

(Power From on High) 27. the Spirit's Message to the Churches

by A.B. Simpson

The Spirit's message to the churches is one of warning, reproof, and promise, urging them to repent, return to their first love, and stand faithful in the face of trouble.

Topics: "Messages to the Churches", "Faithfulness and Love"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the Spirit's messages to the seven churches in Revelation, highlighting their relevance to the modern Church. Each church represents a distinct condition of faith, from Ephesus's loss of first love to Laodicea's lukewarmness, urging believers to heed the Spirit's call for genuine devotion and faithfulness. Simpson warns against complacency and encourages a return to fervent love for Christ, as well as steadfastness in trials. He illustrates the importance of individual commitment to Christ, even amidst a declining church culture, and the promise of reward for those who remain faithful. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deep, personal relationship with Jesus, urging listeners to listen to the Spirit's voice.

Transcript

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Rev. 3: 22.

The seven letters of the Lord Jesus to the seven churches of Asia contain the last message of the Holy Ghost to the Churches of the Christian age. These messages were not addressed to the Apostolic Church; for all the apostles except John were already in heaven, and the first two generations of Christians had passed away. In a very peculiar sense these epistles represent the message of the risen Savior and the Holy Ghost to the Churches of the last days and our own times. While they are the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, they are also represented, in that perfect unity which the Scriptures constantly recognize between the Spirit and the Son, as the words which the Spirit saith unto the Churches.

A short circuit through the western part of Asia Minor would take one in the order of these epistles from Ephesus to Smyrna, and thence to Pergamos, Thyatira, and the other cities mentioned. It has been supposed by many thoughtful interpreters, that these Churches represent in chronological order the successive conditions of Christianity from the time of John to the end of the age. This is doubtless true to a certain extent.

Ephesus, strong in its orthodoxy, zeal and Christian work, represented the Church immediately after the apostolic age. Smyrna, persecuted and suffering, represented the next epoch of persecution and martyrdom. Then came the reaction of Pergamos, the prosperous and worldly Church with its greater perils and temptations representing the period of Constantine, when Christianity was the established religion of the State, and the world had ceased to oppose and exchanged her persecuting frown for the fawning smile of seductive pleasure.

The Church at Thyatira represents the next stage, the rise of spiritual corruption, and especially of the Romish apostasy. This is naturally followed by Sardis, a condition of entire spiritual death, which well represents the darkness and death of the middle ages.

Philadelphia follows, feeble, but true, loyal to Christ's word and name, and receiving His approval and benediction. This represents the Reformation era, the cause of that and the revival of spiritual life and power under Luther, Cranmer, Knox, Doddridge, Baxter, and the religious life and deeper spiritual movements which have been going forward, in a blessed minority of the Churches of Christ, during these later centuries.

There is yet one picture more, it is the Church of the Laodiceans, rich, prosperous, self-satisfied, widely respectable, but thoroughly lukewarm, indifferent, and deeply offensive to the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ. He stands as One outside the door, knocking for admission, warning of coming judgment, and soon to return again and sit down upon His Millennial throne. Surely this represents the Church of today, and the still more worldly Church of the immediate future, the last age of Christianity before the coming of the Lord.

Now, while the picture is chronologically true, at the same time each of these Churches represents a condition of things that is permanent and perpetual to the time of the end. While Ephesus represents the first ages of Christianity, yet it is found all the way through. While Philadelphia represents the dawn of the Reformation, yet the spirit of Philadelphia runs on, and the representatives of true revival and vital Christianity are found to the close, and so all these Churches are concurrent as well as successive.

They represent seven conditions of Christianity which may almost always be found in some quarter of Christendom, and to which the Holy Ghost is speaking His last solemn message of warning, reproof, or promise. Let us look at them in this light.

I. THE SPIRIT'S MESSAGE TO THE STRONG CHURCH.

The Church at Ephesus was a strong Church. It was full of good works. "I know thy works," and not only thy works, "thy labor" -- works that cost something, "and thy patience" -- works that are continuous. It was an orthodox and a jealous Church, which stood firmly for what it believed to be the truth, and it withstood without compromise all that was false and counterfeit. "Thou hast tried these that call themselves Apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars." This is a very high testimony, and one would think that a Church of which the Master can say so much, must be considerably in advance even of the average standing. But the Lord is not satisfied with Ephesus. The Spirit's message is one of the deepest searching and condemnation. Our English version poorly expresses the emphatic meaning of this condemnation. It is not "I have somewhat against thee," but rather "I have against thee." I have so much against thee, that if thou dost not change this cause of offence and reproof I cannot bear thee; I will not suffer thee; "I will come unto thee and remove the candlestick out of its place, except thou repent."

