

Soul or Spirit – Part 3: the Seven Churches in the book of the Revelation

As we pursue our discovery of what is 'soul and spirit,' we need to look at Jesus' words to His church in the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. These words are the only words of our resurrected Lord Jesus to His church from His throne in heaven. They, therefore, are very important and, as seven is the number in the Bible for completeness or perfection, then it could be suggested that these words cover in principle the problems which are to be found in true local Christian churches through the ages since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It could be said this is the 'prototype,' and as we often see when God does something for the first time, as with the healing of the 'man at the beautiful gate', He sets out the principles of the ways in which He works. As these are the first words to the church in such a way from the Lord Jesus, we could possibly consider the same principle is in operation; nevertheless, if you don't accept that proposition these words still need to be given a great deal of careful consideration, and we will look at them to try and understand whether the churches were continuing in the spirit or had moved into soulish and fleshly activity. It is clear if we read the letter to the Galatian church they had done that already. Paul the apostle writes to them, "*Having begun in the Spirit are you now made perfect in the flesh?*" It is clear that when God does a work and churches come into being, - it applies too when an individual comes to the Lord Jesus, - that they begin 'in the spirit'. There is the need to be born again to become a new Christian, that is a work of the Holy Spirit, but that new Christian must continue in the spirit; so it is with churches and we can look and see how the seven churches progressed in their faith.

We have used the word 'true' for the churches, as of course there are many sects, denominations etc. who are very far from any truth and have no one within them, at least within their leadership, who has the 'Spirit of Christ', and yet they would call themselves 'churches'. The seven letters, which we find in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, were written to true believers and to churches which had come into being in the first 'spread' of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ into what we now call Asia Minor and is modern day Turkey. There already were many of the issues in some of those churches which are faced by churches in our modern times; those problems had developed very quickly. We read in Acts 20 of Paul the apostle meeting with the elders of Ephesus. He told them that after his departure would 'arise from among them' those who would 'damage the flock'; in other words, work against the spiritual wellbeing of the church. We will come to look at the church in Ephesus in some detail later as there is more information about the Ephesian church than any of the other six churches; we have Paul's letter written to them in our Bibles. In Part 1 of this teaching we have already quoted 'be renewed in the spirit of your mind', 'put off the old man', 'put on the new man' etc. so we can with some accuracy see what Paul was inspired to write to that church and, in view of the comments of our Lord Jesus, why they had not responded to Paul's exhortation. But if, as we have already commented, there would come those in Ephesus who would lead the church away from the truth, it is not surprising that there would be issues and problems in the other churches, and that these would also arise quickly. It is therefore wholly understandable if the churches in modern times have these problems, as men arise in so many ways with their own ideas and ambitions to lead others away. In Ephesus people were to be 'led away after men', and so it is at all periods in church history that men lead others away after themselves, seeking their own fame, reputation and wealth. Love 'seeks not its own', that is the truth, and yet the Ephesian church had left its first love and maybe that is why it was vulnerable. We shall see this as we progress through our thoughts but maybe now we should highlight the danger of leaving our first love and why the Lord Jesus, in His word to that church, expresses such concern about their state. This is why maybe the lampstand would be taken away, as without such love the church could never fulfil the will of God.

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Before that, however, we need to look at what John writes in the first chapter of Revelation. He was there for the 'Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ'. The book of Revelation is a prophecy, please read chapter 22 and in verse 19 we read 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy'. So, John was on the isle of Patmos for the testimony of Jesus Christ. That is the only basis for any prophecy and therefore bringing forth the word of God. It is Jesus' testimony, what He bears witness to and of the truth which He sees. Such a basis can **only** ever be the source of any prophecy, and all the other gifts of the Holy Spirit too. We have been looking at the separation of soul and spirit, and in this area it is essential to see that which is just soul and that which is of the Holy Ghost and 'life'. For prophecy to be of the Spirit it **must** be of the testimony of Jesus, His real and exact words. Prophets are to judge; a true prophet will recognise the true Spirit of God and the word of prophecy in another prophet.

So we move to find John on the island for the 'Word of God', the 'absolute word of God', 'the logos of God' and not just the Bible. There was, of course, no Bible in that time, which is why prophecy was so important, as it was in Old Testament times, to bring the 'Word of God' to the church. We need true prophets today, but many say those days are gone. Never! The church is in such great need now, at least as much as in the days of the apostle John and these seven early churches. It very much needs that 'word of God' to divide between soul and spirit. The prophets stood and spoke in those days of the early church, as in Old Testament times, and the people were to 'hear' the word; few indeed would have been able to read and there would have been little written material in any event. So the spoken word, through prophecy or other spiritual gifts, was essential to the life of the early church. This therefore is the value of the prophetic ministry, so as to bring the 'word of God', and to each of the churches, we have "*He that has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*". So the apostle John, indeed the prophet John, that was the very reason he was 'in the spirit', had the testimony of Jesus, the 'Word of God', to bring correction, comfort, encouragement and above all the way of life to those seven churches. All prophets in any generation of course need to be 'in the spirit' and have the testimony of Jesus Christ and bring the word of God to the churches of their day.

