

**THE MYSTERY OF GOD  
SHALL BE FINISHED**

**THE  
PERGAMOS  
CHURCH AGE**

A STUDY IN THE RESTORATION OF THE CHURCH

**No.5**

# THE PERGAMOS CHURCH AGE

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## FOREWORD

This third Church Age (extending from 312 till about 600 AD) is highly significant for an understanding of the downward progression of the Church from her original calling.

A grasp of developments in this period will also substantially explain the shortcomings of the Reformation. This is because many of the errors into which the Church fell in Pergamos were inadequately eradicated by the Reformers, and continued to cause great difficulties for believers until the Church drew closer to her original calling.

In addition to the reference books listed previously, I have gained much assistance in both this and the next (Thyatira) study from:

- L Boettner, "Roman Catholicism" (Banner of Truth)
- A Hislop, "The Two Babylons" (or, The Papal Worship proved to be the worship of Nimrod and his wife) (Loizeaux Brothers)
- L Verduin, "The Anatomy of a Hybrid" (A Study in Church/State Relationships) (Eerdmans)

I again acknowledge my indebtedness to my late wife, Carol, for her arduous work in preparing the draft typescript of the original version.

In transferring the original hard copy version to the current electronic format, I have taken the opportunity to substantially revise it stylistically. There is no substantial change to the content.

The Philadelphia Church Age (No 9) is almost complete. The Laodicea Church Age (an examination in depth of the Word for our own day) is still in preparation. I have as yet only begun to write one section of this, End Time Deception. Your prayers would be appreciated.

Further studies in this series may be viewed on my website, [www.endtimerestoration.com](http://www.endtimerestoration.com). Hard copies may be obtained by emailing me using the contact form on the website.

**John L Birkin**

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## THE DOCTRINE OF BALAAM

### (i) The trap to lure into an adulterous union

Pergamos means literally “thoroughly married”. It is a most accurate prophetic description of the events of this age in which the church married the world.

The age begins with the reign of Constantine as Roman Emperor (313 - 337 AD). In his reign things took place which altered the whole complexion of Christianity and paved the way for the evil spiritual despotism of the Middle Ages (the Thyatira Church Age).

The Church had begun her downward slide in Ephesus, when she lost her first love. Now the seductive blandishments of the serpent (2 Corinthians 11: 2-3) were to lead to an illicit union. The chaste early Church virgin would become a fallen woman, joined to someone other than her Beloved. Truly she would be “thoroughly married”, but her union would be adulterous.

How and why did this come about?

A closer examination of the Lord’s message to Pergamos will reveal the answer.

*But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication (Revelation 2:14).*

We are told of the existence of a group in Pergamos who held the doctrine of Balaam. Furthermore, those holding it did not do so casually. The word “hold” means literally “to get possession of, become master of, take hold of, seize, hold fast, not to discard or let go”. This doctrine was not just a few loosely held ideas or thoughts. It was held tightly, tenaciously and with determination in the Church as orthodox doctrine.

But this doctrine was deadly. This is clear from the use of the word “stumblingblock”. This originally described the stick in a trap on which the bait is placed, and which springs up and shuts the trap at the touch of an animal. Then it came to mean any entanglement to the foot, obstacle or snare to trap or make fall. Hence Williams translates this passage, “taught Balac to *set a trap* for the children of Israel”.

Who was Balaam? What was his doctrine? What was it about its nature and content that entangled the Church and caused her to fall into the clutches of the serpent?

To answer these questions, let us look first at this doctrine in the Old Testament and then at its significance in the New.

## (ii) The trap described

The incident referred to by the Lord in Revelation 2:14 is found in Numbers 22 to 25.

After the long years of wandering, Israel had at last begun her march to the Promised Land. Progressing triumphantly up the east bank of the Dead Sea, she camped at the crossing of the Jordan near Jericho.

Moab and Midian feared a fate similar to that which befell the Amorite tribes who opposed Israel's march militarily in face-to-face combat. So, despairing of military success before the banners of Israel, they devised a strategy using more "spiritual" means.

They sought the services of a famed prophet, Balaam, to curse Israel through divination and enchantment. But the Lord overruled. He frustrated Balaam's every attempt, turning his curses into blessings.

Balaam, however, was deeply covetous of *the wages of unrighteousness* (2 Peter 2:15), the reward he would gain if he succeeded. So he devised another plan. This would definitely cause Israel to be cursed.

To see the evil reasoning behind Balaam's plan is to see the secret of the evil being taught in the church of Pergamos which led to her being ensnared.

In his unwilling blessings, Balaam had described Israel as dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations (Numbers 23:9). She was not to mix with the nations but to remain separate from their abominations. He realised he could not curse whom God had blessed. So, Balaam counselled Balak to bring Israel to defile that separation which was one of the reasons for their blessing. If they did, God would curse them.

Through his advice the Midianite women seduced the Israelite men (Numbers 25:1; 32:15-16). Even one of the princes of Israel was implicated (Numbers 25:14-15).

Having lured them into fornication, the next stage was to invite Israel to a sacred meal at the religious festival of one of the Midianite gods, Baal-Peor, taking part in its licentious rites and bowing down to their idols.

Oh, serpent! Well did you know that no foe could not stand against the banners of Israel in open warfare. The shout of a King was among them:

*He hath as it were the strength of the wild-ox... Behold the people riseth up as a lioness, and as a lion doth he lift himself up: he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the blood of the slain* (Numbers 23: 22b, 24) (RV).

So, after the failure to curse Israel by spiritual means, the next tactic was not a frontal military assault but an insidious worming-in. Not direct and open opposition, but the wily charm of a deceitful smile. After all, was not Midian also one of Abraham's descendants as well as Israel (Genesis 25: 1-2)? Were they not brothers? Was not Moab the son of Lot, Abraham's nephew?

Each mention of this plan bears the hallmark of the subtle serpent of the garden of Eden:

*For they vex you with their wiles wherewith they have beguiled you in the matter of Peor... (Numbers 25: 18a)*

*But these (false prophets).. .sporting themselves in their deceivings... beguiling unstable souls.. .which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray following the way of Balaam.. (2 Peter 2:12-15)*

Notice how they trap the unwary. The word “beguiling” means literally, “to place a bait for, to set a trap for, entice, lure”. A full frontal attack would be too obvious. But unwary ones who are unstable, that is, not firmly established in the Word, are easily led astray and ensnared.

To digress, the word “unstable” does not refer to emotional or mental stability. Nor does it refer to those sometimes called “spiritual gypsies”. It is possible for a sober, intelligent, level-headed and reliable person to be unstable in the Biblical sense. It means not being rooted and grounded in Christ (cp Colossians 2:4-7). There are hard-working, upright believers who fail to ensure their every action is rooted in Him.

Remember the tragedy of the Ephesus church. They laboured unto weariness, and yet still fell from their first love: a total adherence to the Word. The important thing is not the extent of our devoted labour but our commitment to every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Are you an “unstable soul” in the Biblical sense? The early Church believers who bit-by-bit turned from the full Word were fine people. To avoid the dangers here described, we must ensure we are indeed rooted in Christ. Remember again, the downward slide of the Church is the story of her progressive loss of the experience of the reality of Christ as *all, and in all*. This is not just a history lesson. It could be our own personal experience.

Let us return to the serpent’s plan to curse Israel.

It clearly succeeded, for the fierce anger of the Lord did indeed come upon Israel:

*they provoked Him to anger with their inventions: and the plague brake in on them (Ps 106:29).*

### **(iii) The dire implications of eating foods offered to idols**

Let us now look more closely at the serious nature of Israel’s sin.

This is important as it explains the awful peril facing the Pergamos Church and what was about to happen to her. For she was now to come face-to-face with the same spirit that inspired Balaam to devise his plan to trap Israel.

The worse thing about Israel's sin at Baalpeor was not the fornication, nor even their physically bowing to idols. Idolatry is far more than an ignorant worshipping of a lifeless form of wood or stone. It is much deeper:

- It is demon worship
- It leads to communion with demons
- Such communion is likened to, and linked to, physical fornication

Let us illustrate from Scripture.

Firstly, it states clearly that idolatry is demon worship:

*They sacrificed unto devils, not to God....* (Deuteronomy 32:17)

*he ordained him priests for the high places, and for the devils, and for the calves which he had made* (2 Chronicles 11:15)

*they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils* (Psalm 106:37)

*the rest of men... repented not of the works of their hands (i.e. their idols), that they should not worship devils* (Revelation 9:20).

(Ultimately, of course, this worship was directed to the prince of the demons. The Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of the devils. Jesus identified this idol with satan (Matthew 12:24-27). Beelzebub is simply the Greek spelling of the Hebrew Baalzebub, the god of Ekron (2 Kings 1:2). So, the true god of Ekron was none other than the evil one himself. He did not simply inspire a false worship. He was himself the actual, albeit veiled, object of the false worship.)

Secondly, worship of idols leads to communion with the demons who inspired their construction, whether or not the idolater realises it. The idolater's spirit enters into communion with the spirit of the unclean devil. This is why Paul equates offering sacrifices to idols with having fellowship with demons:

*Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry. ... the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils.* (1 Corinthians 10:14-20)

Finally, the Old Testament compares idolatry to physical fornication. This is very serious. Such worship leads to a spiritual illicit union with the demons behind the idol, with whom they have fellowship:

*Enflaming yourselves with idols under every green tree...* (Isaiah 57: 5a)

*And they shall no more offer their sacrifices unto devils, after whom they have gone a whoring.* (Leviticus 17:7a)

In fact, the spirit of spiritual fornication (idolatry) is the same as that of physical fornication:

*the spirit of whoredoms hath caused them to err, and they have gone a whoring (= spiritually) from their God.. . therefore your daughters shall commit (=physical) whoredom, and your spouses shall commit (=physical) adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they commit whoredom, nor your spouses when they commit adultery: for themselves are separated with whores, and they sacrifice with harlots (Hosea 4:12-14)*

So, it is no coincidence that immorality and idolatry are very closely linked. Idol temples often had cult prostitutes who gave themselves to illicit unions with worshippers to symbolise the worshippers' union with the god they came to honour.

In the light of the foregoing we can now see more fully the serious nature of Israel's sin at Baalpeor. Just as physical fornication with another is unfaithfulness to a spouse, idolatry is spiritual unfaithfulness. The terms used to describe Israel's sin at Baalpeor clearly show they not only fell into physical fornication but into spiritual. They were unfaithful to their Lord:

*Israel joined himself unto Baalpeor (Numbers 25:3a)*

*They joined themselves also unto Baalpeor, and ate the sacrifices of the dead (Psalm 106: 28)*

Israel not only bowed to idols, she joined herself to them. She had fellowship with demons. Israel! Holy, separate Israel, led by the pillar of fire, overshadowed by the cloud of Glory, guided by a prophet, delivered by blood and power, followed by the signs of her supernatural God.

How is this relevant to Pergamos? Because the similarity between Israel's sin and that of the Church in the Pergamos age is far closer than may be realised.

Like Israel at Baalpeor, she tolerated those who held the doctrine of Balaam. So, she too was about to join herself to another spirit, the self-same spirit that Israel joined herself to at Baalpeor. The Church! That holy Bride, filled with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, possessing the pure Word of God, given holy apostles and prophets to guide her, endued with the gifts of the Spirit and tasting already the powers of the world to come.

In the Ephesus and Smyrna ages, as Paul feared (2 Cor 11.3) and John foretold (Rev 2:4-5), the first love of the early church virgin began to cool. She slowly drifted from a commitment to Christ in which she had eyes for none other but Him and His Word.

Now, in Pergamos, she was about to fall into the same trap as Israel, fresh from her recent commitment to the Lord at Sinai, at Baalpeor. The Church was about to be lured into an adulterous relationship with another spirit, defiling her original purity.

Such was the awful fruit of the doctrine of Balaam. The result is horrible to behold.

Let us now see how this came about historically.

## WHERE SATAN'S SEAT IS

(or, THE HISTORICAL RISE OF THE DOCTRINE OF BALAAM)

### (i) The true nature of the worship of the city of Pergamos

In His words of comfort to Pergamos, the Lord spoke of their living *where Satan's seat* (literally = throne) *is*. This expression is far more accurate than generally realised.

The way the serpent came to set up his throne in Pergamos is as follows.

The root of the idolatry of the whole earth is one: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT. Historical Babylon is the source of all the religions of the earth.

(A full examination is given in the Thyatira Church Age and Mystery, Babylon the Great studies. For the present my object is simply to lay a foundation for an understanding of what the Church was sliding into.)

The Babylonian, or Chaldean, priesthood were the guardians of the secrets of the mystery religion of Babylon and of the true nature and object of its worship.

After the death of Belshazzar and the capture of Babylon by the Medo-Persians (Daniel 5:30-31), these priests fled to Asia Minor. They fixed their central college at Pergamos, where Attalus their priest-king set up a kingdom.

Here they continued the worship of ancient Babylon. This was nothing less than the worship of Satan himself, although the fulness of this awful reality was kept from all but those few fully initiated into the true identity of their external objects of worship.

In Pergamos was the famous temple of Aesculapius, worshipped in the form of a living serpent, housed and fed in the temple. This serpent was regarded as an incarnation of the supreme god himself.

Now in the mystery religions the serpent was symbolic of the enlightening sun. The very name Aesculapius means "the man-instructing serpent", i.e. the serpent who brings enlightenment to man. So, he represented none other than that ancient serpent who seduced Eve to partake of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that her eyes might be opened, a *tree to be desired to make one wise* (Genesis 3:6). The worship of Pergamos was nothing less than that of the evil one himself.

("Sun images" appear in the idolatry of Israel in conjunction with the worship of Baal (e.g. 2 Chronicles 34:4, margin). The sun symbolised Baal, who ultimately represented the Babylonian Messiah, the satanic counterpart of the Christ.)

Let us give one further illustration of the spirit of this evil city.

Pergamos was mainly indebted for its beautification and extension to Eumenes II (197-159 BC). This same king assisted the coming to power of Antiochus Epiphanes, the evil king of the north described by Daniel as a foreshadow of the man of sin and of the

abomination of desolation. Their friendship suggests they shared a common spirit. What a spirit to share!

