

REVELATION CHAPTER 2

FOUR CONGREGATIONS ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

PART 1. Revelation 2:1-7. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF EPHEBUS.

(1) The city of Ephesus

2:1a To the angel of the church (congregation) in Ephesus write (*Greek: grapho*)(imperative, aorist).

Its citizens. Ephesus was founded more than 1000 B.C. by Hittite tribes from the east. Later, Greek tribes from the west also settled there. In the 3rd century B.C. the Romans conquered that part of the world and Ephesus became the capital of the Roman province of Asia (in Asia Minor). There was also a Jewish community in Ephesus (Acts 18:19), who had received from Caesar Augustus of Rome the right to freely exercise their religious practices in the Roman Empire. Ephesus had its own legal assembly (Acts 19:39).

Is commerce. Ephesus was located on the western shore of Asia Minor, on the Aegean Sea and near the mouth of the Cayster River. Ephesus was a wealthy, prosperous, magnificent harbour city. It accommodated the largest ships and its ships sailed to the north, south and west. It was easily accessible by land and the city was connected by many roads to all the major cities of Asia Minor. It therefore became the greatest commercial city in Asia Minor.

Its religion. Ephesus became famous for her worship of the goddess called Artemis or Diana and her temple (Acts 19:27). People from all over Asia Minor came to worship at this temple. This temple harboured many criminals and furnished employment for many silversmiths, who made miniature shrines of the goddess Diana (Acts 19:23-29a).

There were also **Nicolaitans** in Ephesus. They were not simply a weakness among the Christians, but definitely *a sect or cult*, with liberal false teachings connected to the Gnostic dualism. They had a definite view of life and a theory, a system and practices, a way of thinking, speaking, acting and living. They were probably widely spread. Early Church fathers, Irenaeus (A.D. 130-200), Tertullian (A.D. 190-216) and Hippolytus (A.D. 240) thought that Nicolaus, the founder of this sect, was one of the seven deacons mentioned in Acts 6:5. This could be only conjecture, because Nicolaus was a common name, meaning 'conqueror of the people'. However, Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-216) said that the Nicolaitans based their teachings wrongly on a statement made by Nicolaus. Apparently Nicolaus had said, "One must rigidly discipline the flesh", which the Nicolaitans misinterpreted as: "One must misuse the flesh". Thus, the Nicolaitans wrongly based their libertine practices and teachings on Nicolaus. The Nicolaitans (2:6,15) and those who held to the teaching of Balaam (2:14) and the followers of the woman Jezebel (2:20) were in general the same group or school of heretics. They were a group with liberal tenets and were probably associated with the false apostles mentioned (2:2). The main characteristic of their practices and teaching seems to have been a violation of the apostolic injunction in Acts 15:28-29, "to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality", precisely the practices of the heathen religions (cf. 1 Peter 4:4-5). Their teaching was similar to the teaching of the false prophet Balaam in Numbers 25:1-2 and 31:16. He was forbidden to curse Israel, but forced to bless Israel. He gave the enemy advice to organise a great heathen idol festival and to invite the Israelites to it. Thus, Israel participated in eating the sacrifices made to idols and committed spiritual and sexual immorality with the heathens.

Through false teachers, false prophets like Jezebel and false apostles the Nicolaitans recommended the members of congregations to participate in the heathen idolatrous feasts and sexual immorality. They recommended, prophesied, taught and tried to justify their false doctrines and practices. According to the letters of Peter and Jude, they apparently had great influence on members of the congregations. In an age of much persecution of Christians, such a compromise seemed a very attractive alternative for members of congregations, because the teachings and practices of the Nicolaitans provided an escape from persecution! Thus, certain members of the congregations, unwilling to make sacrifices for Christ, made compromises with the world around them and formed the sect of the Nicolaitans. The eating of meat sacrificed to idols was understood by many people as bringing one in connection with demons (1 Corinthians 10:14-22).

The apostles Paul and John. Paul ministered in Ephesus during his second missionary journey (A.D. 50-52) (Acts 18:24-28), during his third missionary journey (A.D. 53-56) (Acts 19:1-41; Acts 20:17-38; 1 Corinthians 15:32) and during his final missionary journey (A.D. 61-62) (1 Timothy 1:3). John lived and worked in Ephesus from about A.D. 66 onwards. The book of Revelation was revealed to John on Patmos about A.D. 95-96. The congregation at Ephesus was therefore more than 40 years old when Jesus Christ dictated this letter to John. The second generation of Christians were not as enthusiastic and zealous for Christ as the first generation of converts. Like Israel after the days of Joshua and the elders (Joshua 24:31; Judges 2:7,10), the later congregation lacked the erstwhile devotion to Christ.

(2) Christ's self-designation.

Note Christ's self-designation in every one of the seven letters is related to the particular condition of that congregation!

This self-designation is revealed to a congregation that faced false leaders (false apostles) and was losing its first love. Christ held the true leaders (the elders) in his hand and he walked among the congregations fully aware of their present condition.

These words says (*present*) he who *continually* holds (*Greek: krateo*)(*present*) the seven stars in his right hand. The “stars” are the true leaders who represent the congregations and are responsible for what happens in the congregations (cf. 1:20). This congregation was troubled by false apostles, who tried to counteract the work of the true leaders of the congregation (2:2). But Christ continually holds the true leaders of the congregation firmly in his hand. They are in his hand, that is, they must know that they are completely dependent on him and must completely depend on him, serve him and inquire after his will. Thus they will never fall away. They must also know that they are completely protected no matter how strong the opposition. They are guided and controlled by Christ as long as they function from the position of being in his hand.

Christ through the Holy Spirit builds the one Body of Christ, the one Church in the world (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). He accomplished this through the independent congregations with their council of elders. All congregations in the world are really independent from each other, but are connected to one another in their head, Christ, and in love and service (1 Corinthians 12:14-27). Thus: unity in diversity. But unity is not attained by having one particular church denomination. There are no church denominations in the Bible, but only one flock with one Shepherd (John 10:16). And diversity is not attained by having diverse church systems as if the hierarchical church system, the congregational church system and the synodical church system are equally acceptable in the Bible. In the Bible and in the book of Revelation there is no over-arching ecclesiastical body like a council of bishops or a synod of representatives from all the congregations. The unity and diversity is never organisational, but functional. Unity can only be maintained by every individual Christian and every independent congregation functioning in relationship to Christ (John 10:16; John 15:5; Eph 1:22-23) and in relationship to what Christ teaches about the leadership structure of the congregation (Mt 20:25-28; Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5). And diversity can only be expressed by the diverse spiritual gifts and diverse Christian ministries (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). Christ and the apostles teach this unity (Matthew 16:18; John 10:16; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 1:22-23; Ephesians 2:14-22; Ephesians 3:6), pray for this unity (John 17:20-23), exhort to maintain this unity (Ephesians 4:1-6) and require this unity (Romans 16:17-18; Philippians 1:27; Philippians 2:1-4; Titus 3:10).

and *continually* walks (*Greek: peripateo*)(*present*) among the seven golden lampstands. (1:13). Christ is present and active among all the congregations on earth. His presence is not limited to a particular locality, but is coextensive with the congregation. He knows everything that is happening in every congregation and in the world in which the Church exists. Nothing is hidden from his eyes and ears, not even the most secret things of the heart. He is present to protect, guide, empower, transform as well as to judge and punish. Nothing can or will happen to a congregation without his active or permissive will.

Christ knows exactly what happens in the congregations (Hebrews 4:13); sympathises with the weaknesses of the members of the congregation (Hebrews 4:15); prays constantly for them (Hebrews 7:25); causes his Words to be written on the minds and hearts of his people (Hebrews 8:10); forgives their wickedness and remembers their sins no more (Hebrews 8:12); cleanses their consciences from acts that lead to death so that they may serve the living God (Hebrews 9:14); represents them in God’s presence (Hebrews 9:24); and equips them with everything good for doing God’s will (Hebrews 13:21).

(3) Christ’s commendation

2:2 I *absolutely and always* know (*Greek: oida = stem eid, Latin: video, perfect used as present*) your deeds (*Greek: erga*), your hard work (*Greek: kopos*) and your perseverance (*Greek: hupomone*). Christ commends the congregation for its deeds, hard work and perseverance. Their deeds are both outward deeds and inner being and disposition (3:15).