The beginning of the prophecy of the 'Book of the Revelation' declares Jesus Christ as absolute Lord. "*I am He that was and is and is to come, the Almighty*". What a wonderful start and how essential for Christians, if they hear nothing else, to hear this wonderful word of encouragement. "Don't fear, I am in control, *I have the keys of death and of hell*". It is only on this basis of absolute truth that our risen Lord Jesus can bring His word to the church. In chapter 1 we find the two-edged sword mentioned again, "*And out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword*". Only here and in Hebrews 4.12, which we have quoted as the basis for this teaching on soul or spirit, is the two edged sword mentioned in the New Testament. Here we find it coming out of the mouth of our Lord Jesus. As we have said, it is to bring His testimony, and is here to divide between soul and spirit, as we shall see, for these seven churches. This is the reason for the revelation to John and confirms John's understanding that this is the 'word of God' as it is the 'testimony of Jesus' and is a true prophecy. The book of Revelation, like all scripture, is very important as we need to hear that dividing word of God in our hearts. In many ways, most of the errors and problems found within the church today are found within those seven churches; so we have much to learn. The book of Revelation is, as we read in the first verse of the first chapter, to signify, or show by signs, so when looking at the words Jesus uses we need to identify what each 'sign' means, but more of that as we progress.

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Jesus commands John, *“Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter”*. These words were for those seven churches principally and yet the vast majority of Christians believe that the prophecy has meaning right through to the return of our Lord Jesus. But this teaching will only concentrate on the letters to the churches, as to how much they help us to know that which is spirit and that which is just soul. Perhaps, as we will see, things were even worse as to the spiritual source of that which was operating in the life of the churches. The first letter is to the church at Ephesus. Please note that Jesus designates this church, indeed all the seven churches, **His** church, from the point of view of location. There is no mention of a doctrine, a denomination, of a ministry or any other name, and perhaps a clue to that which is simply spiritual is when believers are all one, all truly born again and all gather together in unity in one local church. It could be suggested that anything less is the ‘ways of men’ and of ‘soul’ and the creation of that which gives human beings places or ministries. However, there must be an understanding of why God calls people out of churches which are corrupt, but here with the Ephesians Jesus addresses His word to the whole church. There is the interesting thought for these current times as to why there is so much division, along denominational lines, which weakens the workings of the body of Christ. What is really spiritual? I will leave you to judge. Denominational means related to a name, a title, and usually will have some basis on either a doctrine or a person. The Bible says we will make mention of your Name only. and for the church it is the name of Jesus.

“These things says he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; 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: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate”.

The church at Ephesus is the one with which we will start. Jesus started with them, and indeed it is the one about which we have the most information. Paul visited Ephesus, and we read the account in the book of the Acts of the Apostles when Paul met with the elders on his way back to Jerusalem, and, of course, he wrote one of his letters to that church. It was the place where they worshipped the goddess Diana, and a great tumult arose because of the loss of business and financial gain for the merchants as people turned, in such numbers, from worshipping Diana to worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet within a few years Jesus tells them, *“You (singular) have left your first love”*. The whole church, the whole body of Christ as a unit, had left its ‘first love’. First love is in some ways difficult to define, it surely is that overwhelming love which comes first in any relationship. With ‘first love’ there is an excitement, a thrill, a joy and an outpouring of delight one to the other. Such a condition had been forsaken by this church; they had left or departed from that place of overwhelming joy and delight. *“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels”*.

We read in the book of Hebrews about ‘drawing back into perdition’, a state of losing something. Here there was a drawing back to a place where first love had been left and lost; all so very sad to our Lord Jesus who delights in us being totally in love with him. Human relationships too can lose

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that first love as man and wife slowly draw back from full commitment to each other. Of course our Lord Jesus never draws back, that is why He comes to try, with His word, to restore that which is lost.