What was this grave charge? What was this solemn omission? "Thou hast left thy first love." It was the lack of love, the lack of fervor, the lack of devotion to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. They had the active and the orthodox element, but they had not the heart life, without which all these are but empty forms, and for which Christ will accept no substitute.

You do not marry a wife to do your cooking and washing as an African savage, but to be your companion, and to give you the devotion of her heart. If she were to excuse her want of love, by the fact that she had so much work to do, you would tell her that a servant could do your work, but only a wife could give you the love for which your heart longs. This is what Jesus asks from His Church, and He will take nothing else instead.

What is this first love? Is it the intense demonstrativeness which we manifest at our conversion, that glad overflowing, perhaps over-effervescent devotion of childhood, which passes into sober and earnest but quiet habits of faithfulness and obedience? And are we to accept His reproof if we do not always feel the excitement of our first experiences? Certainly not. First love does not mean the love we have first had when we were converted, because He wants us to have something better as the days go by. It is not first in the order of time, but it is first in the order of importance. He means the love that puts Him first, the love that gives Him the supreme place, the love that makes Him the first waking consciousness, and the last thought as we fall asleep at night, the supreme joy of all our being, the gladly accepted sovereign of our will and all our actions, and the One apart from whom we have and want nothing; the first and last of our heart's affections, and our life's aim. This is what Christ expects, and without this love our noblest liberality, our loftiest zeal, our busiest work, is but a sounding brass, a tinkling cymbal, and a disappointing mockery to His loving heart.

This is the first and the last message of the Holy Ghost to these seven Churches. Jesus wants your love. A dear Christian friend once passed through a peculiar experience. It seemed to her as if Christ was not satisfied with her life, and so she began to plan for more work. She added another Sunday School class, another Ladies' Society, a few more hours of laborious work, and still she was not satisfied. Month after month the hunger grew, and the sense of disappointment only increased.

At last she threw herself before Him, and said, "Lord, will you not show me what it is You want? What more can I do to please You?" And then a gentle voice seemed to whisper to her, "It's not more work I want, but more love, and I want you to work less and love Me more." And as she let herself fall into His loving arms, and learned to lean upon His breast, and sit like Mary at His feet, while Martha was bustling around with her busy work, she found that what the Master wanted was her heart, and her first love. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

II. THE SPIRIT'S MESSAGE TO THE SUFFERING CHURCH.

Rev. 2: 8-11. The Church in Smyrna was a martyr Church. It represents the suffering people of God in every age. It is not always outward fire. There is a keener pain in the white heat of inward trial, and there are sorrows still for human hearts to bear, as piercing as in the martyr days. What is the Spirit's message to the suffering church? "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life." Do not get out of your trouble as easily and as quickly as you can by any possible means, but rather be faithful in your trouble, be faithful even if it kills you; be faithful not until death, but unto death, faithful even at the cost of death itself. The great temptation to the tried ones is to regard deliverance from trouble as the principal thing.

How noble the example of the men of Babylon in contrast with this! "If it be so," they said, "our God is able to deliver us, and He will deliver us out of thy hand, oh king; but if not, be it known unto thee, oh king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." That is the true attitude of faithfulness, to stand like Christ in the wilderness, refusing the devil's help, until God Himself shall set us free, or accept the sacrifice at its fullest cost. This is the greatest need of today, the backbone and the royal blood of self-sacrificing loyalty to principle and to God. When the Holy Ghost can find such men and women, He can accomplish anything by them.

III. THE SPIRIT'S MESSAGE TO THE WORLDLY CHURCH.

This is represented by Pergamos. Rev. 2: 12-17.

This Church dwelt where Satan's seat was, and Satan's throne is in the world. Its special danger was the doctrine of Balaam, the temptation to go to worldly banquet with the great and influential, to eat of things sacrificed to idols, and to indulge in unholy pleasure, holding the doctrine of the Nicolaitans -- the form of godliness, and yet the liberty to sin.

This is the peculiar temptation of the Church of today, to hold on to God with one hand, and to the world with the other, to compromise sterling principle for the approval of the influential and the great, to go to their feasts, keep in touch with social amusements, to retain their influence and approval, and yet pretend to be true to God. In contrast with the forbidden bread, and the forbidden love of this present evil world, the Holy Spirit offers something better -- the hidden manna of the heavenly banquet, and the everlasting love of the Lord Jesus Christ, represented by the white stone with the new name written upon it, which no man knoweth save he to whom it is given.