(I know) that you cannot (*Greek: dunamai*)(*present*) tolerate (*Greek: bastazo*)(*bear. endure*)(*ao*rist) wicked (*Greek: kakos*) men, that you have tested (*Greek: peirazo*)(*ao*rist) those who *continue to claim* (*Greek: lego*)(*present*) to be apostles but are (*present*) not, and have found (*Greek: heurisko*)(*ao*rist) them false (*Greek: pseudes*). Christ commends the congregation for its intolerance of false apostles. The last fact is noteworthy. There were people who claimed that they were apostles (cf. Acts 1:21-22; 1 Corinthians 9:1). Consequently they taught things as if they were sent by Jesus Christ and they demanded without warrant obedience from Christians. However, the congregation of Ephesus had examined and tested these so-called apostles (Acts 17:11), had found that they were false apostles and had rejected them (publicly exposed and excommunicated them) (1 Corinthians 5:9-13)! It takes courage, faith and faithfulness to stand against false apostles and remove them out of the congregation!

In all these trials, the congregation had been loyal to the true doctrine and not become weary to defend the truth. The congregation of Ephesus had listened to Paul’s warning in Acts 20:28-31! The elders must keep watch over themselves and over the people entrusted to their care. They must be overseers and shepherds of the congregation. They must recognise the wolves (the false apostles, prophets and teachers) who come into the congregation in order to tear the flock apart by distorting the truth in order to draw disciples after themselves (Acts 20:30).

2:3 You *continue to have* (*present*) perseverance and endured (*Greek: bastazo*)(*ao*rist) (hardships) for my name, and have not grown weary (*Greek: kopiao*)(*perfect*).

The last verb (in perfect tense) means: “You have worked hard, toiled, strived and struggled (physically, mentally and spiritually), but have not grown weary or tired.

Another commendation in verse 6: “But you have this in your favour: You *constantly* hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also *constantly* hate”. The Nicolaitans were a group with liberal tenets and were probably associated with the false apostles mentioned.

(4) Christ's condemnation.

2:4 Yet I hold this against you: You (*singular*) have forsaken (*Greek: aphemi*)(*aurist*) your first love (*Greek: agape*). Christ condemns the congregation and the representative leader of the congregation for forsaking their first love. In spite of their many Christian activities, they were not as devoted to Jesus Christ as before! A member may be very regular in his attendance at the services in the congregation, but may not be as devoted to Christ as he formerly was. Before their love for God had filled their lives, inspired them and fired them on in their service for God. But now their love had cooled and led them to half-heartedness.

(5) Christ's injunctions.

2:5 Remember (*Greek: mnemoneuo*)(*imperative, present*) (the height) from where (*Greek: pothen*) you have fallen (*Greek: pipto*)(*perfect*)! Repent *decisively* (*Greek: metanoeo*)(*imperative, aurist*) and do (*Greek: poieo*)(*imperative, aurist*) the things you did at first. Christ urges the congregation to remember and reflect on its fall backwards, that is, away from its first love. They must think of how they had loved Christ in the beginning, how they had served him wholeheartedly and uncompromisingly. Christ urges them to repent, to convert, (literally) *to change their thinking and to reform their behaviour*, and to do again what they used to do when they were completely devoted to Christ!

If not, *I am coming* (*present*) to you and will remove (*Greek: kineo*)(*future*) your lampstand from its place (*Greek: topos*), if you do not repent (*Greek: metanoeo*)(*subjunctive, aurist*). Christ warns them that he is already on his way to remove their lampstand, unless they change their mind and reform their behaviour! There may still be a church building in their city and an organised congregation, but it will not be a lampstand or light to the world anymore! And where there is no genuine congregation, there is no truthful preaching, no genuine salvation offered and consequently no salvation received by people either. Growing spiritually cold is punished with decline and even decadence and a loss of all spiritual privileges.

2:6 But you have (*present*) this in your favour: You *constantly* hate (*Greek: miseo*)(*present*) the practices (*Greek: erga*) of the Nicolaitans, which I also *constantly* hate (*present*). (See verse 3).

(6) Christ's exhortation.

2:7. He who has (*Greek: echo*)(*present*) an ear (*Greek: ou*), must hear ((*Greek: akouo*)(*imperative, aurist*) what the Spirit says (*present*) to the churches (congregations). Literally: “He who has ears (and all people have ears) *must* hear what the Spirit *continuously* says to the congregations!” Note the words: must, continually and congregations. The word ‘churches’ (congregations) is in the plural. Each of the seven letters *must* be read in *all the congregations in the history* of the world and they should be read again and again, because the Spirit *keeps on and on speaking* to the congregations through them!

Although it is *Christ* who speaks, he says it is *the Spirit* speaking. Thus, the Lord Jesus Christ is the Spirit (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:17). He spoke through his Spirit to the prophets of the Old Testament and through the prophets to his Old Testament people (1 Peter 1:9-12; cf. Hebrews 1:1). And he continues to speak through his Spirit to the apostles of the New Testament and through them to his New Testament people (2:7; John 14:26; 16:13-14). That is why the Bible consisting of the Old Testament and the New Testament is the Word of Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21).

(7) Christ's promise.

To him who *continues* to overcome (*Greek: nikao*)(*present*). The present participle denotes not simply one victory, but a *continual overcoming of temptations (seductions) and perseverance in trials (persecutions)* until the end (Matthew 10:22).

The conqueror is a person who remains faithful to Jesus Christ and who perseveres in temptations and trials, if necessary even unto death. But he is not necessarily a martyr as Paul's life proves (2 Timothy 4:6-8). He is a Christian who fights against sin, the sinful world and the devil, and who perseveres in his love for Christ unto the very end. He is born again and walks by faith (1 John 5:4). The word of God lives in him and he overcomes the evil one (1 John 2:14-15). He does not believe every spirit but tests the spirits to see whether they are from God or whether they are evil and come from Satan. He acknowledges that Jesus comes from God (reveals God). And he has the Spirit living in him. The Holy Spirit is greater than the one who is in the world (the evil spirit)(1 John 4:1-5).

I will give (*Greek: didomi, doso, edosa, dedoka*)(*future*) (the right) to eat (*Greek: esthio, ephagon*)(*aurist*) from the tree (*wood*)(*Greek: xulon*) of life, which is (*present*) in the paradise (*Greek: paradeios*) of God. Through the fall into sin, man lost the privilege to eat from the tree of life in paradise (Genesis 3:22,24). The word ‘paradise’ is the Greek word for garden in the Hebrew. Christ promises to conquerors the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God (cf. 22:2,14,19). The original paradise was a small garden in the region of Eden, temporary and a place where it was possible to sin and die (Genesis 2:8-17). But the paradise of God is first in heaven with God (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:3-4) and then on the whole new earth with God (2:7; 22:2). It is eternal, a place where nothing impure will enter

(21:27) and where there will be no more death (21:4)! God does not walk there now and then as in the old paradise (Genesis 3:8), but lives there continually (21:3). The paradise of Christians can never again be lost!

(8) A possible application¹.

The congregation of Ephesus is an example of a dead orthodox congregation, a congregation that holds on to the Christian truth, but lacks Christian love. Such a congregation represents the choice between loveless dogmatic truth and truth that loves (cf. Ephesians 4:15).

Christ recommends their orthodoxy (their holding on to the correct teachings in the Bible). Although the Christians are constantly threatened to go along with cunning deceivers who piously pretend to be ‘apostles’ (men sent out by Christ), they must test them with the truth of the Bible and dare to expose them as false apostles (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:1-15). Christians who say “yes” to God (Jesus Christ) must constantly say “no” to themselves and to every person and every spiritual movement and every teaching that tries to undermine the true teachings in the Bible!

And yet Christ rebukes their lack of love. These Christians lack one very important thing: they have forsaken their first love. They stopped studying the Bible and they prayed less. Their walk with Christ is shallow and their joy has died. They hate the false teachings and evil works of a group called the Nicolaitans, who make compromises between the Christian faith and the society they lived in (2:18-28). But they also hate the Nicolaitans themselves. They are so occupied with keeping the truth in their midst pure and repel every attack from the outside that they can only see the world around them as a danger, a temptation, an attack and no longer as a possibility to evangelise and win to Christ! They have put the belt of truth around their waist, but too little the shoes of readiness to proclaim the gospel (Eph 6:14-15). They are hiding from love, because they regard love for the lost people of the world as too difficult and too dangerous! True love says ‘no’ to false teachings, but ‘yes’ to the people that are deceived by false religions. True love says ‘no’ to false teachers, prophets and apostles, but always with compassion and with a view to win them for Christ and his undiluted truth.