As a young man the author was shown these verses for comparison by a pastor in Liverpool. He compared *"I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience"*, Jesus's description of the works at Ephesus with *"your work of **faith**, and labour of **love**, and patience of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father"* for the church in Thessalonica. The difference has been highlighted showing the 'faith', 'hope' and 'love' which were in the 'works' they did in Thessalonica and these are the 'three eternal things which remain' described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. And these works were not just works, but works based on 'believing' on our Lord Jesus; 'the just shall live by faith'. Labours were more than just hard work, but labours of love, - the word in the Greek for labours means 'beating upon the breast', intense labour, perhaps in prayer, but because of love and sacrifice. Their patience and endurance was based not just on doctrinal truth and hating that which is evil, as is the implication with the Ephesians, *"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: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted"*, but on the eternal hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a living hope by which they lived, to which they were born again through the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. So much truth was ministered in Paul's letter to the Ephesian church about their life as a body and *"that Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish"*. The Ephesians had been shown the final and glorious intention of Jesus for His church, on His return, which should have inspired them to remain in first love, but even so they had forsaken such a glorious state of faith and lost sight of their glorious hope.

We then look into Acts 20, a while later in the history of the Ephesian church, but before the words to them via John, and read *"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears"* This is the account of Paul talking to the elders, overseers, presbyters, bishops, indeed pastors is the Biblical description. All are the same word in the Greek language; these were the responsible men in that church. They were called to a meeting, Paul says that he daily had in his heart the 'care of the churches', and Paul warned them and actually told them what would happen and from where the errors would come in the church's near future. They were told that some from among them would lead people away 'after themselves'; following men, not God; that is in many ways the origins of denominations. Is this why the Ephesian church had left its first love? Is it because some followed men, leaders, those who were eminent, and failed to follow the Lord? Did they come into a place where they depended on getting so called 'spiritual input' secondhand, from some of these leaders or the so called 'ravening wolves' which would come in? It is good to read 2 Corinthians 12 about 'false apostles', or 'super apostles' as the NIV describes them. Perhaps such a description fits with many of the so called 'apostles and prophets' in these times, who very much promote themselves and financial gain for themselves and their members. These false ministers bring people into bondage, under their own power and influence; they are turned into

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'angels of light' and yet are 'ravening wolves', wolves in sheep's clothing, destroying the flock. They make people dependent on them and not directly on the Lord Jesus, and in so doing lead people away from first love. People 'hero worship' these sorts of ministers and base their love on their ministry rather than a first-hand knowledge of the Lord Jesus Himself. John writes in his first letter, *"Truly our fellowship is with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ"*

The Ephesian church were not criticised for errors in the matters of doctrine, they had worked out who was evil, who had false doctrine and had rejected them. So losing our first love is not having wrong doctrine, which is said of some of the other churches but not here. Paul writing to the Corinthians says this, 'some say they are of Paul, others of Cephas and others of Apollos' and so on and concludes 'you are still carnal, you are of the flesh'. Is this the reality in Ephesus? As we have suggested, did they follow men and not the Lord, and is that what Jesus means by 'losing first love'? These are only thoughts and there may be many other aspects to losing first love, but the whole basis of the New Covenant is about everyone knowing the Lord Jesus, from the 'least unto the greatest'; every Christian, however mature or however inexperienced, having their own direct relationship with the Lord Jesus. As we have said, John in his first letter tells us that 'our fellowship is with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ', a direct relationship with God. For John it is the place to start his letter, 'This is what it is all about'. Is not the whole reason, in some ways, for our salvation to restore our relationship with the Lord Jesus? This is where there is no other mediator, no one else coming between our direct loving and dependent relationship with Almighty God. So, if Christians are taken away and follow men, or even women in modern times, those ministers can come between them and the Lord, and that means first love is lost. In so many aspects of the 'Christian' church we have a formal priesthood, all trained and doing all the leading. They can be called vicar, priest, pastor, leader, elder, minister or whatever, but could they be the 'middle men' who provide everything for their congregations and then first love is lost? Again, just questions, but to give us enough thoughts to cause us to examine our Christian lives, how our churches function and so on, and whether we have lost 'first love'. Are we of soul or spirit? If we are of men and follow men then we are carnal and therefore of soul and not of spirit and have left our first love, as only when we are spiritual and full of the Holy Spirit can we flow in the love of God poured into our hearts and truly be in first love with our Lord Jesus. Every Christian is a priest/minister to God, Revelation chapter one talks about us being priests and kings. Every Christian is to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God.

