they were an organized group of some kind. (Some have tried to teach that the Nicolaitanes were followers of someone named Nicholas, and have tied this into the traditions about Saint Nicholas, that is, Santa Claus. There is no basis for such a teaching.) The word Nicolaitanes is taken from the Greek *nikolaiton*, which means *binding the people*. Nicolaitanes, rather than an organized group, were any people that tried to

put people in bondage to the ministry. In the first century, this may have involved trying to create a Levitical priesthood to rule over the people. Although this church successfully resisted any attempt to put the people in bondage, we'll see in a later lesson that another church was not as successful.

Only one weakness was mentioned in connection with the first century church: They had left their first love. What was that love? The greatest commandment, that God is one, also included the command that we were to love Him supremely, above all. But what does it mean to love God like that? It means also loving His ways, His truth, etc. By leaving their first love, they had abandoned, if not truth itself, their dedication to it. This set the stage for later churches to abandon truth in favor of lies.

The first thing Ephesus was advised to do was remember. By telling them to remember from where they had fallen, God was asking them to draw a comparison between their spiritual condition in the beginning, and their condition at the time of the writing. Just sixty-six years after the founding of the church, there were serious and significant signs that it was backsliding - as pointed out in Jude's epistle. Far more significant than the evil that they had allowed to enter the church was the frightening fact that they no longer possessed the ability to recognize the evil. It was imperative that they recognize their condition by remembering how they used to be.

They were then advised to repent, that is, of course, to turn around, to return to their original course. They were warned to do the things they'd done in the beginning, or they would be removed as a church. If they did so, they would inherit the right to the tree of life and would live forever. The warning was not heeded, however, and the first century church, once holy and spiritually powerful, was replaced by a spiritually inferior body. Symbolically, Ephesus was replaced by Smyrna.

WRITE: Using Rev. 2:1-7, list all the strengths of the church of Ephesus.

# APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE OF MINISTRY

## MINISTERIAL TRAINING COURSE

### The Seven Churches of Asia

#### Lesson Three

READ: Rev. 2:8-11

THINK: The church of Smyrna represents the persecuted church. In certain parts of the Roman Empire, being a Christian was punishable by death. History records the horrible slaughter in Rome as Christian men, women and children were thrown to the lions for the amusement of the emperor and the people. Foxe's Book of Martyrs also gives valuable insight into this era, and the student is encouraged to obtain and read a copy of it.

Smyrna is an anglicized form of the Greek *Smirni*, which means *myrrh*, and, figuratively, bitterness. (Myrrh is an extremely bitter substance.) The use of Smyrna to represent the persecuted church is symbolic of the bitterness of the persecutions the church endured. The time period covered by Smyrna is the second and third centuries. (We'll see later on that there is an overlap of time between Smyrna and Pergamos, and between Thyatira and Sardis, and that Philadelphia and Laodicea cover almost exactly the same time period.)

The letter to Smyrna mentions the tribulations of the church, and alludes to the devil attacking the church. While this may be understood in the context of the physical persecution the church was enduring, it should also be understood in connection with the reference to the false Jews and synagogue of Satan in verse 9. Since Christians are spiritual heirs of Abraham, and therefore spiritual Jews, the reference to false Jews would refer to people who claimed to be Christians, but weren't. This was the most significant attack launched by Satan, not the persecution by Rome. The greatest danger was infiltration of false Christians into the church. This includes people like Montanus, mentioned in the last lesson and Tertullian, who coined the term "trinity."

Much of the letter to Smyrna is encouragement to remain faithful and not to fear. Very little was said that could be seen as direct criticism of the church, probably because the Lord had compassion on them because of their persecution. On the other

hand, few strengths were mentioned either. Promised rewards for faithfulness and overcoming were a crown of life and immunity from the second death.

WRITE: Why did God choose Smyrna to represent the persecuted church?

# APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE OF MINISTRY

## MINISTERIAL TRAINING COURSE

### The Seven Churches of Asia

#### Lesson Four

READ: Rev. 2:12-17

THINK: The student will remember that following the fall of the Medo-Persian Empire to Greece, the evil Babylonian religion transferred its headquarters to the city of Pergamos (sometimes called Pergamum) in Asia Minor. The church at Pergamos represents the church being infiltrated by, and finally being united with, Babylon. As mentioned earlier, there is some overlap between Smyrna and Pergamos. Although Babylonian doctrine was first taught in the guise of Christianity in 156 AD, it was in the third century that it really took root in the church. Therefore, the letter to Pergamos covers all of the third century, and the beginning of the fourth century, culminating in the Council of Nicea, when Babylonian doctrine was declared to be official church teaching, making the union of Babylon and Christianity complete. The word Pergamos comes from a word meaning tower or castle, and implies fortified. This may be taken as meaning that Satan had fortified or strengthened his foothold in the church.

The first thing the Lord did in this letter was acknowledge that what was left of the church was living in the place where Satan's throne was, i.e., in the midst of the teachings of an evil religion. And yet, even in that atmosphere, there was a core of believers who held on to the Name of Jesus and His teachings. (Historically, this was mostly the church in Palestine and North Africa. Much of Asia Minor and Italy had adopted either trinitarianism or Arianism/gnosticism.)

In spite of the fact that some of the churches in that time period had resisted the influence of unbiblical teaching, a significant number of errors had found their way in. Making a comparison to an incident in Israel's history, God warned of the infiltration of idol worship into the church. (The reference to fornication is symbolic, referring to the worship of other gods. In the Old Testament, Israel's worship of other gods was frequently referred to in terms of fornication or prostitution, in the sense that Israel was being unfaithful to the Lord. See Ezekiel 6:9)

The Nicolaitane doctrine was also prevalent at this time. The Babylonian priesthood (*not* the Levitical) was replacing the Five-Fold Ministry. A hierarchy of priests and bishops was being built, with absolute power over the people. With the creation of such "sacraments" as confession, in which a lay person reveals his/her sins to a priest, the clergy gained a significant hold on the people. Threats of excommunication and eternal damnation were used to wield power over others. Eventually, the bishop of Rome obtained political power over the other bishops, becoming the Pope, or Papa.

At the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, the trinitarian bishops, acting on behalf of Babylon, seized control of the church, excommunicated all the other bishops, and the Roman Catholic Church was born.

WRITE: Was the third century church in North Africa predominantly Oneness or trinitarian? What is the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes? In what way did it manifest itself by the third and fourth centuries?

# APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE OF MINISTRY

## MINISTERIAL TRAINING COURSE

### The Seven Churches of Asia

#### Lesson Five

READ: Rev. 2:18-29

THINK: The church in Thyatira represents the Roman Catholic Church from the Council of Nicea (325 AD) until the end of the church age. It is interesting to note that a number of positive attributes are listed for this church. The Lord commended them for their good works, pointing out that their later works were even more than their earlier ones. Also mentioned were their love (agape!), faith, service and patience.

As wonderful as these things are, they are not enough to offset the serious charges leveled against the church in verses 20-21. The reference to Jezebel is significant. The student will recall from the class Old Testament History that Jezebel was one of the queens of Israel, the wife of King Ahab. Jezebel's legacy is that of an evil woman, worshiper of false gods and slayer of the prophets of the Lord. She symbolized everything that was evil in the Old Testament. Of course, Jezebel is long dead, and her mention in this letter does not mean that she has risen from the dead. Rather, her name is used symbolically to represent evil. The evil "Jezebel" is treated by the church as a prophetess, meaning that the evil teachings are believed to be the word of God. Her teachings resulted in gross error (sin), inducing the people to commit "fornication," i.e., to worship false gods, such as the trinity, the virgin Mary, the saints, and statues.