Here is another example of the nature of the spirit of historical Pergamos.

Antiochus claimed to be “God manifest”, the incarnation of the god Zeus. The kings of Pergamos were likewise considered deities, incarnations of the old Babylonian god. And no doubt they were. Not of the human spirit of since dead kings, but of the evil spirit indwelling those kings. They were the tools and expressions of that ancient serpent himself. Biblical proof that the inspiration spirit of the king of Babylon was none other than the serpent himself is found in Isaiah 14: 4-19. Satan indwelling the king of Babylon is addressed directly by the prophet.

How is the spirit of historical Pergamos relevant to a study of the letter to the Pergamos Church? Because:

1. In its immediate context, at the time of the apostle John (late 1st C), this threw light on the problems of believers within a city whose god was Aesculapius.
2. In the prophetic sense, during the Pergamos Age (313 - about 600 AD), the spirit of literal Pergamos shadows the problems of the Church in this age. But the opposition would not be from without. Incredible though it may seem, this spirit was to be granted access to the professing church. As a result, in the church the true believer was actually to be brought face-to-face with the very spirit of the ancient Babylonian mystery religion.

Already we have some idea of how this could take place from considering Israel's sin at Baalpeor.

To see how this spirit gained admission, let us now examine more closely the changes in the constitution of the Church during the reign of Constantine.

## **(ii) The “conversion” of the Emperor Constantine**

During the last great persecution of the Roman Empire against Christians (described in the Smyrna age), a struggle broke out over the control of the Empire. In 312 AD Constantine, in one of the most decisive battles of history, defeated his rival.

Soon after he published the famous Edict of Milan proclaiming freedom of conscience, granting Christianity full legal equality with any religion of the Roman world and ordering the restoration of all church property confiscated in the recent persecution.

When marching to the decisive battle, Constantine claimed to have had a vision followed by a dream in which he was instructed to conquer in the sign of the cross. Thereupon he had an imperial standard (the “Labarum”) constructed, which included the first two initials of Christ's name. He also sent for Christian teachers to explain the significance of the cross. From that time Constantine declared himself a convert to Christianity.

Whether he was, however, is another matter.

It is unquestionable that the Emperor felt indebted to the Christians' God for his victories. And doubtless this was as far as his religious convictions went. As a warrior he embraced Christianity earnestly. As a statesman he owned and valued it. But whether as a lost sinner he felt his need of Christianity is another matter, The usual attributes of conversion: sin, grace, pardon and regeneration are strangely absent. Those churchmen who spoke to him emphasised the benefits to his career, especially his military and imperial career, of his "conversion".

Since they used political bait, it is not surprising if his conversion was politically tainted. The military man's interests predominate. His newly embraced faith seems not to have reached his private life.

One example should suffice to show the absence of an experience of the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost. In AD 325 Constantine gave orders for the execution of his eldest son, probably because of a jealousy over his military successes stirred up by his wife, the son's stepmother. Later he ordered her death also in his remorse and misery.

In conclusion, the Christianity of Constantine was of such a doubtful kind that the pagans saw nothing in it to hinder his enrolment among the gods when he died.

### **(iii) The blending of paganism with Christianity**

Following the Edict of Milan, Constantine issued a second edict advising his subjects to embrace the Gospel. This, together with his policy of favouring Christianity, led to a great influx of new "believers".

Gifts and honours for converts led to much false conversion. The Church became increasingly filled with those who had gone through the external motions of baptism without any separation from the world. The clergy, too, were given gifts and exempted from taxation. Great church buildings were erected at public expense.

So, just as the quality of new converts slumped, the standards of the leaders also declined rapidly as men sought office for worldly advantage rather than by the call of God.

With the advent of masses fresh from their earlier heathenism, a second grade "Christianity" rose up which profoundly affected the character of the Church. This popular "Christianity" was in effect a hybrid, a blend of old pagan ways and true Christianity. The stage was set for the introduction of full-scale paganism in Christian clothing.

Let us consider two aspects of the life of Constantine to better understand the rise of this awful hybrid.

#### **a) Constantine as Pontifex Maximus**

Though Constantine favoured Christianity, it was not the Christianity revealed in the Word. Yes, he prohibited private heathen sacrifices, and all state sacrifices. But the suppression of the former heathenism was only limited. In fact, there was a blending of the old paganism with Christianity in his reign.

This was symbolised in his holding the office of Pontifex Maximus (the high-priest of the old pagan religion) at the same time as assuming supremacy over Church affairs by appearing in councils, mingling in debates and controlling the outcome of religious questions.

His blending of supremacy over Church affairs with holding the office of “Pontifex Maximus” perfectly illustrates the suitability of the word Pergamos to describe this age, as well as the reference to the doctrine of Balaam.

The head of the Babylonian mystery religion held this same title. So did the deified king-priests of Pergamos described earlier.

In 133 BC, however, the last king of Pergamos bequeathed all his dominions to the Roman people. So, all the dignity of the old title of the kings of Pergamos as successors of the Chaldean mystery priesthood passed to Rome.

When Julius Caesar, who had previously been elected Pontifex Maximus, became head of the Roman state and religion, all the powers and functions of the legitimate Babylonian high priest were vested in him. So, he not only claimed the kingdom. He also claimed the divine dignity of the kings of Pergamos, i.e. deification.

Almost certainly Pergamos is the origin of the Caesar worship, or deification of the Roman emperors, that continued in succession from the days of the “deified Julius”.

The transfer of the evil spirit of the Babylonian religion from Pergamos to Rome soon manifested itself in a ferocious anger against the Spirit of God, thus revealing its true character.

A further fact serves to illustrate the identity of the spirit of Pergamos and of Caesar worship. Whilst in some cities Caesar worship was a formality, it was in Pergamos that it was at its most intense.

In Tibet, Nepal, and other Hindu/Bhuddist areas it is said that the spirit of rulers or religious leaders is reincarnated in their successors. This is far more accurate than is usually realised. Although the human spirit was not reincarnated, the same evil inspiration spirit passes from one to another.

Similarly, the “genius”, or spirit of the Roman emperors and heirs of the office of Pontifex Maximus sought to influence each successive occupant of the imperial throne, although with varying degrees of success.

Some brief examples, however, will serve to show the mind of this spirit.

- Caligula (37- 41 AD) claimed to be divine, and wanted his statue erected in the temple at Jerusalem. Note how this spirit lusts to sit in the very place representing the throne of God.

Later emperors revealed how much they were influenced by this spirit in their hatred for the Church. In their attempts to force believers into the rites of the Emperor worship cult, they were in effect trying to force worship of the spirit at the heart of the Babylonian mystery religion, the serpent himself.

- Nero (54 - 68 AD) forced Christians under the heaviest penalties to offer sacrifices to himself.
- Domitian (81- 96 AD) styled himself 'Master and God', and made the official oath "by the genius of the emperor" compulsory. Deifying himself, like Nero he ordered his statue to be worshipped as a god. He persecuted Christians fearing a coming man born in Judea of the family of David who would obtain the empire of the world.

The foregoing illustrate something of the spirit and associations of the office of Pontifex Maximus. Although only some emperors gave themselves over to be used by the spirit behind this office, yet it is plain how great an evil lurked behind it.

Perhaps this will be clearer if we consider the converse. The Church potentially has the fulness of the Holy Spirit. But it is only when believers give themselves wholly over to the Lord that the full potential lying dormant is manifested.

By the days of Constantine it seemed that the office of Pontifex Maximus was stripped of much of its earlier power. Nonetheless the fulness of the spirit behind the office was yet to reveal itself. Until the reign of Gratian (375 - 383 AD), even so-called Christian emperors retained the title, though delegating the more idolatrous functions to heathen officials.

The day would come, however, when this office was taken over by one who professed to be the visible head on earth of the Church of Christ, the bishop of Rome. Then the lurking spirit in the background would reveal once more its full antichristian nature.

So, the combination in Constantine of the office of Pontifex Maximus together with an outward profession of Christianity symbolises the hybrid produced by the adulterous union of Church and State during his reign.

From his time greatly accelerating inroads of paganism into the Church on every hand were evident.

### ***b) Constantine and the "Unconquered Sun"***

Another symbol of the adulterous Church-State union consummated in the days of Constantine was the claimed vision he had, prior to his victory over his rival, of a cross superimposed on the midday sun.

Sun-god worship was one of the most popular forms of contemporary paganism. Constantine blended it with Christianity throughout his reign. Indeed he seemed unaware of any mutual exclusiveness between his faith in the “Unconquered Sun” and Christianity.

Examples of the blending of these mutually exclusive elements are:

- In 321 AD he closed the law courts “on the venerable day of the sun” (even today called “Sunday”). His explicit reason was respect for the sun, not the Lord’s sabbath.
- When moving his capital from Rome to Constantinople, he placed in the square a statue of the sun-god bearing his own features, and even found room for one of the evil mother goddess Cybele. During a celebration conducted by Christian clergy in 330 AD he solemnly invoked the “genius” (i.e. spirit) of the city.

This blending of pagan and Christian worship was not restricted to Constantine. A very rapid decline in the Church’s separation set in. Those who held so tenaciously to the doctrine of Balaam were prevailing. The bait was being taken and the Church ensnared. She was partaking both of the Lord’s table and of the table of devils.

After Constantine’s “conversion” he favoured that party within the Church commonly called the “Catholic” party. Only it benefited from his religious policies. But to obtain the imperial favour and the consequent power, influence and other benefits showered upon the clergy, the Catholic party paid a heavy price.

They accepted the pagan inroads accompanying Constantine’s “conversion”. Those leaders most in control of the Church, through its growing Nicolaitan power structure of bishops, archbishops etc, baptised the paganism of Constantine and the masses who followed his example. Thereby the many semi-pagan “converts”, bringing their old ways with them, opened the door wide for a massive influx of heathen practices and doctrines into the Church, mingled with authentic Biblical doctrines.

(As will be seen later, the grip of Nicolaitanism was greatly strengthened under Constantine’s royal favour. And, more ominously, from this time began state suppression of groups that would not align themselves with the “Catholic” party.)

Let us illustrate with an example showing the mingling of sun-god worship with Christianity. It is no coincidence that it was at this time that the celebration of December 25th was introduced in Rome as the date for the Nativity.

Whence did this custom originate? No thought or idea is by chance. Somewhere there is an inspiration source.

The Word gives no indication of the time of Christ’s birth. Furthermore, no such festival is heard of in the early Church till the 3rd C, and did not gain much observance till the 4th C. How then was this celebration introduced? How was the date chosen?

Long before the Christian era, a heathen festival was celebrated at that precise season in honour of the birth of the Babylonian mystery religion's counterfeit Messiah. It appeared in many different forms in different lands. In Rome it was celebrated as "the birthday of the unconquered sun".

Tertullian protested that in his day (about 230 AD) professing believers actually joined in such heathen celebrations. But by Constantine's day the church in Rome had accepted the doctrine of Balaam and began *to eat things sacrificed unto idols*.

The way this was introduced was the method consistently used throughout the Dark Ages: to take a pagan custom and to identify it with a genuine Biblical event or doctrine. Undoubtedly this made the way into the Church from heathenism easier for many. But it also largely heathenised the Church itself.

From small beginnings this process continued until the Medieval Church, whilst professing the name of Christ, became nothing less than a complete metamorphosis of the ancient mystery Babylon religion in Christian clothing, partaking also of the spirit of that evil religion.

And it is no coincidence that such things as the celebration of December 25th first began in Rome, the new home of the mystery Babylon spirit.

Before leaving the subject of sun-worship, two more examples should suffice to show the extent of pagan intrusion among professing Christians:

- In the 4th C the bishop of Troy admitted he secretly continued to pray to the sun, even as a bishop.
- In the 5th C, Leo, bishop of Rome had to rebuke his flock for paying reverence to the sun on the steps of St Peter's before turning to "worship" in the basilica.

#### **(iv) The "disappearance" of the old paganism**

Throughout the 4th C there was a strange confusion in the attitude of the official church to paganism, the most popular religion of the Roman Empire. On the one hand "Christian" emperors were encouraged by ecclesiastical leaders to suppress its official celebrations. On the other, it seemed progressively to be entering the Church itself.

Around 376 AD paganism was still very strong, yet between 378 and 395 AD it came to ruin. The famous historian, Gibbon, described this disappearance as:

"perhaps the only example of the total eradication of any ancient and popular superstition; and may therefore deserve to be considered as a singular event in the history of the human mind".

But did it really disappear? In exact proportion as paganism disappeared from without the Church, in the same proportion it appeared within. Gibbon himself said:

"It must frankly be confessed that the ministers of the Catholic church imitated the profane model they were so impatient to destroy."

Let us examine a key factor behind the incorporation into the Church of the paganism of the Roman Empire (of which the ancient Babylonian paganism was the source).

We have traced the office of Pontifex Maximus, high priest, of the Babylonian mystery religion from Babylon to Pergamos, and later to Rome. Here this office was held by successive emperors until the reign of Gratian (375 - 383 AD) when an amazing event took place. The title of Pontifex was transferred to Damasus, bishop of Rome and acknowledged head of the Christians in the capital of the Empire.

The bishop of Rome thus stood in direct, lineal, legal and spiritual descent from the priesthood of Babylon itself.

Gibbon dates the ruin of paganism from this date (378 AD). Its stubborn idolatrous worship, which had continued despite official displeasure, suddenly vanished. Evidently the evil Damasus, who came into the bishopric over the dead bodies of over a hundred of his opponents, was willing to live up to the original spirit of his new title to attain popularity with the idolatrous Romans. The pagan "converts" brought their creed and worship into the Church with them. (For full details, see A Hislop, pp 247 - 252).

Fuller details of all that followed this astonishing event are given in The Thyatira Age. Here the seed sown by this action reached its full maturity. For the present, however, I wish to conclude with a brief note of some of the trends that accompanied the gradual paganization of the Church.

Along with the influx of masses fresh from heathenism there arose a popular "Christianity" which greatly venerated the martyrs. Although outwardly these had died for the true faith of the Word, in the popular mind they merely replaced their old gods and heroes. They were transformed into guardians of cities, patrons of trades, and curers of diseases.

