

**THE MYSTERY OF GOD
SHALL BE FINISHED**

**THE
EPHESUS & SMYRNA
CHURCH AGES**

A STUDY IN THE RESTORATION OF THE CHURCH

No.4

THE EPHEBUS AND SMYRNA CHURCH AGES

PREFACE

Having considered the overall key to the interpretation of Church history (the extent to which Christ is all in all), I now wish to examine the first two Church ages. These end with the coming of Constantine to the throne of the Roman Empire in AD 312. This date is one of the most significant in Church history. It marks a fundamental change in her nature and circumstances.

Thereafter that process of decay, whose introduction in the Ephesus and Smyrna ages will be described in the following pages, accelerates rapidly during the Pergamos age till the Church comes to the depths of Satan in the Thyatira age. (The latter extends throughout the whole Medieval period from about 600 to 1500 AD).

After Pergamos and Thyatira I stand back from the detail of the Church's slide into the depths of Satan to show the overall strategy of the spirit of antichrist during these first four ages in Mystery, Babylon the Great

With the Sardis age (more or less contemporary with the Reformation period) the whole flow of the tide changes.

Henceforth the pattern will not be of progressive degeneration but of restoration to the original blueprint, culminating in the Church's coming to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ at the end time. Successive waves of restoration reverse the earlier degeneration till Christ is once again all in all.

In addition to the general reference books mentioned in Study No 3, I have gained much help on specific points in the present study from "Evangelism in the Early Church" by Michael Green.

I would also like to acknowledge the much valued help of my late wife, Carol in preparing the draft typescript for the original December 1977 version, when word processors were scarcely heard of.

(I have taken advantage of the production of this electronic version of the Ephesus & Smyrna Church Ages to update the book stylistically.)

To give an overall idea of how this series, 'The Mystery of God shall be finished', is developing, studies already in print are listed below:

- No 1: The Eternal Purpose
- No 2: The Hope of your calling
- No 3: That God might be all in all
- No 4: The Ephesus and Smyrna Church Ages
- No 5: The Pergamos Church Age
- No 6: The Thyatira Church Age

No 7: Mystery, Babylon the Great

No 8: The Sardis Church Age (or, The failure of the Reformation)

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.

Further studies in this series may be viewed on my website, www.endtimerestoration.com. Hard copies may be obtained by emailing me using the contact form on the website.

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A EPHESUS

1. Introduction

The word “Ephesus” appears to be a compound with a double meaning: “aimed at” and “relaxed”. Such a meaning would certainly be a remarkably accurate commentary on this first period of Church history.

As I meditate upon this age, I feel a deep awareness of the total unreliability of men - even Christian men - unless they walk in Christ and in the Spirit in their every word, thought and deed. Good intentions are not enough. As already discussed in the introductory study to the Seven Church Ages, Christ not only can be, but must be our all in all. *The flesh profiteth nothing* (John 6:63). *Without Me you can do nothing* (John 15:5).

Knowing how subtly the fall of the early church came in spite of the mighty move of the Spirit she saw, I can only cry out from the depths of my soul, “O Lord, bring me, like your servant Paul, to say in truth, *We... rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh* (Philippians 3:3)”. Here alone is our only hope of escape from a similar fate.

2. The historical development of the Ephesus church as revealed in Scripture

Let us consider the Ephesus church, as described in the Word, painting a Biblical picture of this church from her first beginnings to the end of the 1st C.

Acts describes the church in her earliest days:

- 18:18—21 Paul’s first contact
- 18:24—26 The first foundations of the new church
- 19:1 — 20:1 Paul’s return and extensive ministry
- 20:16—38 Paul’s last direct contact with the Ephesian church

Further information comes from the letter to the Ephesians, the two epistles to Timothy (who was sent to Ephesus to resolve certain difficulties over false teaching there) and the letter to the angel (or messenger) of the church of Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7).

1 Timothy was written several years after the events described in Acts, before Paul’s imprisonment; Ephesians and 2 Timothy whilst imprisoned. The message to the angel of the church at Ephesus was revealed some 20 years or so afterwards.

Founded in the midst of extraordinary miracles (Acts 19:11-12), Paul could say of the Church at Ephesus, as of Corinth: *my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God* (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

But, though not founded on the *enticing words of men’s wisdom*, she was certainly well instructed in the wisdom of God, *even the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the world unto our glory* (1 Corinthians 2:7). There was a correct understanding of the baptism of the Holy Ghost (Acts 19:1-7), and a convincing demonstration of the authority of the Name of Jesus. Here the Word truly triumphed and demonstrated its power. In such an atmosphere, occult practices were broken, and religious fakes exposed.

As far as we know, Paul ministered in Ephesus and the surrounding province for longer than in any other place: three years according to Acts 20:31. No wonder then that he was able to say to the Ephesian elders, *I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God* (Acts 20:27). What riches are implied by this phrase, *all the counsel of God*! The word 'counsel' is very wide-ranging, going far beyond the limited sense of God's will in a particular circumstance. It implies the full contents of the plan of God in all history, and His overall objective for the Church. This is that plan which Paul further expounds in his letter to the Ephesians. It is the revelation of the "mystery of His will" - the eternal purpose.

Surely, then, this was a people with prophetic revelation of the mind of God. And no wonder – they were not taught merely in a traditional once-weekly, hour-long Bible study. Paul testified, *I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you and have taught you publicly, and from house to house;.. .by the space of three years I ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears* (Acts 20:20, 31).