Christ commands this orthodox congregation to repent and again do the first works: to hold on to the truth and to do this in a lifestyle of love towards the people in the world. By holding on to the truth in love she must grow in everything to Christ, the head of his Church (Ephesians 4:15)!

PART 2. Revelation 2:8-11. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF SMYRNA.

a. The city of Smyrna.

2:8 To the angel of the church (congregation) at Smyrna write (*imperative, aorist*):

Its citizens. Smyrna was originally a colony of Greek Ionia. It was later destroyed by the Lydian king. Three centuries later it was rebuilt a little to the south. It was a beautiful city, with houses sloping up from the sea towards the public buildings situated on the top of a round hill, called ‘the Pagos’, which constituted what was known as the crown of Smyrna. Because of the constant cool sea-breezes, it was a favourite city with the Romans and the Jews. It claimed to be the First City of Asia in beauty and size.

Its commerce. It was a rival harbour city of Ephesus.

Its religion. Smyrna was always a loyal ally of Rome and therefore this city practised the worship of the Roman emperor. There were also many Jews in Smyrna and they regarded themselves as ‘the only people of God’. They opposed the Christians.

The founding of the congregation in Smyrna. The congregation at Smyrna was probably founded by Paul during his three years stay at Ephesus (A.D. 53-56). In Acts 19:10 we read, “All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”

(2) Christ's self-designation.

This self-designation is revealed to a congregation which suffered persecution and is urged to be faithful even to the point of death.

These words says (*present*) he who (is) the First and the Last. Christ introduces himself as the First and the Last, that is, as the One who is one with God the Father, the Almighty (1:8,17). Although the congregation would be persecuted and many would die, death would not have the last word! Christ, too, became dead, yet lived!

who became dead (*Greek: ginomai*)(*aorist*), yet lived (*Greek: zao*)(*aorist*)(better than NIV: who died and came to life again). A better translation: “who became dead, yet lived.” Jesus does not say, “I became dead and came to life again”, but “I became dead, yet lived”, which means, that he was alive in his divine nature even when he was dead for three days in his human nature (cf. 1:18)! Jesus is the ever-Living God, who conquered death in his human nature and will conquer death for all Christians!

(3) Christ's commendation.

¹ Bavinck, En voort wentelen de eeuwen, pp. 54-64
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2:9 I know (*Greek: oida*)(*perfect*) your afflictions (*Greek: thlipsis*) and poverty (*Greek: ptocheia*) – yet you are (*present*) rich (*Greek: plousios*)! Christ commends the congregation for the oppression and extreme poverty they suffer. Although the city was prosperous, the Christian congregation was poor (1 Corinthians 1:26). Becoming a Christian was from an earthly point of view a real sacrifice, because Christians often lost their jobs and were persecuted by the non-Christians. They suffered hunger, imprisonment and often death by means of wild beasts that tore them up, or death by means of the stake at which they were burned. Yet their poverty was only material, because spiritually they were rich! They were co-heirs with Christ of the whole new earth (Romans 8:17)!

(I know) the slander (*Greek: blasphemia*) of those who *continue to say (present)* themselves to be (*present*) Jews and are (*present*) not, but (are) a synagogue (*Greek: sunagoge*) of Satan. Christ knew that particularly the Jews were slandering the Christians and set the Gentiles and their governments up against the Christians.

The Jews particularly fought the Christian claim that the Christians were the people of the LORD, a claim which the Jews reserved for themselves! The conflict was about who were the real *Jews*, that is, ‘the people who receive praise from God’, the genuine children of God? Was it the *physical* descendants of Jacob (only physical Jews) who did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah or the *spiritual* descendants of Abraham (only believers from among physical Jews and Gentiles) who believed that Jesus Christ was the Messiah? The Bible clearly teaches that in God’s eyes the real children of Abraham were those who believed in the gospel and were justified by faith (Gal 3:6-8); those who were circumcised in their hearts (born again) by the Holy Spirit (Romans 2:28-29), who believed that Jesus Christ died on the cross for their sins and thereby became a new creation (Romans 2:28-29; 9:6; Galatians 6:12-16)! Thus Jesus Christ fights against the Jews with the sword of his mouth (2:16) and calls them the synagogue (assembly) of Satan. This is not an anti-Semite statement, but the truth. Jesus warned that those people who do not believe that Jesus Christ is the one he claims to be will indeed die in their sins (John 8:24)! Only those who believe this will bring the gospel to the Jews and all other Semites so that they too may be saved!

Many Jews had immigrated to Smyrna to do business. They had received permission from Rome to practise their religion freely in the Roman Empire. It was especially in Smyrna, where the Jews betrayed the Christians to the Roman persecutors or eagerly accused the Christians before the Roman tribunals. They were filled with malignant antagonism against Christians and had become the instruments of Satan to persecute the Church (Acts 13:50; Acts 14:2,5,19; Acts 17:5,13; Acts 18:6,17; Acts 20:3; Acts 21:11,27-36; Acts 23:12; 25:7).

The modern thought that the Jews are still, in some very special and glorious and pre-eminent sense the people of God is not biblical. Because the Jews have rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah, Saviour and Lord, Christ has rejected them (Luke 10:16)! Because they have rejected the Old Testament prophets and killed the Messiah, the kingdom of God has been taken away from them and has been given to a people (Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ) who will produce its fruit (Matthew 8:11-12; Mt 21:33-44). The unbelieving and opposing Jews are not the children of Abraham and also not the children of God, but children of the devil (John 8:39-44). Jesus Christ calls them a synagogue of Satan, that is, a group of people gathered together by Satan for their religious service (2:9)! The Jews believed in ‘God’, but their ‘God’ was no longer the God who had revealed himself through the prophets in the Bible and through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2). Their ‘God’ was not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3). They had deviated from the Bible and had devised their own ‘God’, a god who was a mathematical unity, a god that could reveal himself in fire (Exodus 3:2-6), but not in Jesus Christ (John 14:9; Colossians 1:15; Colossians 2:9). This condemnation of Jesus Christ clearly shows the apostasy of the Jews and their consequent rejection by God.

(4) Christ’s condemnation.

None.

e. Christ’s injunctions.

2:10a Do not be afraid (*Greek: phobeomai*)(*imperative, present*) about what you are about (*Greek: mello*)(*present*) to suffer (*Greek: pascho*)(*present*). I tell you, the devil is about (*Greek: mello*)(*present*) to throw (*Greek: ballo*)(*present*) some of you in prison (*Greek: phulake*) to test (*Greek: peirazo*)(*subjunctive, aorist*). I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you.” Christ exhorts Christians not to begin to pity themselves, because he knows everything that is happening to them! Satan is called the instigator of persecution and suffering, because in a sense he is the planner, instigator, motivator, etc. behind the people who persecute the Church. While Satan will cause Christians to be persecuted as a temptation, that is, in order to pull them down into sin and away from Christ, God uses the same difficulties (attacks) as a testing (trial), that is, as his means to build them up, to refine and sanctify them!

and you will have (*Greek: hexete = future of echo*) tribulation (*Greek: thlipsis*) for ten (*Greek: deka*) days. Christ exhorts them not to fear their enemies, because their suffering will only last for a definite, yet brief period, symbolised by 10 days. In everything Satan does, he is bound (curbed, curtailed, restricted, limited) to the sovereign limitations set by Christ (20:1-3)! The time in which he is allowed to do evil against Christians in any place is a measured time: it will not be shorter, but it also cannot be longer! He cannot go further than Christ’s sovereign permission! Compare the 3½ days of the victory of the beast (11:9). Compare the other symbolic *measured times* in Revelation 12:6 and 13:5. The fact that the trial is but for a short time is often a motivation to endure and persevere (Isaiah 26:20-21; Isaiah 54:8; Matthew 24:22; 1 Peter 1:6; 1 Peter 5:10). Christ exhorts Christians to be faithful even if it costs them their life.

(6) Christ’s exhortation.

2:11 He who has (*present*) an ear, he must hear (*imperative, aorist*) what the Spirit says to the churches (congregations). See Revelation 2:7.

(7) Christ's promise.