Let us refuse the temptation of the world's bread and the world's friendship, and some day we shall sit down in His banqueting house, and His banner over us will be love as He receives us to the Marriage of the Lamb, and gives us the rapture of His own love, one thrill of which would compensate for an eternity of earthly delight.

Beloved, is He speaking to some of you? Is the world plausibly trying to win you to a worldly life? "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

IV. THE SPIRIT'S MESSAGE TO THE CORRUPT CHURCH.

Thyatira represents the age of corruption, and the counterfeit life of the wicked one. The striking phrase found in this epistle -- "the depths of Satan" -- well represents the abominable mysteries of the Papacy, and the kindred perils which are gathering around the church in these last days, through Satan's counterfeits and the false life of Thyatira.

This will doubtless increase as the age draws to its close. There will be false prophets; there will be visions, illuminations, revelations, "osophies" and "isms" yet more and more.

In opposition to these, the Holy Ghost has given us a safe criterion in this epistle, "I will put upon you none other burden, but that which ye have already, hold fast till I come." This settles the whole question. There is to be no new revelation, no new Bible, no new authoritative voice from heaven. We have it all now in the Holy Scriptures, and all we have to do is "that which we have, hold fast till He come."

These men come to us with their theosophies and their revelations, telling us, as the serpent told Eve, of higher life and loftier spiritual planes; but it is the false, elusive light of the lamps of the pit. In answer to it, we have only to hold up the word of God, and all these illusions will be exposed, even as the sunlight not only chases away the darkness of the night, but eclipses the feeble torchlight glare.

In contrast with all this, how glorious the promise which the Spirit gives to the faithful overcomer! In opposition to the devil power which the adversary offers, and the false light of his revelations, the Lord Jesus says, "I will give him that overcometh power over the nations in the millennial kingdom, at My second coming and the true light of the Morning Star," the power and the light which are from above, and which shall be forever. O, beloved, are any of us turning our eyes to the false delusive torchlights of error, fanaticism, superstition and a false mysticism? "He that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

V. THE SPIRIT'S MESSAGE TO A DEAD CHURCH.

Sardis represents the culmination of all that has gone before, a Church which has a name to live, but which is really dead. What is His message to such a Church? Alas! it is useless to speak to a dead Church, but He can speak only to the remnant that is still alive within it. And to these He says, "I have a few names, even in Sardis, that have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy."

If God has placed you in such a community, you can stand faithful; you can live in vital connection with Him, and you stand as a true confessor of Christ where all around are dead. And to such He gives a glorious promise; "He that overcometh, 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." "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Beloved, be true, though you stand alone, and someday you will hear your name confessed before the Father's throne.

VI. THE SPIRITS MESSAGE TO THE LITTLE FLOCK OF FAITHFUL ONES.

The Church in Philadelphia meets nothing but words of approval from the Lord. It is the little Church, it has but little strength, but it has been faithful in two respects. It has been true to Christ's word and loyal to His name. It holds its testimony clear and true to the word of God and the holy Scriptures, and in contrast with ecclesiastical names and outward forms, it recognizes and honors the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The holy Scriptures and the living Christ, these are its testimonies. It is easy to recognize the true evangelical flock of Christ by these signs in all the ages, and especially in these last days.

In contrast with higher criticism, down grades and latitudinarian views, are we standing, beloved, for the simple authoritative, unchanging Word of God? In contrast with all other names are we standing for the person, the divinity, the glory, and the all-sufficient grace of the living Christ, and proving the power of Jesus' name?

Then for us also the Spirit speaks these mighty promises: First, "an open door" of service, that none can shut; secondly, a part in the glorious translation of the bride at the coming of the Lord. "I will keep thee from the hour of temptation that is coming upon all the world, to try them that dwell on the face of the whole earth"; thirdly, a place of permanence and honor in the new Jerusalem, a part in the Millennial

kingdom of our Lord, where we shall stand, as pillars in His temple, bearing the name of the new Jerusalem, and the new name Jesus Christ, identifying us with Him in His personal love and glory forever.