Mary, in particular, was elevated to a prominent position. To her went much of the feeling that earlier found expression in the worship of the mother goddesses of Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor. This continued bit-by-bit over the years until the Medieval Church had endowed her with all the attributes of her great archetype, the mother goddess of the Babylonian mysteries. (In the Old Testament this goddess was called Astarte, the wife of Baal. The "groves" were intended to represent her.)

These martyrs, or saints, were celebrated with burning incense and lighted tapers just as their earlier heathen predecessors.

Also, from the early 4th C, a marked change took place in the whole form of Christian worship.

Until Constantine, churches were chiefly private houses. Worship was largely free from formal repetitions. Spontaneity predominated. The influx of unregenerate heathen, however, together with the other evil effects of state support of Christianity, led to the incorporation into the Church's worship of much of the ritual of the pagan temples.

Ceremonial became quite elaborate. The clergy wore ornate clothes. "Holy" ornaments and vessels were greatly enriched. Set prayers, chanting and choirs all

came to be introduced. Gone was the supernatural Spiritual worship of the early Church. The atmosphere of mystery and holy awe of pagan rituals came increasingly into public Christian "worship". It came to be thought necessary to screen off the "holy table" from the people. Eventually this came to be called an altar, a concept wholly foreign to New Testament corporate worship, and reeking of the paganism from which it came. There is no need of an altar. Christ has been sacrificed once for all.

The introduction into church buildings of images and pictures of Christ and the saints also dates from this period. Their inspiration again lies in the idolatry from which the masses had previously come. The representation of Christ as the Almighty Lord on His judgement throne, for example, owed something to pictures of the pagan god, Zeus. Portraits of Mary, too, were not wholly independent of characteristics of the pagan mother goddesses originating from Babylon.

In conclusion, some scholars claim that as much as 75% of Roman ritual is of pagan origin. Even the (Catholic) Cardinal Newman admitted that:

"Temples, incense, oil-lamps, votive offerings, holy water, holy days, seasons of devotion, processions, blessings of fields, sacerdotal vestments, the tonsure (of priests, monks and nuns), images etc., are all of pagan origin."

But it was not only the external features of pagan worship that were gradually absorbed. Even worse, their underlying spirit came in also.

O Lord, arise!

## THE DOCTRINE OF THE NICOLAITANS

### (i) Early indications of the claims of the bishop of Rome

In addition to the doctrine of Balaam, Jesus reprovved Pergamos for tolerating those who held (or, clung to) the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:15).

We have considered who the Nicolaitans are and the implications of their doctrine in the previous study.

We have also illustrated how that doctrine was applied, showing the rising the power of bishops and archbishops, gradually usurping more and more religious authority in the areas covered by their jurisdiction.

Parallel with this trend, those bishops whose “parishes” coincided with important cities came to be considered of greater dignity. Consequently the bishop of Rome, the capital of the Empire, began to assert himself more and more.

Let us now pinpoint some of the stages in the rise of the hated Nicolaitan spirit in Rome prior to the changes in the Church’s governmental structure in the reign of Constantine. These changes set the scene for the long dreary 900-year Thyatira age. The incipient downward trends of Ephesus and Smyrna were to lead to a position in Pergamos where a Nicolaitan priesthood could force its will upon the people.

Though the time to manifest itself openly had not yet come, the first stirrings of the spirit of antichrist in its lust for power over the hearts, minds and bodies of men may be seen in some early bishops of Rome.

- Victor (190 - 202) shocked Irenaeus when he demanded uniform acceptance by all believers of the Roman date for the observance of Easter. He claimed those who observed it on different days could not be Catholic Christians. Irenaeus rebuked him for trying to dictate. The bishop of Ephesus also declared his attitude was autocratic and offensive.

This smells of the spirit of Nicolaitanism. But before the 3rd C there was no Scriptural attempt to justify the supremacy of the bishop of Rome. The spirit of antichrist had to tread carefully. There was still much light in the Church. But that justification soon came.

- Callistus (218 - 223) was the first to use Matthew 16:18 to justify his claim for the supremacy of the bishop of Rome. Clearly his aim in attributing the power of remitting sins to the Church was to increase the power of Rome since she was the self-proclaimed head of the Church.

Callistus was probably referred to by Tertullian. He described as a “bishop of bishops” and “pontifex maximus” the man issuing an edict claiming the Church had power to grant remission of even the gravest sins after baptism.

- Stephen (253 - 257) again quoted Matthew 16:18 in defence when Cyprian rejected his interference in North African baptismal practices since each bishop was supreme in his own diocese.

Although these are the first signs of the rising claims to power by Rome, it was not until Damasus (366 - 364) that serious attention was given to the Scriptural "basis" of the Roman claim to primacy.

But these first signs are not insignificant or coincidental. They are the first whiffs of the foul odour of a spirit as yet unable to fully unveil itself or to reveal the extent of its yearning to rule the minds of men.

Events were moving quickly, however. This spirit would soon be enabled the better to express itself. It would also be enabled to isolate and liquidate opposition from those who still walked in the light of the Word first delivered to the saints.

## **(ii) Constantine and the Church-State union**

Constantine's "conversion" not only led the Church's into the trap laid by those holding the doctrine of Balaam. It also played right into the hands of those who held the hated doctrine of the Nicolaitans.

In addition to mixing paganism with Christianity, the evil doctrine of Balaam also welded Church and State into an unholy alliance. Henceforth the ecclesiastical authorities would find that the State would meddle in the affairs of the Church. But the Church was also able to make use of the power of the State to enforce her will over dissenters.

All believers did not necessarily desire this course of action. There were large groups who resisted it, and as a result were put out of fellowship by that strong, close-knit, hierarchically organised (i.e. having a graded priesthood of elders, bishops, archbishops, metropolitans, etc) group called "Catholic".

Such resistance groups were termed "heretical". From this time right through the Middle Ages the word "heretic" assumed a different meaning from that in the Word. The chief sin was considered to be separation from the established "Church". Believers could be orthodox in doctrine, blameless in character, and yet termed "heretics" because of their refusal to associate with the fallen "Church" in her adulterous union with the State.

Many other believers, however, accepted the increasing influence of the State in the Church, through their lack of spiritual watchfulness. Weary of the long years of persecution and suffering, they gladly embraced the favours bestowed by Constantine. Swallowing the attractive bait, they discovered too late the full implications of their actions. Many and loud were the protests against the evils that flowed from State involvement in religious affairs. But few were able, or willing, to see that to remove individual branches was not enough. The whole system had to be uprooted, and a return made to the Biblical pattern of a Church separate from the world.

Let us now see how the Church, from the time of Constantine, largely came under the control of the successive occupants of the Roman imperial throne.

Until Constantine the Church was totally independent of the State. It advanced not by governmental favour but by supernatural power, despite often severe persecution.

During his reign, however, bishops became court favourites, receiving honours and finance for church buildings.

Flattered by his advances, the professing Church allowed Constantine an undue control in her affairs. Even if converted, his office as Emperor afforded him no Scriptural right to be involved in the affairs of the Church beyond that which his spiritual stature warranted. Despite this he was allowed to appear at religious councils and to control the settlement of theological debates. Increasingly those who had the ear of the Emperor were able to control the outcome of any religious controversy.

Had the growth of the power of the bishop not gone so far that one man was able increasingly to control the churches throughout a whole province, the consequences of Constantine's "conversion" would have been far less. If the local churches scattered throughout the Empire had been independent, the effect of one church falling from the Word would not have had automatic repercussions on the others. But the greater the centralised control, the more quickly a complete movement can be controlled and affected for good or for evil once the governing body is won over.

(It is no coincidence that in their attempts to control denominations in communist lands, the authorities found it easier to take over movements whose governmental systems were most centralised. Their greatest problems were with autonomous congregations such as Baptists and Brethren. Indeed, to better control such movements, attempts were made to consolidate and centralise the power of whatever loose advisory councils they had. In the Romanian Baptist Union, for instance, attempts were made to make the purely advisory decisions of the Union binding on all churches, and to give individual pastors full legal control over local assemblies (instead of the assemblies choosing their pastors). Thus simply by controlling the Union, which would control the appointment and location of individual pastors, the authorities could control every individual assembly.)

However much individual believers may not have understood exactly what was going on, the spirit of antichrist most certainly did. Some of his agents were doubtless evil men. Others, however, were used unwittingly, imagining that good would come to the cause of God through Constantine's favours.

It is no coincidence that a cornerstone of Constantine's religious policy was unity. In cases of theological dissension he took it upon himself to summon united Councils at public expense, as though these were affairs of state. Once a decision was reached, it was enforced like any other state legislation. Thus the position of the Nicolaitans was greatly strengthened.

The Church was increasingly assuming the position of the great Babylonian whore, committing fornication with the kings of the earth.

Let us look at one of the most momentous events in Constantine's policy of enforced religious unity.

### **(iii) The Council of Nicaea (325 AD)**

A dispute arose about 320 AD between Arius and the bishop of Alexandria over the nature of the relationship between Christ and the Father.

The quarrel threatened the religious unity that Constantine deemed essential. So he summoned the bishops of all the Empire to a general council at Nicaea, at government expense, accompanied by lower clergy (who did not, however, have any vote).

At this Council we see clearly how far the Church had fallen. Firstly, the Roman Emperor was allowed to preside over the opening session. Secondly, with dire implications for the future, the Council's decisions were enforced by the power of the State. All not adhering to the Nicene creed were to be banished, Arius' books burnt, and concealment of his writings considered a capital offence.

In addition to formulating the Nicene creed, this Council also issued rules regulating ecclesiastical discipline. They make very interesting reading, revealing the working of the centralising Nicolaitan spirit.

It is not by chance that the impious Balaamite Church-State union was furthering the aims of the Nicolaitan spirit.

Hitherto individual bishops had been very free in their actions, and the assemblies suffered little interference in how they were elected. Henceforth a bishop had to be consecrated by all the bishops of his province if possible. The bishop of the provincial capital (= the metropolitan) was given a power of veto over the appointment. This greatly accelerated the process that concentrated power over the bishops in the hands of the metropolitans (later called archbishops).

Among the metropolitans it was accepted that those of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, were entitled to a measure of jurisdiction (i.e. legal control) beyond their own province.

Clergy below the rank of the bishop were no longer able to move to another church without the bishop's permission. (Already they were ordained and paid by the bishop). This cemented the power of the bishop over all below him. With the rapid growth of rural churches, and increased congregations in the cities, the bishop grew in importance, especially as only one bishop was permitted in each city. Presbyters (who came to be called "priests") were appointed over the individual congregations in each city and its locality.

From this we see how a graded hierarchical control structure was being erected, concentrating control over the whole Church in fewer and fewer hands:

- Individual churches were controlled by presbyters.
- Presbyters were paid and their movement controlled by the bishop, who directed all churches in and around each city.

- The appointment of individual bishops was subject to the approval of the bishop (or, metropolitan) of the chief city of a province.
- The metropolitans of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch were granted a measure of jurisdiction (i.e. legal control) beyond their own province.

The Council of Serdica (342-3 AD) took this last development one stage further. Rome was made a court of appeal from a provincial synod (church council) in the Western Roman Empire

Later all power over the appointment of metropolitans in Western Europe was concentrated in the bishop of Rome. This fulfilled the ultimate objective of the evil spirit of antichrist. Then would be revealed all the iniquity lying in its foul bosom.

Before this could happen, however, it was not only necessary for all ecclesiastical power to be concentrated in one pair of hands.

It was also imperative that the civil authorities could and would enforce this power.

Let us see how this came about.

#### **(iv) Political and civil enforcement in religious affairs**

Until Constantine Christianity had no legal recognition. With the Edict of Milan it was declared a permitted cult. But things did not remain there. Constantine's favour and recommendation that all his subjects embrace Christianity was but the beginning. Whereas hitherto Christianity had been persecuted, it now found itself able undertake some persecuting of its own.

State support, however, proved a double-edged sword.

Initially it may have seemed that official pressure against non-Christian religious practices was beneficial. After all, from Constantine throughout the remainder of the 4th C, the former heathen religions gradually lost all official support.

In addition, increasing coercion was used to prod the pagans towards Christianity. For example,

- Constantine required all unbaptised persons by law to attend indoctrination classes with a view to baptism. Those refusing baptism after this were subject to civil penalties.
- In 416 AD the army was declared closed to all but Christians.

Stage-by-stage the scene was being set for the legal identification of heresy (i.e. believing something other than the officially supported faith) with sedition and crime against the State.

The true believer was to pay dearly for his acquiescence in permitting the arm of the flesh to be used to accomplish Spiritual ends.

*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds... (2 Corinthians 10:4)*

Due to an increasing separation from a living fellowship with their Head, unwatchful believers acquiesced to the changes in the nature and constitution of the Church in Constantine's day. These changes gave the growing Nicolaitan priesthood access to the power of the State to consolidate its hold over the Church, and to introduce and enforce doctrines and practices contrary to the Word.

State power was not only increasingly used to discriminate against non-Christian religious practices. It was also used against Christians who deviated from the official Nicolaitan priesthood, which held the ear of the Emperor.

Doubtless some believers honestly thought imperial aid was a divine blessing, embracing it as a means of bringing the Gospel to many. Doubtless also they failed to appreciate the implications of the momentous changes in the Church's constitution and their potential for misuse. Nonetheless, the spirit of antichrist was further preparing for the day when it could fully reveal itself, once it gained absolute control over both the professing Church and the State.

To illustrate the growing State interference in religious affairs, let us consider the first edict of the emperor Theodosius (d. 395 AD):

"We will that our subjects steadfastly adhere to the religion taught by Peter to the Romans now professed by the pontiff, Damasus ... We order that the adherents of this faith be called Catholic Christians; we brand all the senseless followers of other religions with the infamous name of heretics..."

His later laws deprived all others of the right of exercising their religion, excluded them from civil office, and threatened with fines, banishment, and even in some cases death.

Later evidence of the pit of iniquity opened by the Church-State union is seen in the use by Justinian (d.565 AD) of his armies to massacre Arian Christians (who differed from the orthodox Catholic view on the nature of Christ) in N Africa and S Italy.

#### **(v) Priscillian: the first execution of a believer by the Church**

The logical outcome of the foregoing occurred in 385 AD. The state power increasingly available for unscrupulous clerics was used to liquidate a true man of God, the godly Priscillian.