Be (*Greek: ginomai*)(*imperative, present*) faithful (*Greek: pistos*) even to the point of (*Greek: achri*) death (*Greek: thanatos*), and I will give (*future*) you the victory wreath (*Greek: stephanon*) of life. Christ promises to conquerors the crown of life, that is, not a royal crown but the victory wreath that consists of life. The conqueror will possess and experience everlasting life, first in heaven and later on the new earth. James says that those who persevere under trial and stand the test will receive the victory wreath that consists of life (James 1:12). Paul says that those who have fought the good fight, have finished the race, have kept the faith will receive the victory wreath that consists of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:7-8). And those who compete according to the rules receive the victory wreath (2 Timothy 2:5). Those who go in strict training, who do not run aimlessly, but run in such a way as to get the prize, will receive the victory wreath that consists of incorruptibility and immortality (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). The elders who are good shepherds of God's flock will receive the victory wreath that consists of glory (1 Peter 5:4). This means that different Christians have to run different kinds of races, but all will receive the same reward, consisting of everlasting life!

He who has an ear, must listen (*Greek: akouo*)(*imperative, aorist*) to what the Spirit says (*present*). He who overcomes (*present*) will not be hurt (harmed) (*Greek: adikeo*)(*subjunctive, aorist*) at all by the second death. Although Christians will be hurt by the first death (physical death), they will never be hurt by the second death, that is, that they will never be cast, body and soul, into the lake of fire at Christ's second coming (20:15; 21:8). The unbeliever will go to eternal punishment (Matthew 25:41,46). There in the hell not only his body, but also his spirit will be lost forever (Matthew 10:28).

(8) A possible application².

The congregation of Smyrna is an example of a congregation persecuted by religion, a congregation that is something she could not yet be visibly. This is a religious problem.

The congregation of Smyrna represents all the congregations in the world that are persecuted by the religious legalists. Such Christians need encouragement. They need to be pulled out of their daily reality of persecution by Jews (the people who keep the law). And they needed to be pulled out of their worries about their poverty. They needed the radar of faith that could penetrate the mist and see the deepest reality of things and events on earth.

For these Christians everything is in reality different than what it seems: Jesus Christ seems *the last* and yet in reality is *the first*. He *became Man* and yet he is *the eternal God*. He *was killed on the cross* and yet he is the One who *possesses the divine nature*. The *One who died* has become the *One who lives*. It seems incomprehensible that the One who is before the creation of the universe and time and who *created the universe and time*, himself *entered creation and the history* (time) of man and became one of us!

The reality from God's perspective is different than what it seems from man's perspective. The poor are really the rich. The persecuting Jews are not really Jews. The synagogue (place of assembly) of the Lord is at the same time the synagogue (place of assembly) of Satan. And Christians who remain faithful to the point of death will receive the crown of life! Christians thus live in a world of deceptive appearances. When Christians fathom these things to the bottom, they realise that these things are in reality different than they superficially seem. From Christ's point of view everything is different than from man's point of view. "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me, till I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood their final destiny" (Psalm 73:16-17). The Church is in this world what she cannot yet be. The Church possesses things that are still invisible and intangible.

The Jews were initially joined by very many non-Jews who feared the God of the Bible. And when the apostles preached the gospel to Jews, very many of these God fearers became Christians. As a result the Jews became jealous and blasphemed and persecuted the Christians in society. In their synagogues the Jews studied and preached the law and yet in their practical lives they violated the law. So their meeting places became meeting places of those who served Satan. Such people persecute Christians and the glorious Church becomes the persecuted Church.

Christ recommends the willingness of the Christians to suffer afflictions and poverty, especially from the religious people who believe in the same Old Testament Scriptures (the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms) as Christians believe in. These religious people are jealous about the growth of the Church in their country. They call themselves 'Jews' (which means: people praised by God), but they have nothing in common with the patriarchs Abraham and Moses and David! Such people forsake the God of the patriarchs, the God who revealed himself in the Bible. They have become entangled in their own man-made religion consisting of outward piety and the observance of the law!

Christ has no rebuke for the suffering congregation. What this congregation needs is encouragement! And the One who encourages them is none other than he who suffered death and came to life again!

Christ commands the congregation not to be afraid of what they are about to suffer. Christ reveals to Christians that Satan and his allies will persecute and imprison some of them. Their suffering will last "ten days", symbolic of a period

² Bavinck, En voort wentelen de eeuwen, pp. 64-72
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that will be full and yet divinely limited! When Christians know that their persecution and suffering will be of short duration, they can bear under it. They have hope and perspective on events from God's perspective. Christ can exhort them to be faithful in suffering to the point of death, because he himself walked that same road. Christians are called to fill up in their bodies what is still lacking in regard to Christ's suffering (Colossians 1:24; 2 Corinthians 1:5; 1 Peter 4:13).

Christ promises that if Christians overcome, that is, courageously face persecution, there is no reason to be anxious, because they are held fast in the hands of the One who died and came to life again. They will not be hurt by the second death, which is the punishment of everlasting death and shut out from the presence of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1:9). They will receive eternal life!

PART 3. Revelation 2:12-17. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF PERGAMUM.

a. The city of Pergamum.

2:12 To the angel of the church (congregation) in Pergamum write (*imperative, aorist*):

Its citizens. Pergamum (derived from the word parchment) (now called Bergama) was built on a huge rocky hill surrounded by a great valley. It was an ancient royal city and in the past it was the Roman seat of government of the province of Asia.

Its commerce. There were many trade-guilds.

Its religion. Pergamum was a place of much idol worship: Dionysius Kathegemon (the Leader); Aesculapius Soter (the god of healing); Athena Nikephoras (the bringer of victory); and the Roman emperor worship. All this idolatry made it a dangerous place for Christians to live. Jesus called Pergamum the city "where *Satan* has his throne" probably because of several reasons: Pergamum was the place where the god Aesculapius, the god of healing, was worshipped under the emblem of *a snake* (cf. 12:9). It was the centre of Roman emperor-worship (cf. 13:3). There were temples dedicated to the worship of Caesar and all people were required to burn incense to the images of Caesar and declare that 'Caesar is Lord'. It possessed very many other heathen shrines, especially dedicated to the many gods of the trade-guilds. The great altar of Zeus (the head of the Greek pantheon) was in Pergamum. Pergamum, Thyatira and Ephesus also had a cult called the Nicolaitans. Thus, it seemed as if Satan had a free reign in Pergamum. Jesus called Satan "the prince of this world", that is, of that part of the world that is evil and antichristian (John 12:31; cf. 1 John 5:19).

(2) Christ's self-designation.

These (words) says (*present*) he who has (*present*) the sharp, double-edged sword. Christ introduces himself as having the sharp, double-edged sword (cf. 1:16). This great sword was used in judgement and war. The sword represents Christ's words of judgement with which he makes war against the sinners within the Church, against the false teachers and cults like the Nicolaitans who remain unrepentant (2:16) and against the governments and religions that persecute the Church (19:15). With the same sword he will strike down 'the nations' (19:15,21), which here is a symbol of the wicked people of the earth (Isaiah 11:4). With his words of judgement he will strike down the antichristian governments and the antichristian religions that persecute the Church (19:19-21). And with his words of judgement he will strike down the final antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

(3) Christ's commendation.

2:13 I know (*Greek: oida*)(*perfect*) where (*Greek: pou*) you live (*Greek: katoikeo*)(*present*) - where (*Greek: hopou*) Satan (has) his throne. All the idolatry, heathen shrines and emperor-worship makes Christ describe this city as the place where Satan has his throne. Christ says he knows everything about the dangerous position and difficult circumstances of Christians! This is a great comfort for Christians! The Christian faith forms the greatest contrast to the heathen religions. The heathen and their religions hate Christians, because Jesus Christ demands repentance from sins and reformation of life. Therefore the Christians are the least tolerated, are hated most and have the greatest struggle to remain standing!

Yet you hold fast to (*Greek: krates*)(*present*) my name. You did not renounce (*Greek: arneomai*)(*aorist*) your faith (*Greek: pistis*) in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness (*Greek: martus*), who was put to death (*Greek: apokteino*)(*aorist*) with you (in your presence) - where Satan lives (*Greek: katoikeo*) (*present*). Christ recommends these Christians for continually holding on to his name and for not renouncing the Christian faith in the time Antipas was killed for his faithful stand. His martyr-death made it clear for everyone that the choice was between renouncing your faith and possibly losing your life. This is a warning that the congregation need to be very watchful that it does not renounce its faith in Christ or desert Christ and his Church.

(4) Christ's condemnation.