O beloved, in view of this high calling and these glorious truths, let us be true, and "he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

VII. THE SPIRIT'S MESSAGE TO AN INDIFFERENT CHURCH.

There is something awfully suggestive in the fact that the Church of the Laodiceans is spoken of quite differently from all the others. Even Sardis was recognized as His Church; but this last Church is not His Church, but theirs. It is the "church of the Laodiceans," and He seems to say to it, as He did to His own Israel of old, "Behold your house is left unto you desolate."

You have not wanted me to control, you may have your Church if you will. The very name Laodiceans means "to please the people." It represents a popular Church, and a timeserving age. It is a very large, wealthy, powerful Church; it is rich, increased with goods, in need of nothing. It is also a self-satisfied Church. The reports of its membership, its finances, its missionary organizations are very flattering. It is doing a great deal of work; it is spending a great deal of money, and it is thoroughly satisfied with its own progress and prosperity, but alas! in the eyes of its Lord, it is "the poor, the miserable, the blind, and the naked one." He is represented as excluded from its interior, and standing knocking at its door as a stranger, He is uttering His last solemn warning and appeal, and telling of chastening and judgment about to come upon it. He is counseling it to buy of Him the gold of true faith, the white raiment of divine holiness, the eye-salve of spiritual illumination.

But alas, the saddest and the most solemn part of all this picture is, that it represents the last stage of visible Christianity, the Church at the end of the age and at the coming of the Lord!

Beloved, can it be possible that the Church of our fathers, the Church of the reformers, the Church of the martyrs, could ever become such a Church? Ah, ask yourselves did not the Church of Paul and John become the apostasy of Rome?

What is the real secret of all this? "Thou art lukewarm," -- respectable indifference; the same cause which led to the rejection of Ephesus, only aggravated and intensified; the want of heart; the want of love; the want of enthusiasm; the want of Jesus Himself within. The Church that has lost the spirit of revival, the Church that has lost the simplicity of fervor, the Church that looks upon religious experience as sentimentalism, fanaticism, and extravagance, clothed in a stately respectability and self-satisfied complacency, folds her arms, and says, "I am rich, increased with goods, and have need of nothing," while Jesus is standing at the door, and the last judgments are about to fall.

And now the Master turns from the Church of the Laodiceans, and His last message is not to the Church, but to the individuals in it, who are willing to stand out from its indifference, and to be spiritual overcomers. "If any man will hear my voice, and open the door. I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit down with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne."

It is to the individual the promise is given. Yes, even if the Church should become apostate, one by one we can stand true to God, and still may win our crown.

There are two promises: First, we must receive the Christ within; secondly, we shall sit down with Him upon His throne. The Prince comes to us now in disguise. Soon He will come in all His glory to know those who have stood with Him in these days of trial and rejection, Oh, in view of that great day, God help us to be true!

It is said that Ivan, of Russia, used sometimes to disguise himself and go out among his people to find out their true character.

One night he went, dressed as a beggar, from door to door, in the suburbs of Moscow, and asked for a night's lodging. He was refused admittance at every house, until at last his heart sank with discouragement to think of the selfishness of his people. At length, however, he knocked at a door where he was gladly admitted. The poor man invited him in, offered him a crust of bread, a cup of water and a bed of straw, and then said, "I am sorry I cannot do more for you, but my wife is ill, a babe has just been given her, and my attention is needed for them." The emperor lay down and slept the sleep of a contented mind. He had found a true heart. In the morning he took his leave with many thanks.

The poor man forgot all about it, until a few days later, the royal chariot drove up to the door, and, attended by his retinue, the emperor stopped before the humble home.

The poor man was alarmed, and throwing himself at the emperor's feet, he asked "What have I done?"

Ivan lifted him up, and taking both his hands, he said "Done? you've done nothing but entertain your emperor. It was I that lay on that bed of straw; it was I that received your humble but hearty hospitality, and now I have come to reward you. You received me in disguise, but now I come in my true character to recompense your love. Bring hither your newborn babe." And when the child was brought to him, he said, "You shall call him after me, and when he is old enough, I will educate him and give him a place in my court and service." Giving the man a bag of gold he said, "Use this for your wife, and if ever you have need of anything, don't forget to call upon the poor tramp that slept the other night in that corner."

As the emperor left him, that poor man was glad indeed that he had welcomed his king in disguise. The day is coming when amid the splendors of the advent throne, we would give worlds for one glance of recognition from that royal eye.

And we shall be so glad when, amid the myriads of the skies, we shall see His loving smile and meet His recognition and hear Him say, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, sit down upon My throne. You were not ashamed of Me when I came to you in disguise. Now I have come to confess you before My Father and His holy angels."

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