Truly, then, this church was founded upon the power of God and the living revelation of His purpose. They understood that the Church was intended to be nothing less than the full revelation of Jesus Christ, *a glorious church* (Ephesians 5:27), i.e. a church in glory, recovering the glory of God which man once had before Adam sinned. Truly they walked in the revelation of "the deep things of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10). They were far from "the depths of Satan" into which the Thyatira age would sink (Revelation 2:24).

Yet already, even in the Ephesus age, there was a little worm sapping away the life of the vine branches. Already the insinuating spirit of the serpent was seeking - and with success - to seduce the pure, early Church virgin from a total devotion to, and dependence upon, her Lord.

When he saw the Ephesian elders for the last time, Paul prophesied of coming danger, both from without and within:

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30).

The flock would be scattered, and false teachings gain ground.

To combat this Timothy was sent there later (1 Timothy 1:3ff). 1 Timothy abounds in references to the struggle to ensure that the church remained true to course. Being a prophet, however, Paul knew that the early church virgin would be seduced. He warned Timothy of his clear revelation from the Holy Ghost of an invasion of seducing spirits, and of doctrines inspired by demons being introduced into the Church by evil men (1 Timothy 4:1-2). Paul also foresaw that this invasion would be effective. Even within the ranks of she who is called "the Pillar and Ground of the Truth" (1 Timothy 3:15) there would be those who would pay heed to these doctrines, departing from the fulness of that faith once for all delivered to the saints.

By the time Paul wrote 2 Timothy (his last known words) the false teachers had grown greatly in influence. The tone of this letter is one of warning about the condition the Church would eventually come to through this demonic attack (2 Timothy 3:1-5; 4:1-5).

But even at that time he could say, *All they which are in Asia be turned away from me* (2 Timothy 1:15). (Ephesus was the capital of the province of Asia), He had sent Tychicus to Ephesus (2 Timothy 4:12), no doubt to try and uphold the Truth of the Word. But there was strong opposition. Alexander the coppersmith, for example, vehemently opposed Paul's teaching (2 Timothy 4:14-15; 1 Timothy 1:20).

So we see the fulfilment of Paul's warning to the elders at Miletus. Not only did the church at Ephesus suffer external opposition. Far more seriously, she was undermined from within. Through human vessels, evil spirits injected false doctrine among the believers, causing some to be turned from that revelation given through the apostle Paul,

The rest of the Church was also suffering the same attacks. By the Spirit Paul warned how ultimately this would climax in the falling away, the great rebellion, of the professing church (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

This term does not mean a desertion or abandonment of a Christian profession. It means a denial of the Truth of the original Word, whilst still retaining the outward appearance. The word "falling-away" is a military term meaning "mutiny". It is a rebellion against the authority of the leader. So, the professing church would still use her Leader's Name, but reject His authority. She would alter His Word to suit her own end. As our Lord said: *When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?* (Luke 18:8) The literal meaning is not so much of faith in general, but the faith, that faith once for all delivered to the saints, faith in the full counsel of God as revealed to His holy apostles and prophets. The Amplified Bible translates it well: "will He find persistence in the faith on the earth?"

As we consider historically the downward progress of the Church in future studies, it will be seen how different satanic doctrines were introduced, and how they weaned the Church from Christ Himself.

3. *The Ephesus church's historical development as typical of the early Church as a whole*

The Biblical history of the Ephesus church parallels that of the whole early Church period as revealed in Scripture.

At first the Church was pure and undefiled. *And of the rest durst no man join himself to them* (Acts 5:13).

Although conceived in the midst of signs and wonders, however, another spirit soon entered, that spirit of antichrist, of whose coming the early Church was amply warned (1 John 4:3b).

Abundant testimony of the invasion of evil spirits into the Church is borne in the New Testament. This was a full-scale battle, instigated by demon forces using false men as their external visible channels in this warfare:

- *The tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil.* (Matthew 13:38-39)
- *If he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit which ye have not received....* (2 Corinthians 11:4)
- *Therefore it is no great thing if Satan's ministers be transformed as the ministers of righteousness.* (2 Corinthians 11:15)

- *We beseech you, brethren..., that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2)*
- *the Spirit saith expressly that in later times some shall fall from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons, through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies..... (1 Timothy 4:1-2 (RV))*
- *Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)*
- *every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God (1 John 4:3)*
- *Hereby know we the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6)*

Note the constant teaching that those who spread the false doctrine are only the outward front used by the spirit of error himself.

It is essential to come to terms with the true nature of our struggle. To use the peculiarities of certain odd people with an unhealthy interest in the demonic as an alibi for not properly informing oneself as to the enemy we fight is just not good enough. We ignore the words of Paul at our peril: *We wrestle not against flesh and blood* (Ephesians 6:12). The problem with many believers is not that they are not fighting, but that they are fighting in the wrong dimension. They are merely beating the air, failing to aim their punches in the right direction. Even worse, some are like spiritual ostriches. They hope that by burying their heads in the sand, evil spirits will go away.

All the later New Testament epistles (2 Peter, 2 Timothy, 1 John and Jude in particular) reveal the effects of this intrusion of evil spirits. They are filled with strong warnings of false teaching and apostasy. As a result of the work of these evil men inspired by seducing spirits, great damage was prophesied.