2:14 Nevertheless, I have (*present*) a few things (*Greek: oliga*) against you, namely (*Greek: hoti*): You have (*present*) people there (*Greek: ekei*) who continually hold to (*Greek: krates*)(*present*) the teaching (*Greek: didache*) of Balaam, who taught (*Greek: didasko*)(*imperfect*) Balak to throw (*Greek: ballo*)(*aorist*) a stumblingblock (*Greek: skandalon*) before the face of (*Greek: enopion*) (i.e. to entice to sin) the Israelites by eating (*Greek: esthio, ephagen*)(*aorist*) sacrifices offered to idols (*Greek: eidolothuton*) and by committing sexual immorality (*Greek: porneuo*)(*aorist*).

2:15 Likewise (*Greek: houtos*) you also have (*present*) those who hold (*Greek: krates*)(*present*) to the teaching (*Greek: didache*) of the Nicolaitans. See 2:1.

Making compromise an option. Christ condemns the congregation for tolerating certain members who had attended the heathen festivals, and had, in all probability even participated in the sexual immoralities that characterised these feasts. To withdraw from these feasts meant withdrawal from a great part of the whole social life of that time. Refusal to join often meant that a person would lose his job, his trade, and he would become an outcast in that society. So some members of the congregation began to argue, that one could participate in these heathen festivals as long as he constantly bore in mind that an idol is nothing. These members argued that as long as they kept a kind of mental reservation amidst these heathen teachings and practices they could still be Christians.

Making compromise a necessity. There were even some members of the congregation who argued that a Christian could not defeat Satan unless he first had become thoroughly acquainted with Satan, his teachings and his practices by actually trying them out (cf. 2:24)!

This compromise with the world, this tolerance towards erring members of the congregation, this neglect to discipline these erring members could have been a result of the congregation emphasising individual salvation at the expense of the Christian's duty to be concerned with the total welfare of the Church.

(5) Christ's injunctions.

2:16 Repent ((Greek: *metanoeo*)(imperative, aorist) therefore! Christ exhorts the congregation to repent, that is, to change their mind (thinking) and to reform their behaviour. The leaders and members of the congregation must repent and discipline these erring members (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Titus 1:10-13; Titus 3:10)! And these erring members must turn away from their evil behaviour. The congregation as a whole must break with their neglect to discipline on the one hand and their sinful way of thinking, speaking, acting and living on the other hand.

But if not (Greek: *ei de me*) I am already on my way coming (Greek: *erchomai*)(present) to you quickly (Greek: *tachu*) and will *certainly* fight (Greek: *polemeo*)(future) against them with the sword of my mouth. Christ warns that he is already on his way to this congregation to judge it with speed. He will certainly make war with the sword of his mouth against the guilty members in the congregation. The sword is the great sword of judgement and war. He would condemn them and carry out his sentence of condemnation (Ezekiel 18:21-24).

There are different ways in which Christ is 'coming' (cf. 1:8; 3:11; 16:15; 22:17; Luke 12:35-40).

Christ makes use of prophetic foreshortening when he speaks of his coming. He regards his entire state of exaltation, from his resurrection, ascension, enthronement until his second coming, as a unit. In Matthew 26:64 he says, "From now on you will see the Son of Man continually sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and again and again coming on the clouds of heaven"! In Matthew 16:28, he describes *the beginning* of his coming and in Matthew 16:27 *the consummation* (end) of that coming! The beginning of his continual coming will be witnessed by people living at his first coming (the disciples). But the time of the consummation of his coming at his second coming cannot be known.

Christ comes in his human nature at his first and second coming and in his Spirit throughout the New Testament period.

His coming in his lowly human nature.

At his first coming at the beginning of the New Testament period Christ came in his lowly divine-human nature, as God who took on the weak and mortal human nature, entered his creation and the history of the world to reveal himself to us, to make atonement for our sins and to conquer Satan (John 1:14; John 6:38; John 12:46; Romans 1:3; Philippians 2:6-8; 1 John 3:8). This was a physical, visible and personal coming.

His coming in his glorious human nature.

After his resurrection from the dead Christ came in his powerful and glorious resurrected nature and appeared to his disciples (Matthew 16:27; Matthew 28:16-20; John 16:16; John 20:19-29; Romans 1:4). This was a physical, visible and personal coming.

His coming through the Holy Spirit.

After his ascension into heaven, on the day of Pentecost Christ came to his disciples. This was a spiritual, visible and personal coming. He did not leave his disciples as orphans, but returned to live in them through his Spirit, to equip, enlighten and empower them (John 14:16-18,23,28; Acts 1:8; Acts ch. 2; Romans 8:9-10; Colossians 1:27).

His coming to establish his kingdom, his Church.

After his outpouring of the Holy Spirit Christ through his Spirit came to his disciples in a way that they saw him coming in his kingdom (establishing his royal reign as King, not only in Israel, but in the world) (Matthew 16:28; Matthew 26:64; 1 Corinthians 15:25). This invisible reign of Christ from heaven would visibly change people (Luke 17:20-21; 1 Timothy 1:15-17), would visibly make people disciples of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20), would visibly establish congregations all over the world (Matthew 16:18-19) and would visibly turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6) as described in the book of Acts. It was a coming which some of his disciples witnessed in their own lifetime! This was a spiritual, invisible and personal coming. It was the beginning of his coming that continues throughout the whole New Testament period until the consummation of his coming at his second coming. This is what Christians pray for when they say, "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10)!

His coming to save believers.

Throughout the whole New Testament period Christ through his Spirit comes again and again to call people through his Word to eternal life (John 5:24-26), to live in the hearts and lives of Christians all over the world (3:20), to gather them into his Church (Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:13), to control them from the inside (Romans 8:9-10,16; Colossians 1:27), to make them his disciples and to remain with them until the end (Matthew 28:19-20). This is a spiritual, invisible and personal coming. To those who receive him, who love and obey him, he reveals himself spiritually to them and comes and makes his home spiritually with them (John 14:21,23). And he stays spiritually in the midst of Christians who gather together in his name (1:13; 2:1; Matthew 18:20; Ephesians 2:22).

□ His coming to judge.

Throughout the whole New Testament period Christ through his Spirit comes again and again to his congregations to judge their sin (2:5; 3:3; cf. John 5:22,27). This is a spiritual, invisible and personal coming. If congregations do not wake up, repent and do the things they did at first, then Christ will come unexpectedly and remove their lampstand, that is, they will cease to be a congregation (a light in the world)!

And he again and again comes to judge the false apostles, false prophets and false teachers (2:16) and those who persecute the Church (chapter 8 and 9).

□ His coming to gather the souls.

Throughout the whole New Testament period at the time a person dies Christ comes to that person either to welcome him into heaven (2:25; cf. Luke 16:22; Philippians 1:23) or to throw him into hell (cf. Luke 12:20; Luke 16:23-24). This is a spiritual, invisible and personal coming.

□ His coming to gather the bodies.

At his second coming at the end of the New Testament period Christ will come visibly in his glorious divine-human nature (Matthew 16:27; Matthew 24:3,27,30-31,36-44; Matthew 25:31-32; 1 Corinthians 11:16), win the final battle (16:14-16), resurrect the bodies of all the dead (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17), gather the elect (14:14-16; cf. Matthew 24:30-31,40a,41a; 2 Thessalonians 1:10), reward the righteous (2:25; 11:18b; cf. Matthew 25:34-40) or judge the wicked (6:17; 11:18a,c; 14:17-20; cf. Matthew 25:41-48), renew the earth and descend with all his people as the New Jerusalem onto the new earth in order to visibly live with them forever (21:1-3; cf. Acts 3:21; 2 Peter 3:3-13)! This will be a physical, visible and personal coming. Up to that time, the gospel will be spread, not only to all the nations, but also in Israel (Matthew 10:23).

(6) Christ's exhortation.

2:17 He who has (*present*) an ear, he must hear (*imperative, aorist*) what the Spirit says (*present*) to the churches (congregations). See Revelation 2:7.

(7) Christ's promise.

To him who overcomes (*present*) I will *certainly* give (*future*) some of the hidden (*Greek: krupto*)(*perfect*) manna. Christ promises the conquerors who overcome the temptation to make compromises with the heathen festivals that they will receive of the hidden manna. The Israelites received visible, physical manna, a kind of bread, to eat in the desert (Exodus 16:4,14-15). This sustained them for forty years during their whole wilderness wandering, strengthened and satisfied them. Christians who overcome the temptation to participate in the heathen festivals with unclean food (offered to idols or a particular "god") will receive the hidden manna, which refers to invisible yet genuine spiritual manna. It cannot be seen with the eyes and cannot be comprehended with the mind. It is divine in origin and in working (Psalm 4:7-8). Christ is the bread of life (John 6:32-35) and he himself will feed them spiritually with the fullness of his grace and blessings, thus strengthening, refreshing and fully satisfying them, forever and ever. Christians do not need the temporary satisfactions of this sinful world.