Also mentioned is eating food sacrificed to idols. This refers to the corruption of the communion service, which was supposed to be a simple memorial. Instead, it became a "sacrifice" (the "sacrifice of the mass"), and the erroneous doctrine of transubstantiation came into being. This teaching asserts that bread and wine undergo a literal transformation into the body and blood of Jesus. These "transformed" substances are worshiped and adored as if they were God. The rite is performed in the presence of statues and a crucifix, which are idols (graven images). The bread and wine are then consumed by the people: Food "sacrificed" to idols.

The church was offered an opportunity to repent, primarily during the Protestant Reformation, but no real repentance took place. The church was warned of impending destruction if it did not repent (verses 22-23), which is elaborated on in Revelation chapters 17 and 18.

During much of its history, the Roman church has forbidden the scriptures to the common people. For centuries, they thwarted attempts to translate the Bible into any language other than Latin, and even into the twentieth century, discouraged Catholics from reading the word. The result was that most Catholics had no opportunity to know truth; the darkness in which they walked was thrust upon them by the church. Verses 24-28 are addressed to those people, and they demonstrate so beautifully the great mercy of God.

Verse 24 refers to the "deep things of Satan." This is a reference to "mystery," which was the "trademark" of Babylon, their explanation for their inexplicable teachings (Rev. 17:5). This "trademark" was adopted by Rome to cover their own teachings. God, in speaking to the common people who knew nothing of the evil mystery, promised to put on them no other burden. They were only to hold fast to what they knew. Their promised reward was authority over the nations. This is a reference to the New Earth, where the righteous will dwell. These people could not be judged holy, because they did not walk in all the light. But since they walked in all the light the church permitted them to see, they will be counted righteous. They were also promised the Morning Star, which was a name Jesus used for Himself (Rev. 22:16). This suggests that they will see Him and know Him.

WRITE: What does Jezebel symbolize? Name two of the positive attributes of the church in Thyatira.

# APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE OF MINISTRY

## MINISTERIAL TRAINING COURSE

### The Seven Churches of Asia

#### Lesson Six

READ: Rev. 3:1-6

THINK: In 1517, the Protestant Reformation began as Martin Luther openly challenged some of the sinful practices of the Roman church. Over the next few hundred years, many other reformers received revelations of truth, and began new churches. The church at Sardis represents these Protestant churches, and covers the period from 1517 to the end of the church age.

According to verse 1, the church in Sardis had a "name" that it was alive, but was dead. In this verse, "name" refers more to reputation than an actual title. When comparing themselves to Catholicism, Protestantism considered themselves spiritually alive. The truth, though, was that spiritually they were as dead as Thyatira. (Had they compared themselves to the first century church instead of Rome, they might have seen that.)

Sardis was warned to be diligent, or watchful, and to strengthen the things that remained, which were about to die. This refers to the truths that precipitated the founding of each Protestant church. Although the founders of the churches greatly treasured those truths, their followers often did not, and stood in danger of losing the few truths they had (Luke 8:18). The Greek says that their works were not found "fulfilled" or "fully performed" in the sight of God, implying that they were not living according to the truths that they did know.

God then urged them to remember how they had received and heard (those restorations of truth, so that they might receive further restorations), and to keep what they had heard and to repent. The warning was given that if they failed to do these things, they would be unprepared for His return (Rev. 16:15; 22:12).

Finally, the Lord acknowledged the presence in Sardis of a few names who had not "polluted their garments." This is a reference to those who had received revelations of full Apostolic truth and walked in it, whether individual names, such as Michael

Servetus, or groups, such as the Bogomils.

WRITE: Explain the warnings God gave Sardis: What did He tell them to do, and why?

## APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE OF MINISTRY

### MINISTERIAL TRAINING COURSE The Seven Churches of Asia Lesson Seven

READ: Rev. 3:7-22

THINK: The last two letters are to the churches in Philadelphia and Laodicea. Since these two churches occupy approximately the same time period, and are bound to each other in a spiritual sense (this will be explained further on), we'll study both in this lesson.