Not all the effects would be immediate, however, nor were they all described as being present then. The degeneration would be progressive:

- Paul said some would be led astray by the false teachers (1 Timothy 4:1).
- Later, Peter described how many would follow their pernicious ways (2 Peter 2:1-2).
- Finally, Paul described the climax as a general rebellion against the authority of God when professing believers would not tolerate sound doctrine (1 Thessalonians 2:3; 2 Timothy 4:3-4).
- So great would this rebellion be that Jesus questioned whether, when He returned, He would find faith in the original unadulterated whole counsel of God (Luke 18:8).

The assault by the spirit of antichrist on the earliest Church was not so much a head-on collision.

Externally, of course, there was sporadic, and often bitter, persecution and resistance to the spread of Word, inspired by satan (1 Thessalonians 2:18; Revelation 2:10).

But the main attack was internal. The light of the early Church was still great. Those who embraced false doctrines could often not bear Truth still proclaimed, separating themselves from the true believers, especially where these were guided by godly men walking in the traditions taught by the apostles (1 John 2:19). So, much of the enemy's attack was not frontal but by an insidious worming-in.

Damnable heresies were at first introduced “privily” (2 Peter 2:1) (cp *false brethren privily brought in* (Galatians 2:4)). Those holding such heresies would “slip in by a side door”, as Jude 4 says literally. Just like the serpent in the garden, this would not be a full frontal denial of Truth of the Word, even though it would effectively amount to that. As yet the Church still had too much light to fall for so blatant a stratagem. She was to be seduced stage-by-stage from a total adherence to the Word, just as Paul sensed:

But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Although she could still boast of the anointing which was in her, warning her of false teachers (1 John 2:26-27), her ear was beginning to bend dangerously to the seductive blandishments of the serpent and his ministers disguised in sheep’s clothing. The day would come when her perilous flirtations would put her in a position where she would be overcome. No longer would the early church virgin put out of the church those who walked not in the doctrine of Christ. Instead those few who not would yield would themselves be put out by an adulterous church, which nonetheless still claimed to uphold the faith of her betrayed Master,

4. The divine commentary on the Ephesus Church Age

The Lord’s words to the angel of the church at Ephesus provide an overall divine commentary on this first period of the Church. How essential it is to see things from God’s point of view. How imperative to be able to assess historical events and trends through the mind of the Spirit, and to understand properly their full significance.

Although I have given much attention to the dangerous trends within the early Church, it is important not to have an unbalanced view.

A fair number of years elapsed between the first beginnings of the Church, and the more serious warning letters (2 Timothy, 2 Peter, 1 John and Jude). Even then much of the warning indicates that the worst is still to come. As yet, the intrusion of the agents of the spirit of antichrist was only at its beginning, and progress was certainly no walkover. Here and there, of course, the spirit gained a secure foothold. But where heresy had gone too far, the heretics often either left or were put out of fellowship. Careful study of the warning passages suggests that it was only later that the full effects of the work of the spirit of error would be seen.

That the early church was vigilant is evident from Jesus’ words:

- *I know... how thou canst not bear them which are evil, and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles and are not, and hast found them liars* (Revelation 2:2).
- *But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate* (Revelation 2:6).

Living in such a tolerant age as ours, it is refreshing to read such words as “canst not bear”, and “hatest”. This age is blinded by its misinterpretation of our Lord’s words: *Judge not, that ye be not judged* (Matthew 7:1). The church of today cannot accept a word such as came to Ezekiel concerning the elders of Israel: *Wilt thou judge them, son of man, wilt thou judge them* (Ezekiel 20:4). She has forgotten how to detest, to loathe and to abhor all that does not measure up to the Word, and instead, like Eli, reproves only weakly. Never forget that it was for this that Eli was said to have despised the Lord (1 Samuel 2:30), and incurred the terrible judgement of God. How offended many churches today would be if it were said that they

despised the Lord. But by their lax and tolerant attitude to His Word they effectively do just that. After all, “despise” does not only mean to sneer at. It can simply mean to treat as of little importance.

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19).

How different from the diligence so often found in the early church in earnestly contending for that faith once for all delivered to the saints! (Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:2, 9-11, 13; Ephesians 5: 7, 11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10-11) False teaching and evil living had to be dealt with radically before they could spread and cause even more harm. Timothy and Titus were sent to churches to nip incipient error in the bud (Titus 1:10-11a, 13; 2:15). If necessary sin was even to be rebuked publicly because of its purifying effect on the whole congregation (1 Timothy 5:20; cp Matthew 18: 15-17). In particularly serious cases those concerned were even handed over to satan (1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 1 Timothy 1:20), or a solemn curse pronounced (1 Corinthians 16:22; Galatians 1:8-9).

This testimony of our Lord of the earnestness with which the early church defended the Truth from false doctrine is confirmed by several reported incidents:

- In one, the apostle John had gone into a public bath-house, but on seeing Cerinthus, a man who sought to import the gnostic heresy into Christianity, he rushed out the building, refusing to stay under the same roof, and urging his friends to do likewise.
- Polycarp, a disciple of John, once came face to face with the famous heretic Marcion. Asked if he recognised him, he replied, “I do indeed. I recognise the first-born of Satan!”
- A further testimony comes from Ignatius, early in the 2nd C. He wrote to the Ephesian church: “Ye did not permit those having evil doctrine to sow their seed among you, but closed your ears”.