I will also give (*future*) him a white stone (*Greek: psephos*) with a new (*Greek: kainos*) name written (*perfect*) on it, which no one knows (*Greek: oida*)(*perfect*) except (*Greek: ei me*) the receiver (*Greek: lambano*)(*present*) it. There are several different views, which we reject.

(Incorrect explanation). The white stone is the tessera or ticket which a visitor receives in order to admit him to the feast of the Great King. Or it is the pebble of acquittal used in courts of justice. Or it is the token given to the victors of the Roman Games and to gladiators who won the admiration of the public and had been allowed to retire from any further combat. Then the white stone as symbol of the triumph of faith would be considered to be a token for admission to the messianic feast³. Or it is the Old Testament Urim and Thummim.

(A good explanation). The white stone is inscribed with the unknown new name of the Christian. *The new name represents the Christian's real inner regenerated character and distinct individual personality in heaven, which only he knows*. In the eternal state, the Christian receives a new relation to Christ expressed in his own gloriously transformed character (his name). This relationship between Christ and the Christian will be absolutely unique, just as the gloriously renewed nature of each Christian in terms of his new name will be absolutely unique for each individual.

While in Israel the twelve precious stones in the breastplate of the high priest represented the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 28:15-21), here the white stone with the new name represents the person who receives it. The white colour

³ Mounce, LSC p. 303f
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indicates *innocence, purity, glory and victory* (3:4; 6:2). The stone itself symbolises *durability and immortality*. The new name written on the stone expresses the *essential being or character* of the person (cf. 2:3).

Thus, the white stone with its new name represents the unique, new, glorious and eternal personality and character which the Christian receives. It represents a person, free from guilt and cleansed from all sin, and abiding in this state for ever and ever. The fact that he only knows his new name means that *he is absolutely unique* - no one is like him. Only those who are alike can know their equals. This is already true in this life (1 Corinthians 2:11), but will also be true in the eternal state. Those who overcome will have a particular consciousness of their unique being in eternity and only they will know that. This interpretation is in harmony with Isaiah 56:5, Isaiah 62:2, Isaiah 65:15 and Revelation 19:12.

(The best explanation). The white stone is inscribed with the unknown new name of Christ. *The new name represents Christ's glorious risen character in heaven at the right hand of God and which only Christ knows*. In the eternal state, the Christian receives a new relation to Christ expressed in Christ's glorious enthroned character (Christ's name). This relationship between Christ and the Christian will be absolutely unique, just as the reward by grace in terms of Christ's name will be absolutely unique for each individual.

In all other passages in the book of Revelation, *the new name* always refers to the name of God or Christ (3:12; 14:1; 22:4). Also the preceding context (2:17) speaks of the Christian receiving Christ, the hidden manna. And the following context (3:12) speaks of the Christian receiving Christ's new name. In the Old Testament the high priest received the name, 'Holy to the LORD' on his forehead as an indication that he was the specially consecrated servant of the LORD (Exodus 28:36ff.). Likewise in the New Testament Christians receive 'the name of Christ' on their foreheads (14:1), as an indication that Christians are the specially consecrated servants of Christ in the last age. This is in contrast to unbelievers who receive the mark of the beast on their foreheads (13:16; 20:4) as an indication that they are the specially consecrated servants of the beast. On the present earth the Christian has the name of Christ written on his forehead. It is nevertheless invisible to the human eye. Likewise in the eternal state he will have that new name revealed to him. He will then as it were become fully conscious of the glory, which he inherits and which is presently still unknown to him and even unimaginable for anyone!

In the eternal state, he will receive that new name of Christ, that new and perfect relation to Christ, whom he will see in his glorious transformed character in heaven. And being the bearer of Christ's new name, he will also be completely transformed into the likeness of Christ. He will be transformed in accordance with his created and re-created personality and in accordance with the gracious reward he receives from Christ. The fact that he only knows his new name, means that he is absolutely unique - no one is like him: no one expresses the glorious and resurrected nature of Christ as he does (1 John 3:1-3; cf. Ephesians 3:10). The word "poikilos" in Ephesians 3:10 means "many coloured" and refers to the diversified (various kinds of) wisdom of God and in 1 Peter 4:10 to the diversified grace of God. In the eternal state Christians will not be duplicates of one another, but every Christian will be absolutely unique!

(8) A possible application⁴.

The congregation of Pergamum is an example of a congregation persecuted by politics, a congregation that has to make a choice between Caesar and Christ.

The congregation of Pergamum represents all the congregations that have to make a choice between the political system of Caesar and Christ. The world is still the domain where Satan and his demons reveal their power and where the Church (the woman) can only be chased and banned. Christians do not follow the ways of this world (Ephesians 2:2) and therefore their way of living goes against everything that is regarded as 'normal' in this world. There are different origins of persecution that time and again erupts against Christians. In congregations like the congregation of Smyrna persecution erupts from *religious motives*. The people from other religions hate Christians, because the grace which Christians proclaim takes all glory away from the Law which the religions proclaim. In congregations like the congregation of Pergamum persecution erupts from *political motives*. The kingdom in the world (the Roman Empire) and other governments clash with the kingdom of God, because they cannot tolerate another kingdom besides their own.

Pergamum had many temples erected in honour of the Caesars of Rome; especially one large temple on a hill behind the city was erected already in 29 B.C. in honour of Caesar August. This was regarded as the throne of Satan. Such worship of human leaders and obedience to them draws life away from the immortal God to mortal political leaders. The State becomes a totalitarian power that controls life from the cradle to the grave. The individual loses his freedom. He has to set aside his responsibility to moral and religious self-determination, his personal convictions and his conscience. He must only believe and do what the state and its leaders command. Such a state worships its political leaders and their politics.

Christ reveals himself, not as the Lamb that had been slaughtered, but as the Lion of Judah (5:5) who triumphs! Amidst all the demonic overgrowth of the kingdoms of people, Christ poses his kingdom. With his sharp, double-edged sword he attacks the forces of the kingdoms of the world. But he also defends his Church and judges, prunes and cleanses evil out of the Church.

⁴ Bavinck, En voort wentelen de eeuwen, pp. 72-81

Christ recommends the faithfulness of those Christians who refuse to participate in the cult of the Caesars and the solemn ceremonies of the folk festivals. These Christians will always be regarded as spoil-sports or traitors against the state and its religion. Consequently they have to forego important jobs and positions in society, are excluded from economic contracts and from honourable functions. They sometimes even pay with their lives. But these Christians realise that such worship of political and religious leaders is in the final analysis a cult of Satan!

Christ rebukes those Christians who make a compromise with the kingdom of the world and its leaders (the Nicolaitans). These Christians feel equally at home with the heathen and their festivals as with other Christians and the congregation. In the Old Testament Balaam gave advice to the Moabite king not to attack God's people with the sword, but to conquer God's people with heathen practices. He knew that just enough fun, a little partying with some alcohol and some sex would arouse God's wrath against Israel so that God himself would destroy Israel (Numbers 31:16)! Christ commands the congregation to repent and to discipline or remove such compromisers out of the congregation. True followers of Christ make no compromise! A Christian 'yes' to Christ means he must say a radical 'no' to everyone and everything that draws him away from Christ! And if the congregation fails to discipline or remove such compromisers, Christ himself will come and fight against them with his sharp, double-edged sword.

Christ promises them the hidden manna, a reference to the wealth of Christ himself (John 6:27-35). And he promises them the white stone with a new name, a reference to the complete justification and sanctification of each individual Christian. While the totalitarian state reduces everyone to the same low level, God's kingdom regenerates people to look like Christ without losing their individual personality! While the kingdoms of people wipe out the individuality of people: their individual character, responsibility, accountability and conscience, God's kingdom emphasises each individual's personality, responsible task in life and unique contribution to life! While the kingdoms of people turn people into mere nameless things and numbers, the kingdom of Christ draws the most special individual characteristics out of a person and gives each a unique name. While the kingdom of the world nullifies, the kingdom of Christ regenerates. Christ makes objects into people and changes "numbers" into people with new "names"!

PART 4. Revelation 2:18-29. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF THYATIRA.