Philadelphia and Laodicea are end-time churches. Laodicea covers the time from the last major restoration of Apostolic truths, c. 1914, to the end of the church age. Philadelphia covers the period of time from the birth of an Apostolic church founded on love instead of judgment, c. 1980, until the end of the church age. (This distinction will also be explained later in this lesson.)

During the past few years, some have made the mistake of assigning the name Laodicea to any non-Apostolic church in the late twentieth century. But since the Catholic and Protestant churches are already represented by Thyatira and Sardis, such a teaching cannot be correct. The truth is that, doctrinally, both Philadelphia and Laodicea are Apostolic. Let's look at both churches carefully.

The word Philadelphia is usually translated as *brotherly love*. A better translation might be *love of brothers and sisters*. (The Greek words for brother and sister are nearly the same, differing only in ending. Therefore *delphia* can be rendered as siblings or brothers and sisters.) The word Laodicea means *people of judgment*, or, perhaps, *judging people*. Although there are other differences between the two churches, their names indicate the most significant difference, and point out the precipitating factor in their spiritual conditions. Although both churches understand Oneness and Jesus' Name baptism, and both are filled with the Holy Ghost, the people of Philadelphia love each other unconditionally, while the church of Laodicea is bound by a spirit of judgment - they judge everyone but themselves, resulting in blindness to their true spiritual state.

The Lord set an open door before Philadelphia that no one could shut. Although there was no indication of what was beyond the door, the implication was clear that they were to go through it. (Some thoughts on that will be offered further on.) God went on to point out that Philadelphia had only a little power, but that they had been faithful to the word and had not denied the Name of Jesus. He continued by promising that those of the synagogue of Satan (false Christians, as in Rev. 2:9) would be forced to worship at the feet of Philadelphia (that is, in their presence - but the object of their worship would be the Lord) and to acknowledge that God does love the Philadelphia church. (The strong implication being that these self-proclaimed Christians had been teaching that God does not love the Philadelphia church.)

After this, God promised Philadelphia that because they had kept the word of His patience (or endurance), He would keep them from (or out of) the hour of temptation that is to come on the whole world, i.e., the Great Tribulation. Notice that He said He would keep them from or out of it, not in it. This indicates that the catching away of the church, colloquially called the rapture, will take place *before* the Tribulation, not during or after it. His last instruction to Philadelphia was to hold fast to what they had, so that no one would take their crown (figuratively, their reward, i.e., eternal life).

Laodicea is enveloped in pride. Because they know Apostolic truth, they think themselves to be rich and powerful and in need of nothing. Their spirituality is lukewarm, and God indicated that it nauseated Him. (spew - Greek: emesai -- vomit) Because they spent all their energy judging others, they could not see themselves. Therefore, God informed them of their miserable state, their nakedness (they should have been dressed in white linen, symbolizing the righteousness of saints [Rev. 19:8]. Their nakedness symbolizes unrighteousness, and their ignorance of their nakedness suggests self-righteousness.), and their blindness.

Part of God's counsel (note: it was advice, not a warning) to them was to buy gold refined by fire so that they could really be rich. What does this mean? They had much, as far as truth was concerned. Therefore, the gold must symbolize the one thing they sorely lacked: Love (I Corinthians 13:1-3). They were also advised to buy white garments, symbolizing true righteousness, so that their unrighteousness would not be seen, and finally, they were told to buy eyesalve and anoint their eyes, so that they might see. Since it is a spirit of judgment that blinds them, the purchase and use of eyesalve indicates the removal of that spirit, and replacement with a spirit of Philadelphia, i.e., love between brothers and sisters.

At this point, God stated His love for Laodicea, although the Greek word used is *filo*, that is, *affection*. This is not as intense as the love He expressed for Philadelphia (Greek: *igapisa* - from *agape*). But He nevertheless still has feelings for them, and encourages them to repent. He said that He was standing at the door and knocking, and would dine with anyone who would open to Him.