As a result of this earnest defence of Truth, despite many false teachings in the latter part of the 1st C and the early 2nd C, the deeds of the false Nicolaitan group and the deceitful attempts of self-styled apostles to inject their doctrine met with only limited success. The influence the apostle John continued, especially in Western Turkey (Asia), till his death at the very end of the 1st C, carrying great authority as the last survivor of the original twelve apostles. But despite this, there was a relaxing that one day would lead down to the depths of satan. Seducing spirits, deceivers, false prophets, doctrines of demons, many antichrists, false apostles, false brethren: all these had already gone abroad, sent forth by that mastermind spirit of error; the spirit, of antichrist. If the church would abide in what she had heard from the beginning (1 John 2:24), she would be safe. But if she relaxed her vigilance, she would fall.

And relax she did:

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent (Revelation 2:4-5).

Though she laboured unto weariness without giving up (Revelation 2:3), she had opened a door to the enemy. It might seem small, but a day would come when she would rue bitterly that she did not cleave to every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Let us now consider the nature of her fall - for fallen she had.

Firstly let us delete the italicised “somewhat” from the reproof in the AV rendering of verse 4, as it is unwarranted. It is a “somewhat” which threatens become an “everything”. The whole tone of these two brief verses is one of falling from the original. Williams graphically translates it: “Remember the heights from which you have fallen”.

Consider the following:

- thou hast left i.e. there has been a departure from the original position
- thy first love i.e. the church’s love is not now what it was originally
- remember i.e. bring back to mind what was originally in it, but has now gone
- from whence thou art fallen i.e. you have fallen from the place you were originally
- repent i.e. (literally) change your mind; the early church has changed its mind from the mind of Christ which it originally had (1 Corinthians 2:16)
- do the first works i.e. go back and do the things you did originally

So, the word of the Lord to the Ephesian age is abundantly clear: Go back to the original, back to the beginning.

An examination of what the nature of her first love is will further clarify what she had fallen from.

- *This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments* (1 John 5:3)
- *Whoso keepeth His Word, in him is the love of God perfected* (1 John 2:5a)
- *If ye love Me, keep My commandments* (John 14:15)

So, the love of God is to keep His Word.

What the Lord is really saying to Ephesus, therefore, is that although the early church had fully cleaved to this Word, she has now turned somewhat from It.

No wonder then that the promise to the overcomer (Revelation 2:7) is to eat of the tree of Life. Just like Eve, as Paul feared (2 Corinthians 11:2-3), the early Church had already been beguiled. She had been seduced from her first unqualified devotion to Christ and was beginning to partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Remember our introductory study to the Church ages. The Church only has Life insofar as she abides in Christ. Her fall is simply her progressive departure from a total dependence upon Him for all; her restoration is simply the progressive reversal of this trend.

The cry of the Lord then is simply: Go back to the original Word. This same theme of the trend away from the original and the need to go back to the beginning is also found in the warning epistles. To avoid over-proliferation I only give a few references:

- *Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us* (2 Timothy 1:13-14).
- *This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: that ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour* (2 Peter 3:1-2).
- *Brethren, write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning* (1 John 2:7; cp verses 24-28).

The brief epistle of Jude gives a nutshell summary of the whole situation:

- Believers exhorted to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (v 3, RV).
- They are put in remembrance of the words they have already heard as their only sure defence against false doctrine (vv 5, 17-18).
- They too are reminded keep themselves in the love of God, and this they will do by building themselves up on their most holy faith - not a truncated faith, but that faith once and for all delivered to the saints, the whole counsel of God (vv 20-21).
- In spite of peril all around them seeking to pull them down, they are reminded how God is able to keep them from falling (v 24).

How sad, then, that in spite of the urgent constraint of the Holy Ghost to warn the Church of impending danger, she still neglected the warning, left her first love, and fell.

Oh Church, it is not enough to labour unto weariness, as so many do. Go back to the Word. The whole Word. This alone is the true measure of your love for God.

B SMYRNA

1. *That ye may be tried*

Deviation from the Word must bring the chastening of a faithful Father.

The Ephesus age had been warned that her candlestick would be removed unless there was repentance (verse 5b). Unfortunately, as the history of the early Church shows, repentance did not take place. The Smyrna age, therefore, was one of trial. The devil was allowed to try the believers, putting their faith to the proof, and exposing its flaws (verse 10).

Throughout the brief letter to the church at Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11) the prevailing tone is a call to a willingness to suffer crushing pressure (= tribulation), even unto death. The attributes of Christ in the opening greeting (verse 8b) are those most designed bring the church comfort in her suffering. The rewards also (verses 10b, 11b) match the trial.

The very name Smyrna is prophetic of the character of this age. It means literally "myrrh". This is a bitter gum frequently used to embalm the dead (cp John 19:39). What an appropriate name for an age so marked by bitter suffering, often unto death. It noteworthy also that Polycarp, the first bishop of Smyrna and one the godliest men of his day, suffered martyrdom in the stadium of this city in about 166 AD.

Of course, the Ephesus age was also marked by persecutions. But these were far less general and widespread than in the Smyrna period (about 160-312 AD).

Sporadic persecutions are recorded in the Acts, for example, from both Jews and Gentiles. But these were not general persecutions specifically planned by the ruling authorities. They were isolated local cases of riots and other incidents limited both in time and place.