(1) The city of Thyatira.

2:18 And to the angel of the church (congregation) in Thyatira write (*imperative, aorist*):

Its citizens. Thyatira was originally a Lydian settlement. The Greek general Seleucus rebuilt the city and settled old soldiers of Alexander the Great in it. The city had relations with Philippi (Acts 16:14). The city was situated in a valley connecting two other valleys. It lacked natural fortifications. Later the city came under the Romans and they stationed a garrison there to defend their capital Pergamum.

Its commerce. Thyatira was a centre of communication, with many people passing through, and it thus became a trading centre. There were many trade-guilds: wool-workers, linen-workers, garments industries, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, etc. These trade-guilds functioned like trade-unions and were associated with the worship of tutelary-deities.

Its religion. See Jezebel below.

(2) Christ's self-designation.

These things says (*present*) the Son of God! Christ introduces himself as the Son of God, in order to reveal his exalted position and power (cf. Psalm 2).

who has (*present*) eyes like (*Greek: hos*) flames (*Greek: flos*) of fire (*Greek: pur*). Christ sees everything people do, even the sinful things that are hidden or done in secret. Nothing and no one is hidden from his all-seeing eyes (Hebrews 4:13). What he cannot tolerate to see, he will burn in flaming fire (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Christ threatens this congregation with destructive judgements.

and whose feet (are) like (*Greek: homoios*) (burnishing) bronze (*Greek: chalkolibanon*). This was an unknown metal or alloy, translated in Old Latin versions as "a natural alloy of gold and silver" and in one Syrian version as "a metal from Lebanon". Christ's feet are ready to destroy the wicked people (1 Corinthians 15:25). It depicts his holiness which cannot tolerate sin or bear the continuing wickedness of people. He is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29) and he will certainly destroy the impenitent sinners. At this point, he is still threatening and not yet carrying out his judgement (cf. 14:19-20; 19:15).

(3) Christ's commendation.

2:19 I know (*Greek: oida*)(*perfect*) your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and your last works (*Greek: eschata*) (are) more than (*Greek: pleion comparative of plus + Genitive*) the first. Christ is absolutely fair in his evaluation of the congregations. He commends everything good. He knows what is in their hearts and minds and he knows what they are doing and their progress they are making.

(4) Christ's condemnation.

2:20 Nevertheless, I *continue to have (present)* this against (*Greek: kata*) you (singular) (*Greek: hoti=:*) You *continue to tolerate (Greek: aphiem)(present)*. Christ does not hesitate to condemn the leader (representative elder) of the congregation for tolerating sin in the congregation! This leader may have been afraid to speak or act, because this woman had a high opinion about herself and called herself “a prophetess”. The immorality of Jezebel may be religious, moral or sexual. Yet, the leader of the congregation neglected to discipline her! The congregation should have disciplined the people who made a compromise with the sinful world and should have put them out of the congregation (1

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5:9-13)! The sad result was that former members (called servants) had been pulled away from Christ and his Church. Because the leaders of the congregation did not turn against the false teachers, Christ turned against the leaders of the congregation! Already during the Old Testament period God warned his people against people who like to call themselves “prophets and prophetesses”, but in reality are false prophets (Jeremiah 23:16-32)!

that woman Jezebel, who *continues to call (say) (present)* herself (to be) a prophetess (*Greek: prophetis*) and she teaches (*Greek: didasko)(present)* she misleads (*Greek: planao)(present)* my servants to commit (spiritual, moral and sexual) immorality (*Greek: porneuo)(aorist)* and to eat (*Greek: esthio, ephagon)(aorist)* food sacrificed to idols (*Greek: eidolothuta*). In Thyatira there were certain false teachers, probably belonging to the cult of the Nicolaitans. One of their women was called Jezebel. Her name is a synonym for seduction to idolatry and immorality (1 Kings 16:31-33; 1 Kings 18:4,13,19; 1 Kings 19:1-2). Like the Jezebel of the Old Testament, she drew people away from Christ and seduced them to despicable idolatry. The immorality (*Greek: porneia*) of Jezebel may be religious, moral or sexual. She claimed to be a prophetess, acted as a teacher and gathered a following of people who believed her teachings. She apparently taught a way how Christians could escape the persecution associated with idolatry: “the deep secrets of Satan” (cf. 2:24).

(5) Christ's injunctions.

Directed to Jezebel and her followers:

2:21 I have given (*aorist*) her time (*Greek: chronos*) to repent (*Greek: metanoeo)(subjunctive, aorist)*, but she *remains unwilling (Greek: thelo)(present)* to repent (*aorist*) of her immorality (*Greek: porneia*).

2:22 So (literally: Behold) I am throwing (*present*) her in a bed (*Greek: kline*) (of suffering), and those who commit adultery (*Greek: moicheuo)(present)* with her in great suffering (*Greek: thlipsis*), unless (*Greek: ean me*) they repent (*subjunctive, aorist*) of her works.

2:23 I will kill (*Greek: apokteino/apoktenno)(future)* her children with death (*Greek: thanatos*).

Christ had been patient and desired her repentance. But she hardened her heart and continued to spread her heresy deliberately. The time for repentance is over and the patience of the Lord has come to an end (cf. Genesis 6:3)! By saying “Behold”(2:22), the Lord is fixing special attention on what he is going to say or do. Her judgement will be something unusual, something terrible. He is going to strike her with a terrible disease, which will cause much suffering (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:28-30). Those who committed spiritual, moral and sexual immorality with her will likewise suffer intensely. The Lord will also strike her natural children with death. He punishes the wicked even in their own children and in their followers (cf. Exodus 20:5; Galatians 6:7-8). Christ's judgements will be so stirring that it will become widely known.

Directed to all the congregations:

Then all the churches (congregations) will know (*Greek: gignosko)(future)* that I am (*present*) he who *continually searches (Greek: ereunao)(present)* kidneys (the seat of emotions)(*Greek: nephros*) and hearts (the seat of intelligence or will)(*Greek: kardia*), and I will repay (give)(*future*) each (*Greek: hekastos*) of you according to your works (deeds). Literally: kidneys and hearts. They symbolise what is the most invisible and most unknown within man (Jeremiah 17:9-10; cf. Psalm 51:6,10). Christ's penetrating eyes has seen the real motive of these false teachers: they are unwilling to suffer persecution for the sake of Christ! They would rather compromise than suffer for Christ's sake. Christ warns all congregations that he knows all the inmost motives of people and will bring every hidden thing into the light in the final judgement. The absolute truth concerning everything and everyone will be made known. And he will reward everyone according to what he has done (Psalm 62:13; Matthew 16:27).

Directed to the faithful members of the congregation:

2:24 Now I say (*present*) to the rest (*Greek: loipos*) of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold (have)(*present*) to her teaching and have not learned ((*Greek: gignosko)(aorist)*) Satan's so-called deep (*Greek: bathos*) (secrets) - as they say (*present*) - I am not imposing (*Greek: ballo)(present)* any other burden (*Greek: baros*) on you.

2:25 Only (except)(*Greek: plen*) hold on to (*Greek: krateo)(imperative, aorist)* what you have (*present*) until (*Greek: achri hou*) I will have come (*Greek: heko)(subjunctive, aorist)*).

The deep secrets of Satan. The false prophetess Jezebel argued: “In order to conquer Satan, you must know Satan”. She taught that a person would never be able to conquer sin unless he first became thoroughly acquainted with sin by experience! Therefore, she urged Christians to attend the trade-guild festivals and to commit sexual immorality in order to be able to remain ‘a Christian’ and even become ‘a better Christian’. This is meant by ‘learning Satan's so-called deep secrets’ (2:24). This doctrine reflects the dualistic world-view of the cult, who regarded only the soul as the real essence of man and the body as a prison, from which a man must seek to free himself (this is Gnostic teaching). The method of freeing oneself was to submit to all wickedness in order to overcome wickedness and thus show that one need not fear wickedness, because essentially a person cannot be touched by evil and stands above evil. Wherever a modern religion has this dualistic teaching: regarding only the soul as reality and all the rest as illusion, it leads to a similar lack of ethics within that religion. The sect or cult was certainly a heretical group and their teachings and practices a heresy.

Hold on to what you have. Christ promises the faithful Christians in Thyatira that he will not impose any other injunction on them than that decided at the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15:28-29). Christ exhorts Christians that they must hold on to what they have, that is, to the revelation in the Bible, until Christ will have come or will be present. Christ's coming is finally at his second coming (cf. Matthew 16:27). But for most people his coming is at the time they die physically! Then they will come in their final state of either justification or condemnation.