Jesus warns the churches, 'He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says'. It is clear from history that the 'lampstand' was indeed removed from the Ephesian church and for many centuries there was no Christian church in the city; in recent days that has changed, - perhaps a sign of the end times? But perhaps the Ephesian Christians were so following men that their ears were not open to the word of the Spirit of God and they did not heed the warning Jesus gave them. Perhaps they were so persuaded by the men they followed that the word given in the prophecy of the book of the Revelation was not for them and that all was well. Oh! Lord Jesus help us not to follow people, leaders, apostles, prophets, pastors, whoever, but only to follow you, individually and as churches, so that we always remain in our first love, in the excitement and joy of being in fellowship with you. Let our individual lives and the lives of the churches flow from the wonder of our loving relationships with our precious Saviour; this is only possible in 'the Spirit' where by the Holy Ghost we are aware of the wonderful things God has done for us. Our souls can never on their own have a sufficient understanding to be able to love our Lord Jesus in Spirit and truth.

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The next church in order is Smyrna. This is the word spoken to them. *“These things says the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches; He that overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death”.*

It is clear that there was tribulation in this city; the church was to go through a period of persecution, and they were required to be ‘faithful unto death’ if needs be. The promise is that if they overcome they will not be hurt of the second death. We look at the second death at the end of the book of Revelation. *“And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.”* This death comes right at the end of the age and is where death and hell, and one assumes all those in hell, the place of the departed, are cast into this eternal death. Eternal death could be described as ‘an eternal existence totally separated from the living God and with no hope of that separation coming to an end’. *“Those who overcome will not go there”* says Jesus, *“they will be in My presence and that second death will not hurt them”*, i.e. it will have no power over them. That may seem a strange promise but so vital to all who will suffer and depart this world in death, - indeed we will all die at some point, - it is for those who are required to be ‘faithful unto death’ that whatever happens in the first death the second death cannot hurt you. For some Christians being a martyr will be part of their experience, it is happening to many Christians even in our times, but Jesus says to the suffering church, *‘Whatever they do to you here on earth cannot affect your eternal life’*. Paul writes to the Romans, *“For none of us lives to himself, and no man dies to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living”*. Hallelujah, what a joy. For many Christians in the modern world the thought of dying for their faith is a long way off but, as has been mentioned, there are still many who live with such a possibility as an ever present threat, as is the threat of prison and/or torture. To hear the word ‘be faithful unto death’ is a real encouragement and for all Christians; Jesus had done that Himself. Jesus said, *“You will be hated of all men for My name’s sake”*, so the likelihood is of persecution for us all at some point, especially in the last days. *“All who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”*. So let us all be ready and *“Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”*. Of course we have seen above that ‘he who overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death’. Jesus says *“Fear none of those things which you will suffer”*

It is vital to understand ‘the devil shall cast some of you into prison’. Jesus sees the truth, it is not the authorities, He says, this is satan, the enemy of God’s people; satan means adversary, one who resists, and here we have the declaration from the Lord Jesus. It is His enemy who is casting these believers into prison, using human means of course, but satan is, and always has been, the spirit behind the persecution of the church and indeed every means to spoil Jesus’ church. Jesus says *“you are rich”*, spiritually that is. In modern times so much emphasis is placed on the falsehood that spirituality equals material wealth. *“If you were spiritual you would own this or that”* and so on. Here we see the opposite; they were poor materially, but in Jesus’ eyes so rich in His Spirit. Our subject is ‘soul or spirit?’ So we can see that this church was spiritual, rich in the things of God, although poor

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materially. We are taught that God looks on the heart and not on the outward appearance, and it is our state of heart that determines our spirituality and that is what Jesus sees. There is little scope for being fleshly or carnal when under persecution, providing we stand, as the only way in which we will stand is through the power of the Lord Jesus and that only comes by the Holy Ghost. He will make us spiritual if He is truly at work in our lives. Looking at church history it is clear that churches suffering persecution are generally much freer from error and soulish activity, as the persecution is a way of purification, it separates the 'sheep from the goats'.