The metropolitan of Lusitania (Portugal) wished to strengthen his power as a representative of Rome so as to enforce the Roman centralising organisation This was unpopular in Spain and opposed by the lesser clergy.

Priscillian's chief "crime" seems to have been resistance to this, and his undermining of the power of the priesthood and the clergy-laity distinction by preaching the need of a holy life and constant renewal of the Holy Ghost. He was charged with witchcraft and immorality, based on his supposed Manichaeian and Gnostic heretical beliefs. This was considered the truth for centuries until modern discoveries gave the lie to this attempt

to blacken his character. Along with six others, Priscillian was condemned by a synod at Bordeaux and handed over to the authorities to be beheaded.

This caused an outcry from the famous bishop Ambrose of Milan. This was significant since Ambrose favoured many of the trends introduced by Constantine. Plainly many sincere believers did not envisage the use that would be made by the spirit of antichrist of the structures they themselves were helping to build.

#### (vi) Augustine and the doctrine of coercion

Augustine (354- 430 AD), a bishop in North Africa, is a perfect example of how a godly man's attempt to strengthen the Church instead opened a door that would later cause untold damage. A situation arose similar to that in Jehoshaphat's abominable alliance with the house of Omri. It set the scene for the usurpation of the wicked Athaliah, and the near extinction of the house of David, the seed royal.

Augustine's views held great influence in his own and later generations, an influence enhanced by his notable conversion and personal godliness.

Desiring to maintain Church unity, he proposed a theory which, though tempered in its application by his own pious spirit, still contained the germ of that system of spiritual despotism, intolerance, and persecution which ended in the tribunals of the Inquisition. More than all others, he gave the upholders of the Nicolaitan doctrine the Biblical "justification" they needed to make the use of force acceptable to an uneasy Church still conscious of the teachings of the New Testament.

The crux of his doctrine was that Church history was split into two parts: before Constantine, and after. He equated the millennium with the establishment of a "Christian" Empire. In an act of paramount significance, Augustine used the Old Testament theocracy to justify State involvement in ecclesiastical affairs and the coercion of heretics.

The significance of this return to the Old Testament cannot be over-stated. It was a return to the *weak and beggarly elements* of which Paul warned the Galatians.

This trend will be seen repeatedly during the Pergamos age. Much of the "justification" for the developing priesthood, the Church-State union, and the changing understanding of the nature of sanctification (to be examined in the next chapter), is based on the Old Testament. In proportion to the downward fall of the Pergamos age there is a corresponding loss of the full supernatural reality of the new covenant.

For Augustine, then, the Church-State union was definitely a divine blessing:

"If the power which the Church has received by divine appointment, through the faith of kings, be the instrument by which those found in the highways and byways - **that is, in heresies and schisms** - are **compelled** to come in, then let them not find fault with being compelled."

In his conflict with the Donatists, a large group of believers in North Africa who rejected the State Church principle, he wrote:

“Many have found advantage ...in being first **compelled** by fear or pain, so that they might afterwards be influenced by teaching.. **Why therefore should not the Church use force in compelling** her lost sons to return?”.

Despite their Biblical weakness, Augustine’s views were widely accepted, for such was the spirit of the age. The spirit of antichrist had prepared the minds of the people well. Their increasing ignorance of that faith once for all delivered to the saints left them open to deception. Even the godly were blameworthy. They were not sufficiently militant against those holding the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

It thus became an unquestioned doctrine of the Church that both the arm of the magistrate and the arm of the clergy were limbs of the Body of Christ.

(This error was continued by the Reformers. Based on Augustine, they maintained that the magistrate, purely by virtue of being a magistrate, was a member of the Body of Christ.)

So, all the weaponry of the State was now available to the Church to force heretics into line. As Pope Pelagius put it in 553 AD:

“Unto the coercing of heretics ... the church also has the secular arm, if men cannot be brought to sanity by reasoning.”

In fact, the Church not only had access to the secular arm. She often incited the authorities to action when they would of themselves have taken none. How true it is that the Babylonian whore, the corrupt religious system, was seated on the political beast, controlling and directing its actions.

### **(vii) The Donatist dispute**

To illustrate how coercion was used in the 4th and 5th C, let us consider the dispute between the Catholic and Donatist parties.

In so doing we shall illustrate something mentioned earlier: that it was not the whole professing Church which gained influence and power in the reign of Constantine. It was only that group centred on the bishop of Rome and prepared to accept the Church-State union. The favours of Constantine were only for that hierarchically organised portion called “Catholic”. Other groups (and they were many) could look for no bounty from his hand. Not only that, but over the years they would come under increasing pressure to acknowledge and join the Catholic party, or be treated as heretics. It is significant, for example, that Theodosius’ first edict directs that men adhere not to the Christian but to the Catholic faith.

The dispute between the Catholic and Donatist parties had its roots in the 3rd C. Basically, the Donatists (who inhabited North Africa) had a stricter view of the standard of holiness required by believers and their overseers. They rejected the growing trend to view the “sacraments” (i.e. baptism and communion) as effective in their own right. Instead they insisted on a holy life in the one administering them.

These antagonisms developed strongly in the reign of Constantine. Until then the two parties intermingled freely, much as we often find in the same church today both those who are strict in their standards and those who are liberal.

In Constantine's day, however, the two groups separated. The strict party rejected Caelician, the new bishop of Carthage, and chose their own. The Emperor called a Council to settle the issue. It decided against the Donatists. The latter refused to yield.

And so began the first use of state force against Christians dissenting from the officially supported group, in an attempt to impose unity. Christians persecuted Christians. Donatist churches were closed and their bishops banished whilst extensive financial support was provided for the North African 'Catholic' clergy.

Very significantly, the only reason Caelician was able to survive the opposition of the Donatists was through the help of the churches of Rome and the North Mediterranean. They supported him in a synod at Rome in 313 AD provided he abandoned earlier North African practices offensive to Rome. This shows how access to State power corrupts the Church. Politics had entered the Church. If he adjusted his views, Rome would support Caelician and use her access to the Emperor's ear to encourage him to seek religious unity (i.e. suppression of dissent) in the public interest, just like the former pagan emperors.

The first persecution was brief. Sporadic official action continued, however, and a second persecution took place in the time of Augustine.

It was during his battle with the Donatists that his doctrine of coercion took shape in an attempt to ensure the unity of the Church.

As Augustine himself acknowledged, the Donatists' contention was not so much over doctrine as over the nature of the Church and her relationship to the world. They insisted on the independence of the Church from the State at all costs. They also resisted the mass influx of semi-converted "believers" in an attempt to Christianise the whole populace through a mere external adherence to the Word, upholding the truth of the Church as an outcalling from the unregenerate masses. The Catholic party, however, supported and represented by Augustine, rejected this view as too puritan.

To justify the difference in holiness between Donatists and the worldly lives of many of the clergy of the emerging hybrid church, Augustine fell back on the doctrine of the tares among the wheat. This was employed throughout the Middle Ages to excuse the evil living of the Catholic clergy and laity compared with the holiness of the many protest groups. It was claimed that the sin of the separatists lay precisely in their separation from the hybrid harlot church. Thus the need to uphold unity justified all the evils used to compel men to remain within the Catholic fold.

When the Donatists sought to go their own way, therefore, the evil antichrist spirit could not allow it. It now had the power to enforce the rule of that Nicolaitan system which was increasingly conforming to the master blueprint of the evil one.

As it was thought that religious dissent harmed the unity of society, government opinion in Augustine's day favoured renewed attempts to suppress dissent. In 411 AD Donatism was outlawed by fines, exile and confiscation of property. This still failed to eradicate it, and the Donatists continued until Mohammedan armies in the 7th C extinguished the whole North African Church.

### **(viii) Historical outline of the increasing power of the bishop of Rome (312 - 590 AD)**

This chapter begun by examining early claims to supremacy by the bishops of Rome.

I then described how the increasing alliance between the State and Nicolaitan ecclesiastical leadership enabled the Nicolaitan clergy to enforce its rule over dissent, stigmatising all who refused its rule as "heretics".

Henceforth the trend to exalt the bishop of Rome grew apace, as the spirit of antichrist sought to consolidate in one man all the power of the growing hierarchy structure.

A brief sketch of some bishops of Rome will illustrate the growth, character and objective of the Nicolaitan spirit.

- Damasus (366- 384 AD) From his time the claims of Rome reached a new crescendo. Claiming that he, and none other, was successor of Peter, he claimed the judicial right to bind and loose.

(The spirit of error was preparing the minds of a people increasingly uninstructed in the Word. From the early 5th C there was a growing general belief that as Peter was first among the apostles, so the bishop of Rome was first among the bishops. Early resistance to Rome's unscriptural claims was waning).

- Innocent (402 - 417 AD) Calling himself "Ruler of the Church of God", he claimed the right to settle the more important controversies affecting the Church. He said churches in S W Europe should observe Roman forms and rites in public worship.
- Leo (440 – 461 AD) His main aim was to lay the groundwork for the great spiritual monarchy of Rome. Raising the claims of the bishop of Rome to a height before unknown, he said:

"Let the brethren acknowledge he is primate of all bishops, and that Christ, who denieth his gifts to none, yet giveth to none except through him."

He called himself Lord of all the Church, and advocated an exclusive universal papacy (i.e. rule of the pope of Rome) and the death penalty for heretics (i.e. those who rejected it). Resistance to his authority was said to be the sure way to hell.

So possessed of the Nicolaitan spirit was he, it is said that he merged his personality and identity with that institution (the papacy) he sought to promote. When he spoke, he believed Peter himself was speaking, or at

least that his words should be accepted as such. And doubtless he was such a mouthpiece. But not of the Peter of the Bible, but of the Peter of the Roman Church. As will be seen in the Thyatira age, this Peter was but the metamorphosis of the high priest of the ancient Babylonian religion.

In 445 AD the emperor Valentinian decreed that all the bishops of W Europe must submit to the bishop of Rome. Rome's claim to pre-eminence was conceded in the West, except by the Celtic Church of the British Isles.

The alliance with the State was paying off.

(The Church of the Eastern Empire (S E Europe, Turkey and the Middle East) repudiated these claims. This resistance continued until a final, permanent split in the 11th C. This led to the formation of the various Orthodox churches of S E Europe and the Near East. Their governmental structure is basically Nicolaitan except that they refuse to give supreme authority to any one bishop. Instead their archbishops (usually called "patriarchs") are treated as equals.)

One final example illustrates the first claim of political control. This would blossom profusely later, bearing much bitter fruit and revealing further the Nicolaitan spirit's lust for power over men. A creature would arise so hideous as to amaze all that it should profess to be the Bride of Christ. In fact, it was none else than the great harlot of Revelation.

- Gelasius (492 - 496 AD) He claimed the see (or, bishopric) of Peter had the right to loose whatever is bound by the decisions of any other bishop.

But he not only claimed total ecclesiastical and spiritual dominion, enforced by the power of the State. He claimed superiority over emperors.

Over the next century the fortunes of the papacy waned. The overthrow of the Roman Empire by the invading Huns, Goths and other tribes destroyed one of the chief means of the papacy's growth, the aid of the State.

By the end of the 6th C, however, those fortunes revived. A further major development, the hazy outlines of which lay in Gelasius' claims, was about to take place. The papacy was to become a major political power in its own right.

This is the story of Jezebel, the domineering female.

## LOSS OF THE POWER OF GODLINESS

In an introductory study to the Church Ages, "Christ is all and in all", I said that Church history is the outworking of the consequences of departing from the teaching of Colossians.

Put it in other words, Paul's warnings in Colossians 2 of the effects of not being rooted and grounded in Christ are prophetic. Not only of what will happen to an individual believer, but also to a local church, denomination, Bible college, missionary society or the Church as a whole.

Indeed, as we shall see, the progressive downfall of the Church is in direct proportion to her failure to hold fast to her Head in all things (Colossians 2:19).

We saw in the Ephesus and Smyrna study the first loosening of the initial firm hold.

The link with the Head was severely damaged by the institution of a man-made government for the Church as a whole. Men were increasingly taught to look for guidance to a man-made governmental system instead of to Christ. Christ's headship, as manifested through Holy Ghost governments, was increasingly squeezed out, and replaced. The prophetic sense of direction endowed to the Church as a whole by our ascended Lord in the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 4:8,11) was all but lost. Gone, too, were those supernatural gifts of the Spirit whereby a living God could still guide His people and reveal His mind.

With the supernatural guidance of God through His holy apostles and prophets and sundry Spiritual gifts replaced by a humanised government, the way was clear for the evil spirit of antichrist to further separate the Church from her Head.

In the Pergamos Church Age she was further beguiled and spoiled (Colossians 2:4,8), and her roots in Christ further loosened.

The early deeds of the Nicolaitans now became a doctrine. Once accepted, the control of the Nicolaitan priesthood was strengthened. There was a vast increase in the power of the centralised clerical hierarchy over the whole Church. It was able to introduce and teach its false doctrines, spreading them rapidly wherever it exercised control.

Through these doctrines the spirit of antichrist sought to inject error to destroy the very roots of the individual believer's union with Christ. The Life of Christ Himself, through the Holy Ghost, was to be the Christian's regeneration and his sanctification and the source of his character. Henceforth, however, men were taught by their clerical guides to seek regeneration and holiness by their own power and effort.

So, firstly Christ's Headship over His Church as a Body was broken. Then individual believers were taught to look elsewhere than to Christ for their regeneration and sanctification.

Note the progression:

- Ephesus: *the deeds of the Nicolaitans* (the growth of Nicolaitan practice)
- Pergamos: *the doctrine of the Nicolaitans* (the theological justification of this practice)
- Thyatira: *thou sufferest that woman Jezebel... to teach* (the enforcing of the doctrine of the Nicolaitan clergy, just as Jezebel compelled worship of a false religion)

The cumulative effect is awful to behold:

- the Holy Ghost driven out of the experience of the Church. No longer will she know the distribution of His gifts severally as He will for her government. No longer the regenerating and sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost, *the power of godliness*. No longer *the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour* (Titus 3:5-6).
- Christ totally excluded in reality (though not, of course, in name) from conversion, holiness of life and the government of the Church.