Before the Smyrna age there were only two severe instances of deliberate governmental persecution: one in the reign of Nero (54-68 AD) and the other in that of Domitian (81-96 AD):

- The wicked Nero began to persecute believers in AD 64, often in a most brutal manner. Christians were compelled to offer sacrifices to the emperor and the gods under the heaviest of penalties, even death. This persecution, however, though brutal, was of uncertain extent. It may have been relatively isolated.
- Domitian imitated Nero in deifying himself, commanding his own statue to be worshipped as a god. He revived the law of treason, which compelled believers to offer sacrifice. (The apostle John was banished to the Isle of Patmos at this time)

From Domitian till the reign of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (161 - 180 AD), there was again no systematic persecution. It was a period of comparative peace with sporadic persecution usually confined to outbursts of popular fury, not directly encouraged by the authorities. Natural calamities were often blamed on the Christians, and local governors or indifferent emperors would generally yield to the popular outcry against believers. Although their position was often very insecure, Christians were afforded some measure of legal protection.

At the very commencement of the Smyrna period, however, Marcus Aurelius directly encouraged deliberate persecution. For almost twenty years it continued, though not always

persistently. One of the two chief trials was in Asia (Turkey) in 167 AD, where for a brief period Christians were deliberately sought out as common criminals. Severe torture and mob violence followed. The other was in Southern France (177 AD) where many were imprisoned for their faith and great popular fury was aroused.

After the death of Marcus Aurelius, comparative peace for Christians returned owing to political instability. Again there were individual cases of persecution and martyrdom but conditions varied from province to province. In the reign of Septimus Severus (194 -211 AD), for example, there was persecution in Egypt and North Africa. The comparative peace even led to the construction of the first public meeting places for believers.

The peace was shattered, however, during the brief reign of Decius (249 -251 AD) who introduced the first general persecution throughout the full extent of the Roman Empire. He sought to restore the ancient pagan religion, and commanded that Christians be exterminated. This persecution was more terrible than any before.

After his death comparative peace again returned, till the reign of Diocletian (284 - 305 AD). Then came the final and most terrible persecution of all. It lasted ten years (303 - 312 AD). This was probably the fulfilment of our Lord's words to the Smyrna church: *ye shall have tribulation ten days* (Revelation 2:10). Diocletian issued a succession of edicts leading to a loss of office, property, rank and civil privilege for all who refused to sacrifice to the gods. Churches were destroyed and Scriptures burned. All clergy were to be imprisoned and not released unless they offered sacrifice. This was to be compelled by torture. Later the same stipulation was applied to all believers whether clergy or not.

These edicts quickly led to torture and killings, which spread throughout almost all the Roman Empire, except in the West (France, Spain and Britain). Scenes of pitiless barbarity continued for ten long years, and only ended in 312 AD when Constantine came to the throne, and issued his famous edict of toleration the following year granting religious freedom and the restoration of all believers' property.

2. *The devil shall cast some of you into prison*

A brief consideration of the inspiration behind the last great persecution will throw much light on the words of the Lord to Smyrna: *behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison* (Revelation 2:10).

The root of outward events is all too often overlooked, and undue attention paid to the mere externals. In the case of this, the worst of all the imperial persecutions directed at the Church, the reasons that provoked Diocletian's edicts are very illuminating.

He had resisted earlier attempts by the pagans to arouse him against Christianity, particularly by his assistant, Caesar Galerius. The deciding factor, which finally caused Diocletian to yield, was a pagan festival. At the sacrifice attended by himself and Galerius, the augurs (i.e. diviners or soothsayers) found they could not discern the usual signs on the livers of the sacrificed animals. Diocletian then consulted the oracle of Apollo (i.e. the spirit medium professing to speak on behalf of the god Apollo). The god replied that false oracles were being caused by the Christians. This was too much for Diocletian's superstitious mind, and he gave way. Even then he wished to avoid great bloodshed, but his abdication in AD 305 left the way open to Galerius'

unrestrained fanaticism. Nor did the latter's death end the troubles. Pagan petitions claiming to be inspired by the gods poured in to his successor asking him also to suppress the Christians. One pagan in particular displayed his magic arts in the emperor's presence by false oracular utterances, claiming that the god had commanded "the emperor's enemies" to be cleared right out.

Clearly, then, many outward events of history can specifically be shown to have been directly inspired by Satan himself. The Roman emperors often consulted diviners before making important decisions, such as on military campaigns. How little it is realised that even in our own age certain world leaders frequently make decisions based specifically on guidance received by supernatural and demonic means. Soothsayers, mediums, "prophets", dreams, clairvoyants, all are used by certain international politicians today to assist them in the formulation of their policies.

Of course, even where this is not specifically done it is still true that, *the whole world lieth in the evil one* (1 John 5:19, RV). How graphically, however, do such illustrations reveal the evil workings of our enemy, the devil, behind the outward acts of world governments.

3. *The synagogue of Satan*

So far there has been no indication at all of anything amiss in the Smyrna church. This is not because all was perfect, however; the leaven was already spread abroad. The hated deeds of the Nicolaitans would become a doctrine by the next (Pergamos) age. There was not a restoration of the fulness of the Word known in the Ephesus age. Because of the intense suffering of so much of the Smyrna age, however, the individual faith of countless saints shone brightly through the ferocity of the refining fires. Though the Church did not return to the full original Word, yet her members proved themselves worthy of the Name of Jesus. The mass "conversions" of later years, when Christianity was firstly legalised, then actively favoured, had not yet come. Persecution and tribulation helped purify the Church of much carnal and nominal profession.