One last comment with regard to those who are of the 'synagogue of satan; they say they are Jews but are not'. In our signified prophecy, 'things Jewish' and facts from the history of the Jews are used to signify 'Christian things'; so here Jews almost certainly means Christians. Jesus says these people say they are Christians but are not, they are of the synagogue, - again, the meeting place relating to the Jews - or assembly of satan. So this is a group of so called Christians, they pose as Christians but are really of satan, of the adversary, these are the enemy. Again a real encouragement to the church in Smyrna, are these people of us or not? Christians throughout the centuries have wrestled with the same dilemma, are these people of us or not? There are of course many cults, recognised as cults and very obvious, but sadly so many other groups which say they are Christians and we wonder; are they or not? This teaching is not an excuse for being exclusive, in some ways rather the opposite. It is designed to help us know that which is spiritual and that which is of soul, so that we can discern where God is working and fellowship one with another. We can embrace our brother and sister even though we may not always agree with all their doctrine. Is Jesus Christ come in their flesh? That is the question, are they of Christ or anti-Christ? We are to test, or try, the spirits. Are they spiritual? Are they of the Spirit of Jesus Christ? Exclusivity is often soulish, based of the ways of man, and causes much division and damage to the body of Christ; there is often much pride, itself of the flesh and soul, that our doctrine is so right. Of course we are not to touch 'the unclean thing' and to come out from among those who do, but we are also to love our brothers and sisters in Christ and receive them even as Christ. That is being spiritual. So how do we know if they are of God or the enemy? How wonderful for the Lord Jesus to tell the church at Smyrna! "I know them", He says, "and they are not of me". Again, as we keep saying, how we need the word of God, the absolute word of God, in the church. Here it divides between soul and spirit, even more between truth and lie, between Christian and the deceived. Oh! Lord Jesus, speak to your church again in these days and discern for us, that we might discern also and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness. Show us the truth in order that your people will have a real testimony of you and not be weakened by being infiltrated by those who oppose the truth. We thank God for man like John, 'in the Spirit' and so able to receive this word for the church, and may the Lord inspire us all to be spiritual, to hear His word and so be able to minister truth to the people of God so that they can stand in the evil day, a true witness of Jesus Christ as Lord of all. Lord Jesus help us to be spiritual and not soulish and carnal Christians, pleasing ourselves, but those who through faith and patience inherit the promises of God unto eternal life....unto him who overcomes!

"These things says he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where you dwell, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holds fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things

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sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches; To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receives it”.

We move to the church at Pergamos who, in the main, stayed faithful to the Lord Jesus, and we are told one of their members had been martyred. They are told they live where ‘satan’s seat is’. Pergamos was the city which controlled all the legal requirements of the other cities in the area and there were 3 large temples there. It has been suggested that it meant ‘satan’, through the civic authorities, ‘sat there’ and had huge authority with no challenge to that authority. This can be true of many locations where there has never been any Christian influence over many centuries. The church would suddenly have brought that challenge, as did the preaching of the gospel in Ephesus which we can read of in Acts 19. The church would have been wrestling against ‘spiritual wickedness in high places’; they would need to be spiritual and have on the ‘whole armour of God’, including the sword of the Spirit, and praying in the Spirit. It would have been necessary for them to stand in the power of the Lord Jesus. There were some things there which were wrong, it appears in the minority, but ‘a little leaven leavens the whole lump’. There were those who followed the teaching of Balaam. We find Balaam in the Old Testament; he was a ‘medium’ who was consulted to curse Israel. Balaam used the powers of divination. As the book of Revelation signifies, it shows by signs, one could suggest that Balaam is a sign to say that there are people using the same powers of divination in the church at Pergamos. They are using the wrong spirit, psychic spirits, spirits of divination, and what they bring in message and spirit is not of God. Jesus on His throne sees, hallelujah, and He discerns and He warns His beloved people. The enemy will always try and plant ‘false people’ within the church, they are ‘tares’, weeds, not wheat; they can be strong and impressive with their words and power and knowledge, and it is the impressiveness of their actions and the often dynamic way in which they work which can add to the potential deception which they can bring. They are operating in their own power, the power of the soul, and it is surprising what power and influence can be generated by the human soul. We have already seen that the things which are earthly, natural, soon become soulish and then devilish, and that is the danger for those who operate in such things but also to those who come under their power. They too can take others away after themselves. Such operations and practices can cause real damage to the hearts of real genuine Christians; that surely must be the idea in satan’s thinking to work in such a way; remember the enemy so hates the church of Jesus Christ and will operate wherever he can find selfishness, self-seeking or pride. These operations can take many forms but some of the more common ones are people who go around and say, “I have a word for you”, or prophecy over people without permission, or push into lives to pray for them and make that person dependent on the one ministering and not on the Lord Jesus. There can be signs and miracles, as of old the magicians in Egypt could do such things, within limits. Signs and wonders follow those who believe, and are God bearing witness to them as He did to our Lord Jesus, the early church, and the apostles, but signs and miracles do not necessarily mean things are of God and we need again the word, as Jesus provides here, to discern between that which is of God and that which is not.