Truly the spirit that produces such an effect is indeed the very spirit of antichrist!

We shall look later at regeneration. Let us firstly look at sanctification, looking in detail at the rise of two false doctrines in particular to show how this spirit worked.

Before doing so, it is worth remembering that the downward progression in the Church's separation from her Head is reversed from the Reformation onwards. The fall of the Church is the progressive loss of Christ as all and in all. Conversely, her restoration is a progressively stronger grip of this truth in each age until every detail of her life is a revelation of her completeness in Christ.

In both the fall and the restoration it is no coincidence that the Church progressively falls into, and is then progressively delivered from the dangers warned of by Paul in Colossians 2.

## **(i) The rise of asceticism and monasticism**

### ***a) The first beginnings***

One of the complaints of the 2nd C Montanists was the decline in holiness and separation. The rejection of their teachings undoubtedly favoured the spread of worldliness. The Biblical doctrine of a Church composed only of individuals with a real conversion experience was changed. By the early 3rd C the Church included many who were only nominal.

Rapid church expansion in the 3rd C, and especially after the “conversion” of Constantine in the 4th C, led to a double standard of holiness. The Church had grown greatly in worldly status and social influence. It was taught that ordinary Christians living in the world did not have to aim for Biblical perfection. They simply had to observe the basic precepts of Christ, aspiring to a higher reward if they did more than the minimum required.

Along with the lack of separation and spirituality, the increasing formalism and rigidity of public worship led to a desire for a freer and more personal communion with God.

The Nicolaitan spirit had increasingly caused public meetings to be formalised. Set prayers and predetermined congregational responses were introduced, especially after the illicit Pergamos Church-State union. By the mid 4th C the ceremonial became more elaborate: Greek clergy began to wear ornate clothes; the use of “holy” ornaments and vessels grew apace, whilst the “holy” communion table and altar (oh, pagan import!) were ornately decorated and screened off from the people. How far is this from that blessed fellowship of the saints described in the Word:

*Now is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. (1 Corinthians 14: 26)*

No wonder a holy desire arose within the hearts of men for a living communion with the living God instead of a stereotyped, formal and often paganized outward form of godliness, frequently in the company of those who knew nothing of the reality of regeneration and of the power of godliness.

### ***b) The inroads of the spirit of error***

However godly the motive of those who initially sought to escape the growing worldliness and formality of the Church, the spirit of antichrist unfortunately prevailed.

It happened in the following way.

Having lost the reality of the Headship of Christ over the Church, the living sense of the reality and nearness of the Holy Ghost greatly diminished. We have already seen how this affected the understanding of the doctrine of the Second Coming (Study No 4).

The diminished sense of the reality and nearness of the Holy Ghost then greatly affected the Church’s conception of.

Originally holiness and sanctification had been seen as the results of the work of the Holy Ghost, and not of human endeavour however sincere or earnest,

*Elect... through sanctification of the Spirit* (1 Peter 1:2). This expression is alternatively translated “by the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (NASV); “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (Weymouth); “to be made holy by the Spirit” (Beck).

*God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13)*

*And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, ... by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:11).*

Holiness was seen as having a supernatural character and which was imparted by supernatural power:

*According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, ... Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:3-4)*

Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away (2 Timothy 3:5)

As a result of the loss of a present consciousness of the Spirit's power, however, holiness came to be seen increasingly as man's effort apart from supernatural intervention. It came to be identified more and more with the renunciation of marriage, and withdrawal from an active life in this world.

By the 4th C, the marked decline in spirituality and growing double standard of two types of Christian life so alienated some that they withdrew from all human contact to live in desolate places as hermits to try and draw closer to God through contemplation and the absence of worldly distractions.

But alongside this desire for separation from worldliness, much of the spirit of paganism also entered in. Though appealing in its high moral standards, nonetheless it was a holiness apart from Christ Himself as its Source. Put in other words, it was an endeavour to achieve the holiness taught by Christ without Christ Himself, through the Spirit, being the spring and content of that holiness.

And this is precisely what Paul so ardently warned of in Colossians 2, as we shall consider more fully later.

Pagan teachings of self-sufficiency (by the Greek Cynics), and that happiness consisted in the suppression of the desires (by the Stoics) were mingled with Biblical teachings. As a result holiness came increasingly to be equated with asceticism. The Greek pagan and gnostic doctrine that matter is evil led to an emphasis on extreme simplicity of life and ascetic practices to overcome the hindrances in the Spiritual life attributed to the body.

Strange as it may seem, however, the root of this idea is thoroughly demonic.

Asceticism (i.e. the practice of severe self-discipline, rigid self-denial and austerity) was present in the East long before the Christian era. It was strongly developed within Bhuddism and the evil influence of Bhuddist doctrines of how to achieve holiness spread widely from the Volga River to Japan. The gnostics, who caused such difficulty in the early Church, gained their inspiration from them.

Basically their chief error lay in identifying the body with the flesh, and in teaching a self-achieved sanctification.

Before examining the devastating practical significance of these ideas on the Spiritual life of the Church, let us conclude our historical survey of the spread of asceticism.

### ***c) Later historical developments***

As already seen, the trend towards asceticism and monasticism began with the 3rd C influx of new believers and a corresponding rise of worldliness, especially in periods of peace between the Roman persecutions. At that time, however, this trend was merely an attitude within the existing church framework. No new institutions were formed.

Early in the 4th C, at the start of the Pergamos age, a further vast influx of semi-Christianised adherents led to physical separation from the churches. Two different developments arose, both in Egypt:

- the hermit, living alone, and
- the monastic community where a group of monks lived together under a leader.

The most famous early hermit was Anthony (251 - 356 AD). He lived in the deserts, seeking to overcome the corruptions within himself by increased self-denials. Holiness was his one grand goal. Instead of sanctifying his nature, however, he found that every evil passion was excited to greater activity (cp Romans 7: 7-11)

The first great organiser of communities was Pachomius (292-346 AD). They lived in cells and wore peculiar dress, the chief item of which was a goatskin (to prevent bodily comfort). They never undressed but slept clothed, in chairs specially built so as to keep in a virtually standing position. They prayed many times a day; fasted twice a week; and ate in silence with hoods drawn so as not to see their neighbours.

This movement spread very rapidly through Egypt, Syria, Turkey and Greece, later penetrating all the Western, or Catholic, Church. Vast monastic orders arose.

The chief organiser of monasteries in the West was Benedict (480- 543 AD). His rules laid down the whole pattern of life of the monks. At 2am and day-break they were raised to chant psalms. Breakfast was at noon. Additional fasting and curtailing of sleep were introduced at certain "holy" seasons. Conversation was strictly controlled. All contact with the outside world was under the authority of the abbot. Woman was to be a stranger to his thoughts, the natural enemy of his lonely perfection. Isolation and privation were the means to attaining religious perfection.

As each order grew corrupt and worldly, a new one rose up to replace it. The chief orders were the Benedictines, Cluniacs and Cistercians.

In the 13th C two new orders arose, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Though based on the same ascetic principles, these were travelling orders unlike the earlier ones centred purely on their home monastery, and cut off by a wall to avoid even occasional intercourse with a world they had deserted for ever.

The vain dream of perfection through self-mortification gave rise to a system that continued for more than a thousand years till the Reformation.

Even then the false conception of the nature and means of sanctification and true spirituality influenced the minds of believers till well into the 18th C. Then Wesley in particular proclaimed once more the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost, liberating men from the vain hope, and burden, of a sanctification by self-endeavour.

It would be extremely difficult to underestimate how, in the Middle Ages especially, holiness was interpreted as physical separation from the world as practised by monks and nuns. It was equated with withdrawal from society, abstinence from marriage, denial of food and sleep, and various extreme bodily severities. Intense respect was accorded those who embraced this way of life. It was presumed they must of necessity live in extreme closeness to God, something denied the ordinary man. How far this is from the Biblical conception of a holiness imparted by the sanctifying power of the Spirit of holiness.

Some of the bizarre forms of bodily mortification and severity give an idea of how deep-rooted was the vain hope of perfection and overcoming sin in the flesh by such means:

- A heavy iron chain as a belt was frequent.
- A few adopted the lives of animals feeding on grass, and living in the open-air without shade and with the minimum of clothing.
- Symeon the Stylite (c 390-459 AD) lived on top of a column. His imitator, Daniel (409-493 AD), spent 33 years on a column.
- Peter Damiano (11th C) stood in a river at night until frozen, and then went from church to church reciting the Psalter to tame his passions.
- Dominic (13th C) would wear a tight iron breastplate next to his skin at all times, confined his arms by iron bands and wore chains round his neck. He recited the Psalter whilst flogging himself at 1000 lashes per 10 Psalters.

With the growth of monasticism some earlier excesses were forbidden by the superiors (abbots) of the monasteries. But the basic principle of sanctification through self-effort was firmly embedded. Though it may be claimed that the help of God was sought to achieve the desired objective, yet the means was wholly in error.

So extensive became the belief in monasticism as a means to holiness that some of the finest teachers of the Church, such as Augustine, supported it.

Let us now look at the Biblical teaching on this topic, and how the Church lost yet another living hold on her Head.

#### ***d) Asceticism and monasticism in the light of the Scriptures***

##### *Relevance of this topic*

I hope an examination of practices such as asceticism and monasticism does not seem unnecessary or of purely historical interest with no practical relevance today. Monasteries, convents, mortifications, extreme ascetic practices, celibacy and the like

may be far from the everyday experience of the modern believer. But the demons that inspired them are not. They are not the mere historical fossils of a bygone age surviving only in Catholic and similar systems. Their inspiration source lives on.

Much can be learnt from observing the objective of the spirit of antichrist in introducing such ideas. Unlikely as it may seem, the underlying principles can still affect Bible believers today in their quest for sanctification. It is my conviction that in many cases this quest is ultimately based on premises similar to those which gave rise to asceticism and all its attendant evils: the quest for a sanctification apart from Christ Himself.

Let us now consider Colossians 2 to explain the foregoing. As we do, keep clearly in mind the two antagonists:

- the spirit of antichrist, seeking to seduce men from a total dependence on Christ, developing a religious life apart from Him; and
- the Spirit of Christ, seeking to root and build up in Him in every respect, until He is the believer's fulness.

#### *The importance of understanding God's purpose to avoid deception*

In Colossians the importance is emphasised of being *filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and Spiritual understanding* (1:9).

Paul experienced great inner conflict that the believers' hearts might attain *to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself* (2:2 NASV). Why this great conflict (Gk = literally, "agony")? Because there was a very powerful spirit abroad, and its attraction was great.

Paul's fellow servant, Epaphras, also laboured earnestly (literally = stretched out, as on the rack) that the Colossians might *stand perfect and complete in all the will of God* (4:12). What was that will? The mystery of His will is *to gather together in one all things in Christ* (Ephesians 1:10).

So we see how both these men earnestly sought to ensure that the Colossians were *complete in Him*. And in Him alone.

Let us now consider the tactics of the spirit of antichrist as seen in chapter 2:4,8,16-23.

They are very plausible, and strongly appeal to the natural mind:

- *enticing words* (2:4); literally = persuasive, probable
- *which things indeed have a shew of wisdom* (2:23) ; literally = a reputation, a plausible reason

Where does the power of these words lie that seem to make so much sense? How are they able to deceive and to carry off the unwary believer as spoil?

#### *The nature of the deception: to return to bondage under the rudiments of the world*

To understand the nature of the deception, we need to examine the content of these enticing words.

- They are described as *the commandments and doctrines of men* (2:22), *after the tradition of men* (2:8).
- These commandments consist of *the rudiments* (or, elements) *of the world* (2:8,20).

Precisely what are these rudiments? To explain, let us consider the other verses where the term is found:

- *Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world.* (Galatians 4:3)
- *how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements whereunto ye desire to be in bondage?* (Galatians 4:9)

The context makes clear that the meaning is not what it is often said to be, i.e. the beggarly pleasures and enjoyments of this world compared with the riches of Christ. The true sense is very significant.

These rudiments are equated with being *under the law* (cp Galatians 4:3-5, 9-10, 21). Neither the Galatian nor the Colossian are described as desiring to turn back from Christianity to the world. Their error lay in turning to a Christianity apart from Christ.

Let me explain:

- Galatians 4:10 equates turning to the weak and beggarly elements with observing *days and months and times and years*.
- Colossians 2:16, 20-21 equates such turning with subjection to ordinances (*Touch not, taste not, handle not...*), and allowing oneself to be condemned as to questions about food, drink, holydays, new moons or sabbaths.

Why are such practices termed elements, or rudiments, of the world?

The Greek word translated “rudiments” means literally “any first thing from which the others belonging to some series or composite whole take their rise; an element, first principle”. The term is applied to the rudiments or primary and fundamental principles (the “abc”) of any art or science.

In the contexts we are discussing it thus means, “the rudiments with which mankind like children were indoctrinated before the time of Christ i.e.

- “the elements of religious training, or the ceremonial precepts common alike to the worship of Jews and Gentiles” (Thayer);
- the “elements of knowledge, rudimentary religious ideas.. the crude beginnings of religion. ... elementary religious truths belonging to mankind in general... the first elements of a spiritual system” (Vincent).

Why does Paul describe such elements as “weak and beggarly”? Because:

- they lack power (“weak”), and
- they are destitute of wealth, influence, helpless and powerless to accomplish their end, bringing no rich endowment of Spiritual treasure (“beggarly”).

In another study (“This is the true grace of God”, Part 1), I have examined the relevance of this to justification.

My objective here is to stress the powerlessness of such “elements of the world”, **which include the Law of Moses**, to bring about true sanctification. The reason for this stress is because the Colossian and Galatian believers were in danger of seeking their sanctification by such weak and beggarly means.

To the Galatians, Paul wrote:

*Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit are ye now made perfect by the flesh?* (Galatians 3:3)

Likewise he warned the Colossians of the dangers of being made a spoil of, after the rudiments of the world and not after Christ (Colossians 2:6,8). The context was of learning to walk in Christ, having already received Him.

*The change in the content of, and the means of attaining, holiness*

In short, then, a spirit had entered which sought to turn men from Christ Himself as their source of holiness. Yet it erected a complete structure of religious ideas ostensibly designed to promote it.