There is a hint of the continued workings of the spirit of error in the Church when Jesus said, *I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan.* (Revelation 2:9)

A common interpretation of these words is to say that those referred to are Jews by natural descent, but not spiritually of the true circumcision. The fact of Jewish complicity in stirring up trouble against the Christians, both in the Acts and in subsequent history, is also used to support this argument.

Although this is true, I incline to viewing this as a group within the true Church, professing falsely to be "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). In fact, however, they are a veritable synagogue of Satan. Professing themselves to be the defenders of the Truth, they actually speak slanderously against (= blaspheme) the ones who are.

Even if this is not the correct meaning of this particular verse, this is in fact what happened. Despite the persecutions, the spirit of error was infiltrating the Church during this age. Whilst in the Ephesus age often those who were not of the Truth went out from among the true, in the Smyrna age we find that the false are actually able to organise themselves into assemblies,

whilst professing to represent the Truth. During the third, Pergamos, age this group grows greatly in power and influence so that, by the Thyatira age the Church comes to taste the very depths of Satan, reaping the bitter harvest of her relaxed hatred of and intolerance for every deviation from the Word. That little false group, at first not tolerated, then permitted and organising herself into assemblies, finally becomes so powerful that she is able to put the true outside her bounds, whilst professing that she alone is the sole depository of the true Word.

Let us now consider in detail the history of the Church during the first three centuries, to the commencement of the reign of Constantine (AD 312). I hope thereby to illustrate clearly the general statements made hitherto concerning the fall of the Church from her first love.

C. THE DOWNWARD PROGRESS OF THE CHURCH HISTORICALLY TRACED TO THE REIGN OF THE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE (312 AD) (or THE GROWTH OF THE NICOLAITAN SPIRIT)

1. The identity of the Nicolaitans

Several explanations as to who the Nicolaitans were have been given.

Some say "Nicolaitan" (literally, conqueror of the people) is simply the Greek translation of Balaam (literally, corrupter of the people). These meanings are not, however, parallel. Furthermore, in Revelation 2:14-15, holding the doctrine of the Nicolaitans is clearly distinguished from holding the doctrine of Balaam.

Others say that the Nicolaitans were a sect springing from Nicholas, one of the seven chosen to serve at the tables (Acts 6:5), who they claim later apostatised. It is said this sect was characterised by sensuality, seducing Christians to unchastity and participation in idolatrous pagan feasts. They taught that sensuality must be known by experience in order to master it, and thus abandoned themselves without reserve to the lusts of the body. The problem with this interpretation is that, at best, it is only a tradition.

However, by simply interpreting the word "Nicolaitan" according to its literal meaning ("conquerors of the people"), a remarkable similarity is found between this literal sense, and those forces at work in the early Church which brought about her subsequent decline.

2. The growth of Nicolaitanism from deeds into a doctrine

Understood in this way, the Nicolaitan spirit is basically that spirit which seeks to seduce the people from the direct rule of God through His Spirit, progressively interposing a humanised government between God and the people.

The testimony of the Ephesus age is that they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. But it is clear that this spirit was not wholly banished, for by the third Church age (Pergamos) these deeds (Revelation 2:6) had developed so far as to have been properly formulated and systematised into a doctrine (Revelation 2:15).

The initial hatred of Nicolaitanism had gone. The Church now actually tolerated those holding this doctrine within her ranks. The Greek word "hold" means "to hold fast, not to discard, or let go; to keep carefully and faithfully". Hence the Williams and Amplified translations render "hold" in Revelation 2:15 as "are clinging to". These men, therefore, were not simply considering this thought - they held to it tenaciously, and propagated it in the Church of God as a properly constituted doctrine possessing the authority of the Word Itself.

3. The early growth of this spirit (up to 150 AD)

The first seventy years of the 2nd C are one of the obscurest periods in Church history. During this hazy period the Nicolaitan spirit progressed secretly, and by the Smyrna age (commencing

around the middle of the 2nd C) had established itself much more securely after its initial firm rejection. Stage-by-stage it came to be thought, then taught, that there was a distinction between clergy and laity, and that the clergy had some special position and power beyond what is recorded in the Word.

(i) Clement

The first recorded signs of a clergy/laity distinction, based on Old Testament ordinances, (albeit very muted) are found in the letter of Clement to the Corinthian church written in 96 AD, during the lifetime of the apostle John.

(ii) Ignatius

A few years later, we find far more serious claims made by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, a friend and disciple of John, in letters believed written on the way to Rome to suffer martyrdom.

In them he gave the bishop a prominence and authority unknown in the New Testament. The leading idea was the perfect submission of the people to the bishop. Fearing the problems facing the Church, he probably thought that strong government was the best means of preserving it from error. He thus urged the virtues of monarchical episcopacy (i.e. the control of one bishop over an assembly). Among other things, he wrote: "We ought to look upon the bishop even as we do upon the Lord Himself" and "Respect the bishop as a type of God, and the presbyters as the council of God".