There are so many permutations and combinations in the way the enemy tries to infiltrate into the church and the lives of Christians. In the end the desire is to bring lies into lives, where Jesus is the

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truth and the truth makes free. Spiritual damage is caused if we as God's people, individually and/or corporately, believe a lie. Lies can be a great hindrance to living unto the Lord Jesus, and cast shadows over the relationships of Christians with the Lord Jesus when they have believed a lie. We read here *"These things say He which has the sharp sword with two edges"*. It is about discerning the spirit, that which is of the heart of God, of love and of truth and of grace, or that which is of soul, of man, is not true, and in the end is of Satan and causes damage to our hearts. It leads to 'causing people to offer meat unto idols'. So this wrong activity leads to idolatry and serving another who is not our Lord Jesus. Soul or spirit again is the question, and we need again the sharp sword of the true and absolute word of God to separate between soul and spirit. Faith comes by hearing the word of God, and causes us to trust in Him.

At Pergamos there were those who followed the ways of the Nicolaitans. It seems not clear who these people were. It is thought they might be followers of 'Nicholas' whose teaching allowed a lot of immorality. The word Nicolaitans is a combination of the Greek word 'latreia' which relates to the public hire of priests and serving in public office, and 'nikao' which means to overcome. It has been suggested that the word relates to a dominant priesthood. There were priesthoods which existed in the culture and practices of those cities, indeed there are such activities and practices in almost every part of the world. Every culture will have its 'witchdoctor' or 'shaman' who will be involved with the occult, and they form a priesthood coming between their god and man. This is all contrary to the freedom each Christian has to know the Lord for Himself. The challenge in Pergamos was not to be conformed to the world and have a priesthood, but to stay in the love of God and the truth of the salvation which was first declared in the gospel.

Whichever suggestion you prefer for 'Nicolaitans', we have the operation of the human soul in the church and not the Spirit of God. John was on the Isle of Patmos, to bring the word of God to these churches so as to deliver them from their error. 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'.

"I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou suffers that woman Jezebel, which calls herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searches the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come".

We move to Thyatira. Again Jesus says, 'I know your works', and that there was among them a Jezebel, a prophetess, rather a false prophetess, who we are told caused the church members, at least some of them, to commit fornication. We have seen that these things are signified, shown by signs, and Jezebel was the wife of king Ahab who promoted the cause of Baal in Old Testament times. Baal was a fertility god and the word means 'Lord'. So we have another lord, another god, and the Christians being led astray to serve another god and not the true and living God. Whether there was just one person, one Jezebel, or whether this talks about the spirit of false prophecy which was

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operating in the church, is not clear. What is clear is that there was a falsehood, leading people away from the Lord Jesus, and He, from heaven, recognised it and sends the warning. 'False', is a lie, not true, and therefore from the father of lies, the enemy of the church. We see the danger for Christians who are 'in their souls' and are not 'in the Spirit' that they are vulnerable, the Holy Ghost not being operational to lead them into and keep them in the truth. Jezebel means uninhabited, it has been quoted as not-elevated or unhusbanded. Perhaps that sums Jezebel up, not in subjection and not of God, and leading others into 'fornication'. In the Old Testament, often Israel committed 'spiritual fornication' by going after other gods. This all fits to show us what spirit was operating in Thyatira, through this one woman or others, leading people away into the 'depths of satan'. The depths of satan sounds pretty awful, but usually whenever there is 'spiritual fornication' there is likely also to be physical fornication, as the unclean spirit will operate in those who follow it and it will lead to immorality. Again we find that which is soulish becoming that which is devilish. Repentance had been offered to this person(s) but declined, so He that has 'feet like brass' will move in judgement on this person(s), but the others are told to hold fast, hold on to that which you have. What a joy to find that Jesus sees the difference in every heart, and those who have not followed this error are told to 'hold fast'. Not one judgement on all, but only on those who have gone into such sin. For the next church, the church in Sardis, we will read of the few who have not defiled their garments and are set apart for their faith and integrity. Often revival will come when Jesus calls out those who are faithful to Him from the majority who are not, and the truth revealed to them takes them up to do a 'new thing'. So Jesus says to the remnant at Thyatira 'hold fast'; in the Spirit they can be 'strengthened with might by His spirit in the inner man'. So being spiritual they are kept, but in the soul there is no way in which the Holy Ghost can really empower them to stand fast. He puts no other burden on them; standing in such a situation is enough for them.

So to Sardis; "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou live, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. ⁵ He that overcomes, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels".