From this spirit individual practices of asceticism began. They increased in power and influence until the vast majority of professing Christians came to understand holiness in ascetic terms, A vast system of religious orders, monasteries and convents arose and spread everywhere.

In effect, however, these were only the external historical fruits of a progressive departure from the warnings of Colossians. The Church failed to seek sanctification by holding fast to her Head. Instead she fell into the bondage of seeking it by means which were helpless and incapable of achieving such an objective such as observance of religious holydays or dietary regulations.

Further bondage arose from confusing the body with the Biblical term, “the flesh”. Since sin dwelt in the flesh (Romans 7:18; 8:3b), it was thought, then taught, that the body had to be suppressed to achieve holiness. But bodily ill-treatment is powerless to deal with sin in the flesh.

This explains the reference in Colossians 2:23 to the *neglecting* (or, punishing; or, not sparing) *of the body*.

Alternative translations of this phrase help to explain the origin of the ascetic practices which blossomed in the Pergamos age from seeds first scattered in Ephesus and Smyrna and which reached full maturity in the dismal Thyatira Dark Ages.

- “severity to the body” (RV, ASV)

- “torturings of the body” (Wms)
- “harsh treatment of the body” (TCNT, NIV)
- “ascetic discipline” (Gdspd)
- “studied neglect of the body” (Phi)

But the worthlessness of such practices is clearly stated in the RSV translation of the latter part of verse 23:

- “but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh” (RSV); or
- “of no value, serving only to indulge the flesh” (RSV, margin).

In fact, strange as it may seem, as the RSV margin shows, bodily severities can actually pamper the flesh and do honour to man’s pride.

An example of such an effect is Colossians 2:18. Here a “voluntary humility” of the type taught by the false teachers actually produces a puffing up by the fleshly mind. Why is this? Because the root of this false holiness is self-attainment. It is not Spirit-produced but rather will worship (Colossians 2:23). Such a worship is self-imposed, self-chosen or volunteered. This humility is not a fruit of the Spirit. It is a self-abasement or self-humiliation.

I cannot adequately describe the dangers of such a “humility”. Yes, the Bible calls us to *humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God* (1 Peter 5:6). But the “humility” of Colossians is the attaining of a holiness by self effort - a diligent, disciplined dealing with oneself. It is built on a foundation of human effort, and so opens the door for a pride in its own attainment.

Note the sharp contrasts:

- *voluntary humility ... vainly puffed up* (Colossians 2:18)
- *neglecting of the body ... satisfying of the flesh* (Colossians 2:23)

It is easy to see the danger of such a holiness if we recall that ascetics and monks were greatly honoured because of their supposed superior saintliness. One church council, for example, could not begin without the approval of a certain famous ascetic.

### Brief recapitulation

Before proceeding, let us assess progress made so far.

I have sought to trace historically the rise of asceticism and monasticism, and to explain why they begun.

The key to their rise is a progressively loosened grip on the Head whilst seeking for sanctification.

Having turned from Christ as our sanctification through the supernatural sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, holiness was sought by means which are powerless to achieve it. External observances and the suppressing of every bodily desire, whether harmless or not, were employed to perfect holiness. Confusion from identifying the flesh with the body led to every kind of bodily severity.

The result was an altered understanding of sanctification. It is difficult for Bible believers today to understand how deeply ingrained became the idea that holiness increased according to the degree of external bodily denials (e.g. fastings, self-whippings, celibacy, physical separation from all contact with the world). Holiness was equated with the monastic life. A married man living in the world only ever expected to attain an inferior level of sanctity. But at least he could join in such things as the fastings which became customary before Lent and at other religious festivals.

Oh, spirit of antichrist! As though the flesh could be overcome by such weak and beggarly elements. Gone is the beauty of the rich flow of the Life of Christ from within by the power of the Spirit.

### *The confusion of "flesh", and "body"*

Before going on, let us consider the distinction in the Word between "body" and "flesh".

The root of the new concept of holiness described above sprang from the wicked gnostic doctrine of the essential evil of the material creation.

Briefly, gnosticism is part of that spirit which goes back to Bhuddism and eventually to the false Babylonian religion, the home of every foul spirit. Its teaching that all created things were evil, and must be avoided, began to spread its tentacles far and wide.

Its early influence on Christian doctrine is seen in 1 Timothy 4:1-5. This is why forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from certain foods were described so strongly as doctrines of demons, and the work of seducing spirits. These issues may seem insignificant compared with denying major truths like the resurrection (2 Timothy 2:18) or redemption by Blood (2 Peter 2:16). But their origin and ultimate object are thoroughly antichrist.

These errors compelled Paul to emphasise that marriage was not sinful (1 Corinthians 7:28). It was honourable (or, to be had in honour), and the bed undefiled (Hebrews 13:4). He also emphasised that what God had created was good, and not to be rejected (1 Timothy 4:4).

How is this relevant to holiness? In that gnostic holiness equated holiness with maximum abstention from contact with the material world. Great care was paid to the diet, with strict regulations as to what should be eaten. The desires of the body were to be suppressed, irrespective of their nature. Sexual desires were evil. Marriage therefore was a lower form of existence, and virginity extolled.

These ideas did not find great scope for organised expression in the Ephesus and Smyrna periods. But after the Church-State union, with its influx of pagan "converts" and ideas, these incipient doctrines took on outward form in the vast monastic system. It extended well beyond the monasteries, however, and is found in such ideas as enforced celibacy of the priesthood and externally imposed fastings for the laity.

The antichristian root of these ideas is seen in the way that austerity to the body was considered the means of overcoming sin in the flesh, to be attained by self-effort.

The Bible, however, does not identify the body and the flesh:

- To *crucify the flesh* (Galatians 5:24) does not mean to crucify the body.
- The works of the flesh are not necessarily bodily sins (e.g. envyings, wrath, strife, variance, heresies) (Galatians 5:20-21).

The physical flesh (i.e. body) is not necessarily sinful in itself (Jesus appeared in the flesh, yet without sin). The problem is sin in the flesh.

The honour God bestows upon the body is seen from His intention to redeem it (Romans 8:23). We shall exchange this body of our humiliation for one like the body of our Saviour's glory (Philippians 3:21). When Paul speaks of a *spiritual body* (1 Corinthians 15: 44) he does not mean a ghostly body, but one which is every whit under the control of the Spirit. Did not Jesus say *A spirit doth not have flesh and bones as ye see Me have* (Luke 24:39)?

The body then is a most sacred vessel. The legitimate expression of its God-given functions is not something to be ashamed of. It is not to be treated with severity for its own sake. True, there is a time for abstinence during special seasons of prayer (1 Corinthians 7:5). True, the apostle Paul wrote that he kept under his body and brought it into subjection (1 Corinthians 9:27). (In fact, the term he used was very strong: literally, "to buffet"). But the sense is not indiscriminate bodily austerity. He means that since the unredeemed body is so often unwilling to give itself wholly to His service, he had to bring it into subjection. Like an athlete, his intention was not to punish his body, but to keep it in such a condition as to be always fit to be about his Master's business.

True, Colossians 3:5 exhorts us *mortify your members which are upon earth*. But this cannot mean physical whippings and lacerations of the body. The "members" referred to are not physical limbs.

The body is merely a means used by the flesh to carry out its wishes. To mutilate it cannot remove the root that inspires sin. Thus it is not the body, but the deeds of the body which are to be mortified (= put to death).

*If ye live after the flesh ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.* Romans 8:13

And the means is not the Medieval church's ascetic mortifications. It is the supernatural power of the sanctifying Spirit.

This is not the place to expound the heart-warming doctrine of the sanctification of the Spirit (or, the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost). It must await the Philadelphia age which saw the recovery of this mighty truth with the rise of Methodism and the later Holiness movements. Suffice it to say for the present that it does not lie within the ability of man, even Christian man, to attain true holiness by his own earnest efforts.

*I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.* (Romans 7:18)

*For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.*  
(Galatians 5:17)

Yes, we must follow hard after holiness. But do not seek it by the wrong means.

I hope that this exposition of the origin of asceticism and monasticism has been spiritually enlightening and practical. I believe that almost without being aware of it many of the thoughts of individual believers are unconsciously inspired by the same root as these errors. These topics are not only of historical interest. The same spirit of antichrist which was permitted to bring this whole system to fruition is still with us. The seeds of monasticism and asceticism remain because their inspiration spirit remains. You and I will therefore see our own individual spiritual conflicts mirrored in Church history. Remember, there are only two spiritual forces in history, and their aims have not altered.

### *The degeneration of the sanctification of the Spirit into a mere moralism*

Christian character is supernatural. It cannot be equated with the best of human moral living. It is not the work of man, but the power of God.

I suspect there is a widely-held view that a Christian is deemed holy if a decent-living, upright, law-abiding citizen, living an honourable family life, and not given to indulgence in the pleasures and entertainments of the world. However good these things may be, and however much I believe they are attributes of Biblical holiness, I want to cry out with all the power I have that this is not the essence of holiness. There are non-Christians whose lives and characters are of good report, and who care little for the mad worldly rush for pleasure. Equally there are Christians whose lives fit the above description externally, and yet are worldly in heart.

Biblical holiness can only spring from the supernatural inspiration of the Spirit. Christian character is not a mere noble ethical and moral code. It is a supernatural Life.

But the understanding of holiness as the fruit of the Spirit degenerated into the mere observance of an ethical code, albeit a nobler one than the world had ever known. It became a Christian character apart from Christ. Christianity became a highly regulated ethical system, a system of ecclesiastical law.

Instead of the new covenant experience of the indwelling Spirit fulfilling the laws written in the heart (Ezekiel 11:19; Hebrews 8:10), there was a return to "the weak and beggarly elements" of the old. Once again men sought holiness by fulfilling an external written code. Yet if they had been unable to fulfil the old, how ever could they live up to the new, which Jesus made even more stringent (Matthew 5:27-28, 31-32)?

Christianity came to be described as the new law. Yet whilst it is true that Galatians 6:1 exhorts us to fulfil *the law of Christ*, the implications of this law are wholly different from the Law of the old covenant.

James describes it as the *royal law* (2:8), or, *the perfect law of liberty* (1:25).

Why the perfect law of liberty? Because unlike the old law, there was a supernatural Spirit available under this law to enable it to be fulfilled. *Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty* (2 Corinthians 3:17). The liberty referred to here is a freedom from bondage to decay, sin and death to experience the liberty of the glory of the sons of God (Romans 8:21). The nature of this glory is Christ Himself in us (Colossians 1:27). To receive the Spirit of adoption delivers from the previous bondage of corruption. In the Spirit we taste the firstfruits of our future inheritance. The law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus makes us free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1).

This explains why the law of Christ is the law of liberty But why the perfect law of liberty? Not just because it is perfect, but because whereas the old law could not bring anyone to perfection, this one can:

*For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof. For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.*  
(Hebrews 7:18-19)

The indwelling Holy Ghost is the fulfilling of the Law.

*But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law... The fruit of the Spirit is... against such there is no law.* (Galatians 5:18,22a, 23b)

This is that which was foretold by the prophet, *and they shall be all taught of God* (John 6:45). It is the inheriting of the blessing of Abraham, the promised Holy Ghost (Galatians 3:14). Herein lay the Life which would overcome the law of sin and death, enabling man to fulfil the righteousness of the law (Romans 8:4).

Glory! Truly, Christian character is a supernatural Life. How tragic that this was exchanged for a mere external code.

#### **e) Pelagius (born c 380 AD)**

Let us conclude with a brief examination of the teaching of a British monk, Pelagius. The aim is to show the practical relevance of this historical study to modern believers.

Pelagius was a man of excellent repute, much learning and good moral earnestness. Even Augustine, his chief antagonist, acknowledged his excellent uprightness of life.

Settling in Rome he was shocked at the self-indulgence and moral laxity of most professed believers. He strenuously preached practical righteousness and holiness.

In the light of the lax attitude of believers to the holy standards of the Word, Pelagius was alarmed at two trends, both seeming to undercut moral responsibility and to weaken the resolve to attain the full standard of Biblical holiness:

1. Augustine's teaching of irresistible grace, which seemed to him to lead to the presumption that God would automatically do what He would do, denying human responsibility.
2. The gnostic error of the innate evil of matter, which militated against an active following after godliness, producing a fatalistic attitude towards the evil

of human nature. If, as the gnostics taught, human nature is so corrupt that the will is powerless to obey God's commands, what was the point of trying?

Although sympathising with Pelagius' objectives, it is much to be regretted that he tended to another extreme. This contributed to the now deep inroads of the work of the spirit of antichrist in separating the Church from vital union with her Head. How sad! So often genuine men resort to unscriptural means in attempting to honour God. How good to know that the success of God's eternal purpose for His Church does not lie in man's hands. It is in the hands of He who works out all things in accordance with that plan which He has purposed.

In his eagerness to arouse men to follow after that *holiness without which no man shall see the Lord*, Pelagius over-emphasised the freedom of the human will. He had much in common with Stoic teaching on morals.

This emphasised man's need to control his passions, showing indifference to pleasure or pain, so that in himself and his own capabilities alone lay the power of attaining a virtuous character. Self-control was the key word. Although the term is Biblical (Galatians 5:23 'temperance' = self-control), it must be emphasised that this is a fruit of the Spirit. Stoic moral teaching centred on man's own ability to bring his every passion under control. Hence the common meaning of the word "stoic" is someone of great self-control or fortitude or austerity, indifferent to events, and not allowing his emotions to react to circumstances.

Pelagius did not teach this doctrine exactly as the Stoics. He certainly acknowledged the need of divine grace. According to W Walker, no man between Paul and Luther so emphasised justification by faith.

In dealing with the Christian life after conversion, however, his understanding of grace was significantly deficient. He maintained that perfect righteousness is possible to all. Every man is possessed of an inherent power to do the will of God, and to reach the highest degree of holiness. He viewed divine grace as an outward means to call forth man's efforts. A work of grace in the heart and the operation of the Holy Ghost were not considered necessary. God's grace in helping man to perfect holiness was conveyed through the exhortations of the Word, and the example of the life of Christ. He thus overlooked much Biblical teaching which revealed the necessity of the supernatural sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost within the heart.