From the last remark it may be seen how an unscriptural distinction is made between the bishop and the presbyter.. That these two offices are identical in the New Testament is obvious:

- In Acts 20:17, 28 the Ephesian elders (Gk = presbyters) are also called overseers (Gk = bishops).
- In Titus 1:5—7 Paul recounts how he left Titus in Crete to ordain elders (= presbyters) in every city, and then proceeds to give the spiritual qualifications of bishops in order to guide his choice.

The terms "elder" and "bishop" are interchangeable. The former describes the holder's spiritual condition (= older in the faith), the latter his responsibility.

The term 'pastor' (= shepherd) seems to have the same meaning. In 1 Peter 5:1—4, for example, reference to all three terms is found in the same context:

- *the elders* (= presbyters) *who are among you* (v 1)
- *feed the flock* (= pastoring, shepherding)... *being ensamples to the flock;... when the chief Shepherd shall appear* (vv 2a, 3b,4a)
- *taking the oversight* (Gk = episcopacy; the office of a bishop) *thereof...* (v 2b)

(Note also the link between Shepherd and Bishop in 1 Peter 2:25). (See also Acts 20:17, 28).

Furthermore, not only are the terms "elder" and "bishop" interchangeable; there are also more than one of these overseeing one church, and not one bishop overseeing several churches, as is the implication of the term "bishop" in modern usage:

- *... to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons* (Philippians 1:1)
- *he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church* (Acts 20:17).

Ignatius, however, commenting on Acts 20, says that Paul called bishops and presbyters (making two offices out of one) and says they were from Ephesus and neighbouring cities (thus obscuring the fact that one church had several bishops).

Even today theologians of episcopally governed systems, such as the Anglican church, cannot justify their system from the New Testament, but only from Ignatius and the Old Testament clergy/laity distinction. It is assumed, since Ignatius wrote so soon after the death of John, he must have been intimately acquainted with his mind. However true this may be, and whether or not these letters are genuine, it matters not: they contradict the Word, the only authority.

(iii) Well-meaning but ill-advised action

It may be fair to suppose that those who sought to introduce monarchical episcopacy into the Church had her welfare at heart. Ignatius, for example, died commendably for the faith. In their desire to protect the Church from division and false doctrine, however, they lost confidence in the power of the Holy Ghost, and were seduced by human reasoning.

Hold fast the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me . . . that good thing which was committed to thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us (2 Timothy 1:13-14)

However good the motive, a framework was being built for an exaltation of human leadership and government which would later be controlled by a different spirit. Herein lay the original sin of the Church: to accept human wisdom above the Word. Thus, in carnal fear, untrusting in the power of God, things grew worse, and the heresies were not suppressed but rather multiplied.

4. Later historical development of Nicolaitanism (from c. 150-312 AD)

Exactly how clericalism was introduced is shrouded in mystery. Despite early references found in Ignatius and others, this was a trend which grew only gradually and sporadically, varying from one region to another. Although the thought was there, it had little power during the Ephesian age.

The very existence of this thought was significant, however. No thought is by chance, much less this one. It was being sown by the spirit of error, in preparation for that day when the Church would relax her hatred of Nicolaitanism and the seed would take root and bring forth its bitter fruit of death.

Even as late as about 170 AD a godly brother such as Irenaeus, the famous bishop of Lyons in France, still made no distinction between a bishop and a presbyter.

At this time, however, a great crisis took place within the Church over Montanism. (This will be examined in detail later). As a reaction against its influence, the ministry of the Holy Ghost, through the gifts of the Spirit and the itinerant ministries of the apostle and prophet, was greatly curtailed. From the end of the 2nd C the rise of clerical control over the churches accelerated greatly, and along with it came the first complaints of the incipient corruption of the clergy. By the 3rd C the presbyter (or, elder) had metamorphosed imperceptibly into a bishop in more or less the modern sense.

Before examining this trend more fully, it may be helpful to summarise the main stages of the growth of the centralising control of the clergy over the local churches.

(i) one man control over one assembly

Instead of a plurality of oversight/eldership (= the presbytery, cp 1 Timothy 4:14) in each church (cp Philippians 1:1), increasingly the bishop is made into an office separate from the elder (or presbyter), having authority over the others. The deacons hold an office in turn subordinate to the elders (as is Biblically proper).

(ii) one man control over a neighbourhood

At first there was no suggestion that one church should control another. Gradually, however, ecclesiastical provinces (called dioceses) were formed. Bishops in larger city areas opened rural assemblies which they began to control by appointing “district bishops” to each assembly. These provincial bishops formed a new class superior to the rural bishops, who in turn were superior in their own church.

(iii) one man control over a whole province

This trend progressively spread throughout the Roman Empire, though with each group independent of the other. When councils were called to discuss doctrinal problems of mutual concern, however, the bishop of the political capital of the province was usually appointed to preside under the title of “Metropolitan”. Gradually this occasional title became a permanent dignity.

(iv) one man control over several provinces

Later still, special dignity came to be accorded to the bishops of the three greatest cities of the empire (Rome, Alexandria and Antioch). These were nominated by the Nicene Council (325 AD) as possessing a jurisdiction beyond that of the civil, political province.

It must continually be remembered when considering these trends that there was no great monolithic advance. By the 3rd C Christianity had spread extensively particularly in N Africa, Ethiopia, the Middle East, Turkey, Italy, S France and parts of Spain and SE Europe. There was no even development of the spread of Nicolaitanism throughout this vast area. Furthermore the continual outbursts of local and general persecution of the faith prevented the growth of a strong centralised church. (It was not until the mid 3rd C, for example, that church buildings began to be constructed.)