Here there is reputation; there is no error but imperfect works before God. Perhaps they are relying on their reputation, and although it is said of them that they are alive, or live, what life they have is about to die. Perhaps this church is all about works and the way they do things rather than the Holy Ghost working the works in their lives. These are still very early days for the New Testament church and yet a reputation had developed, perhaps among the other churches in the area, which was already not true. How quickly things can be lost from a church. The children of Israel were to collect manna every day, except on the Sabbath, so that it would be fresh and not stale. When left, it became infested with worms, it became corrupt, so perhaps this church was not living in a vibrant relationship with the Lord Jesus and everything was a bit tarnished. Anyway, it was not good enough, the works were not of faith, and they did not bring fruit unto righteousness. The answer? Remember, the same as for the Ephesian church, 'Go back to the beginning and remember what you have heard'. It was the word that brought them to life, 'repent, embrace the word that brought you to life. Stop

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going the wrong way and hold fast'. They were about to die, the life into which they had come was about to disappear, so 'go back to that which brought you to spiritual life and hold on to it; the word has life, grasp it and have life again or at least let it restore your life. Watch, look, see what is really going on, understand your problem and strengthen the bit of life that remains, otherwise I will come and that will be the end of things.' As we have seen, it is so easy to become soulish and for things outwardly to look the same, to look fine; the same meetings, the same words and so on, and the form looks ok, this church is alive, but really it is dying. There are a few that have not defiled their garments, Hallelujah, Jesus always has His few but wants the many, He wants us all to have life. The whole reason for the gospel is that we can have everlasting life, to have Jesus' life, to live by His life. This church was allowing the most precious thing to die. Let us beware and watch and live unto God in everything; the promise as always remains for those who overcome. *"He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches"*.

The church at Philadelphia: *"I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. ⁹ Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. ¹⁰ Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. ¹¹ Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown"*

A wonderful encouragement to this church which had a little strength and yet Jesus kept open a door for them. We don't know whether this was the opportunity to continue to meet in spite of all the opposition, or to continue a particular work, or just a door of access to the Lord Himself so that they could pray. Whatever, it will stay open; no one will shut anything if Jesus keeps it open. Paul asked the Ephesians that a 'door of utterance would remain open for him', so perhaps this is a similar thing. In any event the door was open. They also would be kept in the trials which would come upon the world. We read again of Jews, the signification for Christians, which are not; they say they are but they really are not. They are of satan, and how encouraging, as we have said previously, for the Lord Jesus to tell the church they are right, to say that their discernment has been accurate. Again looking at our subject of 'soul' or 'spirit', we have a spiritual church here who can discern and know the hearts of men and women, to distinguish between that which is of God or not of God, that which is Christ or anti-Christ, that which is clean or unclean. They have kept 'the word of His patience'. All through we have seen the word of God which is quick and powerful, that which divides between soul and spirit, and this church in Philadelphia had heard the word which had quickened the work of the Holy Spirit within them and caused them to stand. This was the word of Jesus' patience, the word to impart to them the ability to endure and take them, through hearing what Jesus wanted them to do and allowing them to continue, to go through the open door and serve Him in love. We read again the promise to those who overcome.

We come to the last of the seven churches, the one at Laodicea.

"These things says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou were cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou say, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knows not that thou art wretched, and

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miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou may be rich; and white raiment, that thou may be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. 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”.

Jesus writes as the faithful and true witness, His word is true and the Amen, the ‘let it be so’ of all that God had wanted of Him in His own life. “Not my will but your will” was His testimony of all His Father required of Him. That is what He was seeking from the Laodceans at this time, and as we shall see their communion with Him had been broken and therefore their spiritual life source was no longer in operation; they were soulish, carnal perhaps, and with their life source not flowing into their lives, the ability to say ‘Amen’ and do the will of God was no longer working out for them. We are of course looking at ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, and the right way to remain spiritual is to draw on the spiritual life available in our Lord Jesus through fellowship/communion with Him. John writes in His first letter, *“Truly our fellowship is with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ”.*

Again, Jesus knows their works, that they are not hot or cold, but lukewarm, they are tepid. Jesus preferred them either one or the other. Perhaps He can do something if we are cold, though better to be on fire, to be hot; cold can be sorted out but lukewarm is so hard for Him, where there is an attitude of complacency. They thought they were fine, ‘we are rich’; maybe nice new church building with all the latest electronic equipment, maybe supporting missionaries and so on. ‘We need nothing’. Their judgement of themselves was wrong; Jesus’ view was ‘you are wretched, miserable and poor and blind and naked’. We should look at each of the words to see what they mean in the original language.