I again emphasise the sincerity of this man. Even their antagonists were impressed by the high morality of the Pelagians. Pelagius himself; before a church council, said he certainly did not teach that man could avoid sin without God's help. The crux of his doctrine was how that help was imparted. In challenging the easy-going carnal living of his day, he stressed man's effort lest emphasis on God's work should confirm believers in their lethargy.

Considered abstractly, it is much easier to see the error of this way. But in the pressure of circumstances I am very conscious how easy it is to wish to stir believers to shake themselves by emphasising man's responsibility. In his earnestness, however, Pelagius erred greatly. He effectively denied man's bondage to sin as shown by Paul:

*For I know that in me (that is, In my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me: but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do (Romans 7:18-19).*

The more I consider Pelagius' teaching, the more I wonder how deeply this reasoning unconsciously affects present-day believers when considering their own sanctification. Personally, I have been greatly enlightened and have found a much deeper understanding of the means of holiness.

Pelagius' doctrine fulfils Paul's words to the Galatians:

*Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? (Galatians 3:3)*

Whilst acknowledging a justification wholly without human merit, Pelagius effectively taught a sanctification by human effort with the only means of divine grace being the teaching of Scripture and the example of Christ. He failed to recognise that it was a justified Paul, whose mind was set on doing the will of God, who cried out in anguish the words of Romans 7:18-19. Repentance and conversion lead to a different attitude towards God's moral commands. But it is only the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost that empowers us to fulfil them. Apart from this, even a justified man is left like Paul:

*to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not (Romans 7:18b).*

How contrary to this are Pelagius' words:

"As often as I have to speak of the principles of virtue and a holy life, I am accustomed first of all to call attention to the capacity and character of human nature and to show what it can accomplish; then from this to arouse the feelings of the hearer, that he may strive after different kinds of virtue."

Great controversy was aroused by Pelagius' teachings. His most ardent opponent was Augustine, the champion of grace. From his own conversion he knew he was delivered from sins he could never have overcome in his own strength. For Augustine, the main work of grace was the shedding abroad of the love of God in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, whereby we are transfigured stage by stage into the glory of God.

During the 5th C, although Pelagianism came generally to be officially rejected, it lived on in less extreme forms, and has always represented a tendency in theological thought.

Although Augustine's view of grace became more widely accepted, here also its living power was robbed by the workings of the spirit of antichrist. As we shall see in the next section, the reception of grace and of the Holy Spirit came to be identified with baptism. These blessed realities were thus reduced to meaningless high-sounding religious phrases.

So, whether identified with asceticism and monasticism, or understood according to Pelagius' doctrine or in Augustine's terms, the living divine power of holiness was squeezed out.

I hope that this detailed examination has not been time-wasting, but has given added insight into the objective of the spirit of error, thereby emphasising the intention of God for His Church.

I also very much hope that it has more clearly exposed those misapprehensions which present-day Christians labour under in their quest for their own sanctification of the Spirit. This has been my chief objective. The events of history may recede into the past, but the spirits behind those events are still with us today.

## **(ii) The rise and development of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration**

### ***a) Introduction***

Let us now look at the loss of the power of regeneration.

We have seen the rise of asceticism as a means of holiness, with all its attendant fruits, until in the Middle Ages holiness was identified with celibacy, physical isolation from the world and bodily punishment. I have sought to show how, despite the outward appearance of godliness of motive, these trends were the demonic means of robbing sanctification of its true source: Christ Himself.

Firstly the early Church had lost the reality of Christ as the Head of her government. Now His life as the source of her holiness was also cut off. It was now sought by those weak and beggarly elements which could not bring to perfection, instead of from He Who is *made after the power of an endless life*. Since the members no longer held to the Head, the Body could no longer grow with the increase which God alone could give.

Her government and character were now but the best that man could provide. The Spirit had been driven out from the government of the Church and excluded as the power of her sanctification. Henceforth holy living would be by human effort, not by the living power of the Spirit:

- Gone the divine government of the Spirit;
- Gone the gifts the Spirit, distributed severally to every man as He will;
- Gone the power of the Spirit in sanctification, renewing the spirit of the mind in true righteousness and holiness, transfiguring us from glory into glory;

But worse was yet to come.

The ultimate objective of that foul spirit of antichrist was entirely to exclude the believer from Christ in every realm. Whilst naming His Name, and professing faith in Him, it erected a whole new doctrinal system which would, in effect, totally cut men off from Christ Who is our Life.

After government and sanctification, the next step was to exclude the power of the Holy Ghost from regeneration. No more was there to be a living testimony of a salvation which could boast of *the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour* (Titus 3:5-6). Gone would be the supernatural reality of regeneration in those born of the Spirit.

Oh, Spirit-less salvation! Woe, woe, woe! Oh, lifeless form of that original God-given blueprint! Oh, Breath of God, blow. We are lost without you!

Truly this is that spirit of antichrist. Stage-by-stage it is separating the Body from her Head, and progressively squeezing every trace of Breath out of it. How greatly does the serpent hate the Holy Ghost.

And no wonder! The Holy Ghost is the very earnest, an advance instalment, of the coming Kingdom and of the destruction of satan, sin and death. He is the foretaste of the powers of the Age to come. The regeneration of the believer is an earnest of the Regeneration. The Church, the new creation wherein all things are become new, is the preview of the grand consummation and the making new of all things as unveiled in Revelation. Truly the Spirit-born Church is *a kind of first fruits of His creatures, an advance unveiling of the times of restitution of all things, and of the dispensation of the fulness of times*. Oh how great is the antagonism of hell to the Holy Ghost, the executive power of the Godhead. How great therefore is its desire to sever the Body from the Life and nourishment of the Head.

Let us now consider how the supernatural power of regeneration was lost historically.

***b) Early loss of the truth of regeneration historically traced (Ephesus & Smyrna periods)***

Early in the 2nd C there were already signs of things intended to be Life-giving realities becoming mere external rites.

The breaking of bread, for example, was already being interpreted in some quarters as an automatic act, conferring benefit in itself, instead of being a living appropriation of Christ Himself. *As the Living Father hath sent Me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me* (John 6:57). Ultimately this trend would culminate in the blasphemous doctrine of the mass.

The same happened with baptism. Importance came to be attached to the water of baptism in itself, rather than to what it signified. Instead of being an outward sign of a new life already received in Christ, baptism gradually came to be considered as the means of that new life.

By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C others were speaking of water baptism and the baptism with the Holy Spirit being one.

Baptism was seen as the laver of regeneration, the water of life, spiritual circumcision and the entry into the Christian life. In 2nd and 3rd C writings, “regeneration”, “born again”, and “baptism” came to be interchangeable. It came to be believed that the waters of baptism purified the soul.

- Origen (185-254 AD) taught that “by the sacrament of baptism, the pollution of our birth (i.e. original sin) is taken away”. He therefore justified the baptism of infants for the forgiveness of their sins.

- Cyprian about 253 AD spoke of infant baptism as conveying grace to children even when under eight days old.

**c) *Development during the Pergamos age***

In spite of the foregoing, the Ephesus/Smyrna ages did not treat baptism as a mere magical rite. They were well aware that, in spite of their high (and unscriptural) opinion of baptism, it was not inevitably and invariably effective in uniting a man to Christ.

It was the onset of the Pergamos age, with its attendant pagan influx, that saw baptism degenerate into the superstitious and magical rite of later centuries. The original Biblical baptism was metamorphosed by the mystery Babylon spirit so as to encompass all the attributes of the old pagan baptismal ceremonies.

- Gregory Nazianzen (330 - 390 AD) advocated child baptism. He taught they were sanctified, sealed and initiated by it.
- Basil of Caesarea (329 - 379 AD) urged the necessity of baptism for deliverance from the tyranny of the devil. He justified this from John 3:5, as did the famous Ambrose of Milan (340 -397 AD).
- The fullest list of benefits claimed for baptism, however, is found in John *Chrysostom's* writings (347 - 407 AD) He claimed to baptise "that there might be superadded saintship, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, a brotherhood with Christ, and to be made members with Him".

You may wonder how all these benefits came to be attributed to the act of water baptism.

Let us consider the significance of the major change in the understanding of baptism. It will be seen how those benefits which Scripture attributes solely to the living energy of the Holy Ghost were drained of their reality. Instead they were explained as merely theoretical benefits conferred automatically by the outward performance of baptism.

**d) *Biblical analysis of the implications of the misinterpretation of the significance of baptism***

This is not the place to detail how the doctrines of the ancient mystery religions (originating ultimately from Babylon) permeated the Church and metamorphosed the underlying meaning of Biblical doctrines, whilst retaining their outward terminology. To trace the inroads of this mystery Babylon spirit is reserved for a later study.

As already explained, however, the Pergamos adulterous Church/State union led to a major influx of pagan ideas and religious concepts ultimately traceable to Babylon.

Among these were the mystery religion teachings on baptism.

It may be wondered how the amazing attributes described earlier came to be ascribed to the mere act of baptism. The answer is very simple, but requires Spiritual revelation.

The spirit of antichrist was abroad. Its goal was to replace Christ Himself, whilst keeping the outward appearance of godliness. (Remember, "antichrist" not only means against but also in the place of Christ). Its influence on unwary minds was strong. The

Church had fallen from her first love, i.e. to keep to the Word. So, believers of this period often said things that sound very strange to ears accustomed only to the Word. It does not mean they were wicked, any more than Peter when the Lord said to him, *Get thee behind me, Satan* (Matthew 16:23). But they had relaxed their vigilance.

So, just as in the pagan mystery religions, baptism imperceptibly became the rite whereby all previous sins were washed away, regenerating into eternal life. Pagan baptismal customs, such as prior fasting and sponsors (or, godparents), came into Christianity. Baptism was seen as effecting regeneration and imparting eternal life. Because of the unscriptural emphasis on baptism as a means of cleansing, it was common to delay baptism till the death-bed, when one's record of sins was practically complete, to ensure that as many sins as possible were washed away by baptism.

Let us now consider how the spirit of antichrist changed the significance of baptism.

Its method was wholly consistent with its overall purpose. Biblical terminology was retained. But it was drained of its Life and Breath. That which was initially a living reality was divested of its power and changed into a mere outward form. So, in the case of baptism, all the effects of the reality were attributed to the mere outward act. Let me illustrate.

The verse so often used to justify the act of baptism itself being the means of our regeneration is John 3:5: *Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* But comparison with other Scriptures makes clear that this act only symbolises regeneration by the living power of the Spirit-anointed Word:

- Peter said: *Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit... being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God which liveth...* (1 Peter 1:22-23). Note the link between the living Word, the purification of the soul and new birth by means of the Word and the power of the Holy Ghost as the Agent.
- James likewise speaks of our new birth by the Word of Truth, a Word which contains within itself the power to save our souls (James 1:18a,21b).
- Paul compares the Word to water, referring to the power of the Word to sanctify and cleanse the Church *by the washing of water by the Word* (Ephesians 5:26). Truly the Word is no empty terminology.
- Now Jesus said, *The words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit, and they are life* (John 6:63). So, the Spirit and the Word are one.
- So, the same new birth which James attributes to the Word, Titus describes as effected by the Holy Ghost: *... according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost* (Titus 3:5).

So, to be *born of water and of the spirit* is the result of the working of the Spirit and the Word.

And it is precisely the Word and the Spirit which the spirit of antichrist was seeking to take from the Church.

Now is the strategy clear? Is it now plain that the misinterpretation of baptism is not just an oddity of history, but part of a master plan? Can you now more fully perceive the evil mastermind spirit behind the downward slide of the Church? Yes, maintain the outward form of godliness. But at all costs the Holy Ghost must be excluded from the daily experience of the believer.

For a while longer the written Word would remain among the believers. But its power was increasingly being drained away by teachings that the terminology of the Word was fulfilled by mere external acts, with nothing further to look for.

But worse was to come. Even the letter of the Word would be taken away by a Nicolaitan priesthood supported by the arm of the State, and the laity forbidden under threat of punishment to read it. More of this, however, in the Thyatira age.

Before concluding, I wish to look at one more point in the development of the teaching of baptism in the Pergamos age.

We have already seen how an experience of the power of regeneration was replaced by the act of baptism, with the act itself being claimed to impart that which the Holy Ghost imparts. Let us now see how the other supposed benefits of baptism (as taught by Chrysostom) came to be believed.

The root cause was confusion from equating water baptism with "baptism into Christ".

Our union with Christ, through baptism into His death, leads to benefits such as adoption, inheritance, incorporation into the Body of Christ. These benefits came to be understood as automatic results of water baptism. The living experience of receiving the Spirit of adoption, and the vibrant personal experience of the exceeding greatness of that mighty power which raised Christ from the dead were lost. They were presumed to have been received in some mystical way by a mere external act. That which baptism no doubt symbolised, *being buried with him in baptism*, came to be identified with the act of baptism itself. It was taught that the performance of the symbol meant the automatic experience of the reality.

Once again it is the believer's living experience of the operation of the Holy Ghost which is lost. Woe unto a religion devoid of the Spirit! No wonder the Psalmist cried out: *My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God* (Psalm 42:2).

To baptise into Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27) is the work of the Holy Ghost whereby we *have been all made to drink of one Spirit*. Our union with Him in death, burial and resurrection to the right hand of the Father (Romans 6:3-6; Colossians 2:12-13) is likewise a living identification with the supernatural operations of the eternal Spirit. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in us (Romans 8:10-11). It is for the revelation of the full significance of this amazing truth that Paul so labours in prayer (Ephesians 1:19- 2:1).

So, it came to be thought that water baptism was the means of imparting the things it was at best intended only to symbolise.

After water baptism, it became the practice for the baptiser to anoint with oil and lay on hands in token of the reception of the Holy Ghost. But all they had was the symbol not the reality. And so the Church lost the promise of the Father, the gift and baptism of the Holy Ghost from the hands of the ascended Christ.

Oh, how barren a wilderness the Church then traversed. She had allowed the rising Nicolaitan priesthood to extinguish divine government. Then she received their false Nicolaitan teachings, teachings which excluded her from personal experience of the living reality of regeneration, incorporation into the Body of Christ and the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

No longer were the people taught to seek for the regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost. Or the reception of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with their own spirit. Or the reality of incorporation into the Body of Christ by the Spirit. Or the operation of the glory of the Father raising them to partake of newness of life in the Spirit. Or the infilling of the Holy Ghost. It was now presumed that these were automatically imparted at baptism.