Notice that doors are mentioned in both letters. For Philadelphia, the door was open, and no one could shut it. For Laodicea, the door was closed, and only they could open it. If they choose to do so (and it is a possibility, or Jesus would not have made the offer), Jesus will enter and dine with them (signifying intimate interaction). This would, in effect, make Laodicea like Philadelphia. Is it possible, then, that what is on the other side of Philadelphia's door is Laodicea? Since Jesus is in the church of Philadelphia (Matthew 18:20), their entry into Laodicea would be the Lord's entry as well. If this is the case, the fact that Philadelphia's door is open would indicate that Laodicea will hearken to the voice of the Lord and will open the door.

If Laodicea were to be freed from the spirit of judgment and were to receive the spirit of Philadelphia, it would then be part of Philadelphia. This would mean that a major change would take place in the character of the twenty-first century Apostolic church. Rather than several divided, divisive, judgmental denominations, there would, instead, be one, united Apostolic body. Will this happen? The Song of Solomon is the story of love between Jesus and His Bride, i.e., the church. After telling part of the story, Solomon was suddenly baffled by the appearance of the woman representing the church. Although he had been talking about her all along, he suddenly didn't recognize her anymore, describing her as being "terrible as an army with banners" and "coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her Beloved." (See Song of Solomon 6:10 and 8:5) (Note: In old English, the word terrible did not necessarily have a negative meaning. Awe-inspiring or impressive might be more accurate.) This implies a change in the nature of the church, a change so significant that she was no longer recognizable.

The Lord has only one Body (Eph. 4:4), one Bride. He is not returning for fragmented, divided, squabbling denominations, but for one united Body. The change, then, is essential if the end-time Apostolic church is to fulfill the work begun by the early church. (Prophecy indicates that the end-time church will be greater than the early church. Haggai 2:9) This, again, confirms the necessity of the transformation of Laodicea into Philadelphia.

Who is the Philadelphia church? In 1980, an Apostolic denomination was founded on unconditional love instead of judgment. Rejected by other Apostolic churches, this new church was originally founded to provide a place where Gay Christians could worship in Spirit and Truth. The National Gay Pentecostal Alliance quickly grew beyond that to become a church for all people, standing firmly for Apostolic truth, refusing to judge anyone else, and believing in the vision of Solomon: One united Bride, leaning on Her Lord. While NGPA didn't pretend to be all of Philadelphia, it did aspire to be part of it, recognizing its lack of power, but holding fast to the truth and the Name of Jesus.

Signs of the coming change are already evident: Some prominent ministers from other Apostolic churches, ignoring the official judgment policies of their denominations, have acknowledged the hand of God in the work of LGBT-affirming Apostolic works, and have refused to judge or condemn it. Saints in those denominations have sought out LGBT Apostolic ministers in times of trouble. For their part, LGBT Apostolics pray regularly for the unification of the Apostolic churches, for the day when the initials UPCI, PAW, ALJC, APC, etc., won't mean anything anymore, but those denominations will have become one. This is unquestionably the will of God. (See John 17:20-26) We would ask all Apostolic people to join with us in prayer for the deliverance of Laodicea from the spirit of judgment, and for the unity of the body (Eph. 4:1-6).

WRITE: With the knowledge that few Apostolic churches openly welcome LGBT people, can you explain the significance of God forcing false Christians to admit that He does love us (Rev. 3:9)?

\*UPCI, PAW, ALJC, APC, etc. - Pentecostal churches are frequently known by their initials. Those given here are of several Apostolic denominations.

APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE OF MINISTRY

MINISTERIAL TRAINING COURSE

The Seven Churches of Asia

Final Exam

1. Name the Seven Churches of Asia.
2. Define the word Smyrna.
3. Which era in church history does Smyrna represent?
4. In which church was Satan's seat? Why did God say that Satan dwelt there?
5. What was the reputation ("name") of Sardis? What was the truth of the matter?
6. What does Jezebel represent?
7. Define the word Laodicea.
8. Who does Laodicea represent?
9. Name one of the positive attributes of Thyatira.

10. What did God have against the church in Ephesus?

\_\_\_\_\_

Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Date