‘Wretched’ is only used once more in the New Testament and that is in Romans 7. *“O wretched man that I am,”* describing the state of sinning in Paul’s life. ‘Miserable’ means to be pitied, so they were in a state so bad that Jesus pitied them, maybe their sinfulness, but also their ‘poverty’. ‘Without influence’ is one use of the word. It would not have been without influence among men, they were rich materially, but not with God. No power, no spiritual authority, no effective prayer life as a church, no miracles, no deliverance of the needy. It is interesting to compare this with the prayer life of the church in Jerusalem of which we read in Acts chapter 4, when they cried to God and saw such a movement in the city and so many miracles. We should also compare it with the church at Smyrna who said they were poor but in Jesus’ view were rich. Often the judgement of churches upon themselves is inaccurate, hence the need for the ‘word of God’. This church was also ‘blind’ and ‘naked’. ‘Blind’ in the New Testament means blind both physically and mentally/spiritually, and of course here applies to the latter. Perhaps Peter sums it up for us best in His second letter, chapter 1. *“But he that lacks these things is **blind**, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins”.* He exhorts the Christians to whom he writes to ‘add’ to their faith. There is a progression to follow, but Peter says those who don't do these things are ‘blind and have forgotten that they were cleansed from their old sins’. The basic truth of the gospel is that ‘Jesus died for my sins’, the removal of that which is against God and its replacement with the righteousness of our Lord Jesus. All this is possible, as we all should well know, because of Jesus’ death on the cross and of course His resurrection proving that He really had dealt with the power of sin. ‘Breaking of Bread’ was given to the church as, among other things, a reminder of the death of our Lord Jesus. *“As often as you do this do it in remembrance of me”.* So here we have a definition of blindness, the loss of

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sight of the removal of sin and the total dependence we all have, at all times, on the mercy of God. Perhaps the idea that they were 'rich and lacked nothing' made them puffed up, 'knowledge puffs up', and they had become lukewarm about the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus says to them 'you are naked', spiritually of course, as without forgiveness and living in the righteousness of God by faith they would not be clothed with the 'robes of righteousness'. We remember the teachings of our Jesus in Matthew 22 regarding the man who had not got on his wedding garments, unsuitably dressed for the occasion. This man was 'spiritually naked' as were the Laodiceans, blind and naked, they were so unaware of their spiritual state and needed Jesus' word to them. Again we see the problem of them not being spiritual, being soulish and unaware of the spiritual realities of the requirements of a Holy God, who had redeemed them, as they lived before Him as His church in that place.

The recommendation, 'buy these things from me'. Jesus had them available; He always does have that which meets our needs. 'Gold tried in the fire', really Jesus' faith. Peter talks of 'faith tried in the fire which is much more precious than gold'. Jesus' faith endured, was tried in His death on the cross and He prevailed; 'so come and take of that which I have already made available to you. You will then believe God and live by faith dependent on Him, the 'just shall live by faith'. Buy white raiment, the robes of righteousness, so that you are clothed with that which you need for your right standing with God and your access to Him. Also buy eyesalve, ointment for the eyes so that you may see; this to take away your spiritual blindness'. Paul writing to the Ephesians talks of the 'eyes of your understanding being enlightened'. This is the spiritual sight they needed, as it comes by the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus. That is the spiritual eyesalve, it is the work of the Holy Ghost and shows us how much we all need to be spiritual, in the spirit and full of the Holy Ghost, to be in a place where we are no longer wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked, but rather in faith, in righteousness, and living looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

We finish with the famous verse, "*Behold I stand at the door and knock*". There is a famous painting of an image of our Lord Jesus with a lantern knocking on a door late at night. The idea is for Him to come in and 'sup' with them and they with Him. 'Sup' means to dine, to eat, here together and is an indication of fellowship and closeness. The verse is often used in evangelism saying to people that Jesus wants to come into their lives. That is of course true, and He does, and is 'the way, the truth, and the life of our salvation'. However, this letter is written to Christians saying from Jesus "I am on the outside". That is what lukewarmness has done, perhaps that is what the loss of first love does, perhaps that is what following men and having false prophets does. It put Jesus practically on the outside. Of course having received Him, He remains faithful even when we do not; "He cannot deny Himself". However Jesus here says, 'I am on the outside and am knocking and want to come in and find fellowship with you again; first love, on fire, no falsehood, following Me in all the closeness to which we come in the Spirit of God in the robes of our righteousness.'

Here is the place of real spiritual life, not lost in the thoughts, pride, selfishness and imagination of our own hearts, but in the Holy Ghost, spiritual and full of the Spirit of God, ready for His will. That is what it means to be spiritual, denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily, that we may show Jesus forth by our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Jesus stands at your door and knocks; can you hear Him? "He who has ears to hear, let Him hear." It is all for the glory of God in the day of Jesus' return. Amen