Furthermore, to more fully cement their hold and to bind the laity in dependence upon themselves, the rising Nicolaitan clergy forbade any to baptise but themselves. Since only they could properly carry out baptism, they were thus the sole imparters of those benefits baptism was supposed to represent.

Oh, the anguish of a Christian life apart from the promised Comforter! Lonely, lonely pilgrimage!

I hope to examine how the revelation of the operation of the Holy Ghost in sanctifying power was restored in the Philadelphia age. In the meantime I trust the present chapter will lay a good foundation for understanding the full significance of the Truth God restored in that age.

To ensure as complete a grasp as possible of the strategy of the spirit of antichrist in the Pergamos age, I wish to close by showing how and why baptism in the New Testament was confused with circumcision in the Old.

Even today those Protestants (particularly Anglican and Methodist) who teach infant baptism justify it on the grounds that it is the seal of the new covenant just as circumcision was of the old. It is claimed, therefore, that infants may be "baptised" since Israelite males were circumcised on the eighth day after birth.

Here again, however, there is a fundamental confusion. The Medieval church (and those still holding this doctrine) wrongly attributed to the outward act of baptism benefits which are only the result of the operation of the Holy Ghost.

It is true that circumcision was the seal of the old covenant (Romans 4:11). But water baptism is not the seal of the new covenant.

According to Paul, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise unto the day of redemption (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30). Furthermore this same Holy Spirit baptises us into Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:27) which entails a union in His crucifixion and burial (Romans 6:6; Colossians 2:13a). It is this union which brings about the circumcision of Christ, made without hands, which is the putting off and rendering powerless of the body of the sins of the flesh (Romans 6:6; Colossians 2:12).

So, the true New Testament parallel of the seal of physical circumcision is not water baptism, but the sealing of the Holy Ghost, or baptism into the Body of Christ. This baptism into Christ effects a circumcision performed by the Holy Spirit, whereby the body of sin (i.e. the carnal nature) is destroyed.

*... neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh;... circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.... (Romans 2:28-29, NASV)*

*nor is that circumcision which is only outward and physical ... a man is circumcised in his heart by the Spirit, not just by doing what the words say (Romans 2: 28-29, Beck).*

Water baptism may well represent pictorially our baptism into Christ's death. It most certainly does not, however, bring it about.

Even today, many believers in non-infant baptism churches fail to realise the extent of the supernatural power of the Holy Ghost available to effect our sanctification. By understanding what was lost by the Church in the Pergamos age, we may come to realise that there yet remains much to be entered into in many lives today.

If so, this study will have achieved its objective of not being a mere history lesson.

## 5 THE CELTIC CHURCH

Before concluding, let us set the developments described earlier in perspective.

I have reviewed the condition of the Church in the Roman Empire, particularly in its western division. Most of the material has illustrated the continued (and accelerated) fall of the Church from her first love, begun in the first, Ephesus, age.

But this is not the whole picture.

From the Smyrna age, the Nicolaitan governmental structure gained an increasingly strong grip over local churches throughout the Roman Empire (i.e. N. Africa, Palestine, Turkey, the whole of southern Europe and parts of modern Germany and Holland).

There were, however, assemblies in different areas and at different times which disassociated themselves from that party called "Catholic" representing the growing centralisation trend. For example, the Montanists and Donatists, in Turkey and N Africa respectively.

In addition there was not unanimity even within the "Catholic" party. Then, as now, many opposed different harmful trends, whilst remaining within its loose overall structure. The ground had not yet been fully laid for the tightly-knit structure of later years where dissent was rapidly quenched.

Although the State had begun to drink of the cup of the Babylonian harlot, it had not yet turned into the ferocious beast of the Dark Ages, under the guiding hand of the fallen woman. Furthermore, during the 5th and 6th C, the Roman Empire began to break up under the impact of barbarian invasions and was therefore both unable and unwilling to act as a vehicle for advancing the control of the fallen Church over both dissenting churches and ultimately all men.

Let us now give a brief outline of the progress of Christianity in the Pergamos age:

- The "Catholic" party, centred on the bishop of Rome, was accorded honour and some degree of primacy in Italy, S France, Spain and N Africa.
- In the East the claims of Rome were resisted. The patriarch (i.e. archbishop) of Constantinople obtained growing power as a rival to the claims of Rome. Though Nicolaitan in their governmental structure, the Eastern churches, however, stopped short of allowing a single man control over all the others.
- Outside the Roman Empire Christianity was spreading far into the heart of Asia through the missionary endeavours of the Persian (or, Nestorian) churches. Expansion was also taking place in Ethiopia, and among the barbarian tribes in parts of central Europe.

In many of these areas a remarkable work of grace was achieved, especially where the deadening hand of Nicolaitanism, with its attendant doctrine of Balaam, held little sway. Often this was in previously untouched realms, where the pioneer spirit still prevailed.

One such work was in central France under the godly Martin, bishop of Tours. He undertook pioneer missionary work in the surrounding area with very blessed results. Indeed, if his biographer is reliable, his was the ministry most vindicated by the Lord, with signs and wonders following the preaching of the Word, since Irenaeus.

How refreshing to read of such a work amidst the disheartening declension of professing Christendom at this time, with the spirit of antichrist progressively squeezing out its Life-Breath.

A further heart-warming and refreshing example of the working of the Spirit is the growth and development of the Celtic Church in the British Isles.

Christianity was established early in Britain. But when the Roman armies withdrew in 410 AD, fierce pagans poured across the North Sea and destroyed the faith on the eastern coast. Even so the Celtic Church (as it was called) lived on in Western Britain and Ireland. Cut off from the European churches by the pagan belt in the east, this Church was preserved from much of the decline in fervour and Spirit on the Continent.

The same Spirit that quickened Martin of Tours also infused this Church. The mother of the famous Patrick (born c 372 AD) was Martin's sister. Captured by pagan Irish pirates, Patrick escaped under supernatural guidance. Called of God in a dream, this humble man later returned to Ireland to proclaim the Word. His labours were so successful that he is acclaimed the apostle of Ireland.

Ireland's fame for pure Scriptural teaching rose high. An extensive missionary work begun. One of the most famous missionaries was Columba, who did a mighty work in Scotland (c 565 AD).

About 150 years earlier, a fine work had been done in the same area by the godly Ninian. He too bore the same blessed Spirit that attended the labours of Martin: Ninian gained his inspiration from Martin when he studied under his ministry.

How ironic that Rome, ever seeking to invest herself with an air of legitimacy, should claim such men as Martin and Patrick for her own. It was English armies sent many years later to enforce subjection to the Pope of Rome, who destroyed the very work Patrick had built up. By usurping his name, Rome seeks to make his honour her own.

Returning to Columba, we find in him the same pioneer missionary spirit as Patrick and Martin. His great object was to train men for the work of the Gospel both at home and abroad. To this end he set up a type of Bible school on Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. From here many godly men went forth across west central Europe taking the Gospel to the pagan barbarian tribes. In 635 AD, for example, Aidan was sent to Northumbria, and within thirty years had evangelised the area from the Forth in Scotland to the Humber, reaching as far south as the Thames.

Another famous product of the Celtic Church was Columbanus. He was sent forth from Bangor in Northern Ireland, another renowned missionary-producing centre. He went to Burgundy (E France), parts of Switzerland and Northern Italy, establishing many centres of evangelism until his death in c 610 AD. His co-worker, Gall, was called the apostle of Switzerland.

A very important aspect of the Celtic Church was the lack of any thorough-going Nicolaitan organisational structure. Early attempts to organise the Irish Church on the Roman system (with the bishop and his clergy exercising exclusive jurisdiction within a diocese) gave way to a looser fellowship link only.

Whenever Celtic Church missionaries met the Roman centralising organisation, they rejected it. Columbanus, for example, treated the Pope of his day with respect, but repudiated his claims of primacy. In his work on the Continent, this separated man came into conflict with the local Nicolaitan organisation when he encountered it.

By the beginning of the 7th C there were two totally different types of monasticism in Western Europe: the Irish and the Benedictine. They were wholly different in spirit. The Irish preachers often lived together in communities when evangelising new territories; going forth on missionary work spontaneously. They wandered as they felt best, having no diocesan bishops to control their movements, and without episcopal permission or supervision. The Benedictines, however, went as a result of strenuous papal bidding, as personal agents of the papacy.

Tragically, the fine work of the Celtic Church for over 200 years was eventually destroyed by the rising power of the evil Nicolaitan system. By the 7th C the influence of the papacy was again growing, spreading its tentacles everywhere to compel all believers to acknowledge its sole authority in spiritual matters.

In 597 AD Augustine, a Benedictine monk, arrived in Kent from Rome to convert the British. He immediately sought to bring the leaders of the Celtic Church into the Roman communion, but completely failed due to their passionately held independence.

Over the years, however, the influence of the Celtic Church in Britain waned. True to form, the Roman envoys sought initially to gain the ear of the ruling monarchs. In 664 AD, at a council in Whitby with the Celtic leaders, King Oswy of Northumbria was won over to Rome. The same spirit was present as at the Nicene council: to enforce spiritual dominion by the power of the state.

An insight into the true spirit of Augustine's British mission is found in his words after the failure of successive attempts to compel submission to Rome in southern England: "If you will not receive brethren who bring you peace, you will receive enemies who bring you war". Soon after, a pagan Anglo-Saxon king marched on Bangor (North Wales) and slew 1200 Celtic monks. It is uncertain what Augustine's role was in this, but his vengeful words, and Rome's regular use of the sword when available, give just grounds for suspicion. Such is the spirit of Roman "missionary" work.

Oswy's conversion is dubious. He professed obedience to Peter lest, "when I appear at the gate of heaven there be no-one to open it for me." (A typical example of Roman "gospel preaching"!)

Very soon after, all England was subservient to Rome.

By the 8th C Scotland, too, fell under her yoke, again through Romish influence at court, enforcing her rule on the Celtic Church.

A similar thing happened among the British missions on the Continent. The policy of Roman missionaries in west central Europe, in contact with the courts of the various rulers, was to compel the British missions to submit to Rome or be destroyed. State aid was obtained, at the direction of Rome, to enforce this. Thus the Nicolaitan system gradually spread across the whole area, extinguishing the spirit of the earlier work.

From this time it came to be accepted throughout western Europe that no archbishop could take office unless conferred by Rome, and yielding obedience to the pope. The oath of allegiance taken in 722 AD by Wilfrid, the most famous Roman missionary to Germany, will suffice to illustrate its Nicolaitan spirit:

“...and will at all times persevere in holding faithful communion with thee, and in closely following the customs of thy church, to which God has granted the power of binding and loosing. ...And if I ever learn the conversation of any clerics contrary to the ancient institutions of the fathers (*i.e. who disagree with the pope*), I will have no dealings or communion with, but rather will prevent their actions to the best of my ability, and wherever I cannot check them, I will faithfully and immediately send information to my apostolic lord”.

Thus again we see that ancient serpent, through the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, squeezing the Life out of the Body.

But, thanks be to God, that is not the end of the story.

## THE HIDDEN MANNA

Despite all his efforts, the evil serpent could not separate they who remained true to the faith of the Word from their Lord.

The overcomer in Pergamos was promised a communion with his Lord in His secret place, hidden and protected from all harm:

*To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna (Revelation 2:17).*

What is this hidden manna? Clearly it was not manna lying all around the camp of Israel every morning in the wilderness, in quantities sufficient to feed millions. That manna was anything but hidden. Where, then, was the hidden manna? In the place which only one man was allowed to enter in Old Testament times, and that only once per year. The Holiest of all!

*Moses said unto Aaron, Take a pot, and put an omer full of manna therein, and lay it up before the LORD, to be kept for your generations... so Aaron laid it up before the Testimony, to be kept. (Ex 16:33-34)*

*and the ark of the covenant ... wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant (Hebrews 9:4)*

The exact location of the pot of manna varied in the history of Israel. But, whether before the Ark of the testimony or within it, the unchanging thing is that the pot was in the Holiest of all. So, if the overcomer was promised the hidden manna, that was tantamount to saying he would dwell in the Holy of Holies, the very dwelling place of God, surrounded by the Shekinah Glory.

What was the manna for? Nourishment. As Israel marched to the land of promise through the surrounding barren wilderness, the manna was their sustenance. Likewise the overcomer, traversing the dry weary spiritual wilderness of Pergamos on his way to his Inheritance, was to be fed on manna. But not the literal manna lying all around; the hidden Spiritual manna found only in the Holiest of all.

Was the nourishment sufficient for the arduous path the believer had to tread? Well, the pot of manna in the Holiest contained one omer. How much nourishment would that provide? Sufficient for the day! One omer was one day's supply:

*on the sixth day they gathered twice as much ... two omers for one man (Ex 16:22)*

What was it like to partake of this heaven-sent manna? What did it taste like? It was like tasting the heavenly gift and being made a partaker of the Holy Ghost (Heb 6:4). How do we know? Because:

*the taste of it was as the taste of fresh oil (Nu 11:8)*

And oil is a symbol of the Holy Ghost.

Now the Holy Ghost is an earnest and foretaste of our inheritance (Eph 1:13-14). Hebrews 6:4-5 says that to taste the Spirit is to taste the powers of the world to come, i.e. our future inheritance.

And what was the inheritance to which the children of Israel were marching through the wilderness? The land of milk and honey. So, when they tasted the manna they were enjoying a foretaste of their coming inheritance! For,

*the taste of it was like wafers made with honey (Ex 16:31)*

Finally, what did Jesus say the manna foreshadowed? Himself!

*I am the living bread which came down from heaven (Jn 6:51)*

So, in conclusion, how blessed is the promise to the overcomer in Pergamos. He dwells in the Holiest of All, where the Shekinah Glory is. There he feeds on Christ, Who is nourishment sufficient for his every daily need. Experiencing a fresh, daily supply of the Spirit, he tastes the Life and power of his future inheritance in glory.

Truly, the communion of the Spirit was still a living possibility for those who partook not of things sacrificed to idols!