(6) Christ's promise.

2:26 To him who overcomes (*present*) and keeps (*Greek: tereo*)(*present*) my works until (*Greek: achri*) the end (*Greek: telos*), I will give (*future*) authority over the nations (*Greek: ethne*). The conquerors are Christians who overcome the temptations (seductions) of Jezebel and other false prophets and persevere doing the will of Jesus Christ to the end. In Revelation 2:22 Christ speaks of Jezebel's works, from which people must repent. In Revelation 2:26 he speaks of his work, which people must do to the end. These works of Christ refers to living as Christ did on earth (1 John 2:6), to living according to his teachings and commands (John 15:14) and to doing the works already revealed in the Bible (Ephesians 2:10). Those who overcome follow in Christ's footsteps (1 Peter 2:21).

What authority is given to Christians? A quote from Psalm 2:9:

2:27 He will rule (shepherd = punish)(*Greek: poimano*)(*future*) them with an iron (*Greek: siderous*) sceptre (staff) (*Greek: rabdos*), as vessels (*Greek: skeuos*) of pottery (*Greek: keramikos*) he will dash (crush)(*Greek: suntribo*) (*present*) (them).

- just as I have received (*Greek: lambano, lepsomai, elabon, eilepha*)(*perfect*) (authority) from my Father". The nations are a symbol of all those who oppress and persecute Christians at the present time. Christ had received authority from his Father to reign (12:5) and to strike down the nations (19:15). Christians who remain faithful to Christ also receive authority to reign together with Christ and to be associated with Christ in the final judgement. "To shepherd" here does not mean to rule over the nations for a period of time, but to dash them to pieces in judgement as the Hebrew parallelism demands (2:26; Psalm 2:8-9). At the final judgement, the wicked will be like broken pottery (cf. Jeremiah 19:10-11) and they will never again rise against Christians or even rise at all! After the final judgement, the wicked will be removed from the earth and the righteous will rule over the new earth (21:27; 2 Peter 3:13). The righteous will completely fulfil the cultural commission of Genesis 1:28. Christians will share in Christ's throne, that is, his victory, his reign and his glory (3:21).

2:28 And I will also give (*future*) him the morning star (*Greek: aster proinos*). The morning star in the physical universe rules every new day. The star being linked to the sceptre (Numbers 24:17) and to the king of the Jews (Matthew 2:2) is the symbol of royalty. Just as Christ is the True Morning Star (22:16) who rules the universe (1:5; cf. Matthew 28:19), so Christians will possess the morning star in the sense that they will rule with Christ and share in his royal splendour (cf. 22:5). All darkness will forever be driven out.

(7) Christ's exhortation.

2:29 He who has (*present*) an ear, he must hear (*imperative, aorist*) what the Spirit says (*present*) to the churches (congregations). See Revelation 2:7.

(8) A possible application.⁵

The congregation of Thyatira is an example of a congregation plagued by false theology, a congregation that has to make a choice between acceptance with the world and acceptance with Christ. This is a sociological problem.

The congregation of Thyatira represents all the congregations that have to make a choice between the immoral social system of the Nicolaitans or holding on to what Christians have received in Christ and from Christ.

Thyatira was a city of industry and commerce. She was famous for her guilds: a kind of community with a particular occupation and labour union. Everyone involved in industry (producing things) or commerce (selling and buying things) was required to belong to one of these social organisations, otherwise he was in danger to be boycotted by everyone else. These social organisations had an outspoken heathen character. Special festivals and ceremonies, in which every member had to participate, were connected to a tutelary god who was deemed to protect and promote that particular industry or trade. The members had to attend religious festivals and large banquets which degenerated into orgies (overeating, drunkenness, sexual immoral fun). This social structure of the society made it very difficult for Christians, because their financial income was dependent on their participation in the industry and commerce of the city. When Christians refused to participate in the idolatrous veneration of the tutelary gods or immoral fun of their festivals, they were boycotted and ostracised from society.

Christians in every society face this problem. In order to share the gospel with the people of the society, Christians must not withdraw from society. But in order to obey God and live a holy life, Christians cannot participate in the religious and immoral festivals and ceremonies of their society.

The new theology. Some preachers in Thyatira advocated membership and participation in these guilds, because their circumstances demanded it. In order to solve their social dilemma they developed a new theology! Nicolaitan theology justified the participation of Christians in these heathen religious and immoral festivals and ceremonies of their society.

⁵ Bavinck, En voort wentelen de eeuwen, pp. 81-90

Apparently they advocated that because the heathen 'gods' did not really exist, Christians could venerate them without damaging their Christian faith. Christians should do these things if by doing them they could safeguard their position and financial income in the world. The Nicolaitan theology advocated that once in a while one could burn incense to these gods. Once in a while one could join the heathen banquets and get drunk. Once in a while one could get involved in sexual immoral fun. The Nicolaitans taught that this was the way for a Christian to "learn Satan's so-called deep secrets" (3:24). They taught that by sinning more, a Christian would participate more humbly in the Lord's Supper. They taught that the deeper a Christian fell into sin, the higher God's grace became to forgive him. They taught that the deeper a Christian descends into hell, the more glorious would be his ascension into heaven. These Nicolaitans hoped that Christ would not notice their real motive for their compromise, namely, to make money and to escape from persecution while remaining a so-called 'Christian'. The Nicolaitans advocated a thorough practical religion that enabled a person to be a Christian and at the same time enjoy all the advantages of being a heathen!

The Nicolaitan theology cannot be grounded on the Bible! Study the apostle Paul's rejection of this theology in Romans 6:1-23! Because the Bible did not support the theology of the Nicolaitans, the Nicolaitans resorted to so-called "prophetic inspiration and utterances". At the same time the Nicolaitans characterised those who rejected their new theology as 'being unspiritual', because they did not surge on the waves of the Spirit and did not believe in their prophecies!

The promoter of this new theology seemed to be a woman called Jezebel. Some ancient manuscripts of the book of Revelation read: "your wife, Jezebel", suggesting that she might have been the wife of the elder of the congregation. Nevertheless, she calls herself "a prophetess". This means she insisted that she received her inspiration and theology directly from the Holy Spirit! In this way she could justify her false views without basing it on the written Bible! It is much easier to base a false teaching on prophetic inspiration than to prove it from the Bible. False teachers and false prophets today also base their false teachings on 'prophetic inspiration'! Moreover, such false teachers and false prophets call those Christians who do not agree with their false theology, 'unspiritual'. And when genuine Christians hold on to the true teachings of the Bible, these false teachers and false prophets accuse them of being legalistic, because they do not allow themselves to be born along by the waves of the Spirit. But note 1 Corinthians 4:6-7 and Acts 26:22. False prophets also accuse genuine Christians of having changed the Bible, even when these false prophets cannot prove it! Note that there are thousands of manuscripts in the original Greek and thousands of manuscripts of very early translations made of the original text that prove all these false prophets wrong! Jezebel together with her followers formed a dangerous fifth column within the Church!

Christ rebukes congregations like the congregation of Thyatira for tolerating so-called prophets or prophetesses and their false teaching. These false prophets and their followers may think that they will escape the rejection and persecution of their government and society by compromising with the religious and immoral social events of their society. But Christ prophesies that unless they immediately repent they will suffer intensely!

Christ reveals himself as the One who sees everything and who will act with final judgement! He is the One who searches hearts (attitudes) and minds (motives). He sees their cowardice, compromise and love for money and status in society. Christ forbids people to change the truth of the Bible with their false theology or with their false inspired prophecies (cf. 22:18-19)! They cannot and will not be able to resist Christ, because Jesus Christ is the One with feet of burnished bronze that can crush everyone! He will repay each person according to his deeds.

While the advocates of the new theology promise "escape from suffering" in society, Christ threatens that he will bring these people into intense suffering in the present time (a bed of suffering) and in eternity (dash them to pieces)! No one can fool around with the King of kings!

Christ commands all genuine Christians to hold on to what they have in Christ and have received from Christ until his second coming. He promises that if Christians overcome, that is, if they do his will to the end, he will give them authority to participate in the final judgement of those who made compromises with the kingdom of the world. In God's great final judgement all power relationships will be turned upside down: the persecuted Christians will become the kings. The Christians, who had little on earth, will in the end have everything, because they will have Christ (the Morningstar) (22:16)!