But in this transition period from the mid 2nd C onwards there was a strong reaction towards uniformity in both doctrine and church government. The spirit of antichrist made great progress in preparing the way for its stranglehold on the whole Church. The spirit had been let loose, but as yet took it no firm shape so as not to alarm the people.

Soon, however, like a python, it would get such a grip that it would almost squeeze the whole Breath of God out of the Body. Soon the tactic of the serpent would change. Instead of persecution, the political power would join with the fallen church, and offer its sword to enforce the authority of her Nicolaitan leadership. Then would the whole evil plan of the serpent be unveiled, and the Church led into the depths of Satan.

5. The introduction of wider claims and “special” ministries for the bishop

Alongside the increasing centralisation of power in the churches came a parallel trend to identify “special” ministries which it was said only the bishop could perform.

The Councils of Arles (314 AD) and Nicaea (325 AD) for example confirmed a growing custom by explicitly forbidding a deacon to “celebrate” the eucharist. Only a bishop was said to be “qualified” for this. Another development was that gradually only visiting bishops were permitted to ordain other bishops, whilst these in turn ordained the presbyters.

As a natural consequence of these trends, by the end of the 3rd C, special clothing for the clergy and “sacred” vessels of silver and gold were being used.

Increasingly the clerical office was being made into something altogether unknown in Scripture.

A final indication of the progress of the spirit of antichrist may be gauged from the remarks of one of the most famous of the 3rd C bishops, Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258 AD). Though martyred for his faith, and condemning the Church’s increasing worldly involvement, he shared the growing clerical mentality of the Smyrna age.

To answer opposition to his decisions, he made remarkable claims for the absolute supremacy of the bishop as a God-appointed ruler of the Church. He spoke of “the wickedness of unlawful ordination made in apposition to the Catholic Church”. He, before Constantine (d. 337 AD), spoke freely of “the Catholic Church” and excluded all who did not conform to it. In addition he was the first to conceive of the clergy as sacrificing priests, turning the Lord’s table into an altar.

Thus we approach the reign of Constantine (312-337 AD) with a clerical spirit increasing greatly in strength. And now it was about to be given opportunity to enforce its authority through the political power.

6. *The significance of the quenching of the gifts of the Spirit*

From its inception, the Church was a supernatural Body suitably equipped to find the mind of her Lord. She was not intended to be a creaking bureaucratic machine directed by committees and agendas, but was endued with the Holy Ghost as her constant inner Guide. As with Paul in his evangelistic ministry in Turkey, it is not enough merely to do that which is good in principle; it is needful to know the direct mind of the Lord (Acts 16: 6-10).

In order therefore to bring the Church down, the spirit of antichrist had to sever her from her initial direct contact with her Head, Christ. One of the most important means of achieving this was to eliminate that normal state of a New Testament assembly wherein God spoke by the Spirit revealing His direct mind, whether by tongues and interpretation, prophecy, the word of wisdom or of knowledge, revelation or whatever other means He chose.

It has already been seen how Paul was specifically directed as to where to preach by vision. Similarly, he and Barnabas were originally chosen by the direct voice of God through the Spirit for their ministry (Acts 13:1-3). Timothy, likewise, was sent to Ephesus not by his “general overseer”, Paul, (or whatever the equivalent denominational title is), but by specific prophecy: *This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you....* (1 Timothy 1:18 NASV). No wonder the devil hated such specific guidance. If the Church walked so close to her Head as to receive His direct Voice in the details of her every action, how ever would he be able to seduce her?

Even today, when the Christian community as a whole is far more open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit than for many centuries, there is still a great fear and resistance to God's specific voice. Why? Fear and unbelief! It is not enough to refer to previous bad examples. We must learn from others' mistakes, but to doubt God's ability to guide because of another's folly is sin. Is it not possible to test the spirits? (1 John 4:1; 1 Corinthians 14:29). Is there no discerning of spirits? *Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good* (1 Thessalonians 5:19—21) . If you do not understand or are unable to discern, then wait upon God. Too many equate testing the spirits with having a critical and sceptical mind. A gullible heart is blameworthy; a guileless heart is praiseworthy.

It is because of unbelief and lack of confidence in God that specific prophecy is feared, and even, oddly enough, explicitly spoken against. Mind you, no Scripture references are given. And little wonder - there are none! If the Church walked close enough to her Lord, she would know exactly what to do, where to go, and who was to go. The Bible is filled with instances of prophecies in which specific names are given, places mentioned, dates referred to, sins of identified individuals exposed.

Although much of the reason for the resistance (albeit usually tacit) to specific prophecy is from lack of faith in a God who is big enough to guide in so definite a way, there is often also a more serious factor at work. It is the very factor which greatly influenced the demise of the gifts of the Spirit and the ministry of the apostle and prophet in the early church. The factor I refer to is that spirit which was behind the growing strength of Nicolaitanism: the growth of a clerical body which increasingly controlled the assembly, assuming "special" ministries and honours which it alone was permitted to perform. Increasingly the laity were relegated to a lesser place. The concept of the Body of Christ, with every member having his own peculiar and necessary role, was slipping away. Increasingly the members lost their grip on their Head (Colossians 2:19), and looked to a human government in the form of their overseers for guidance and direction.

Now there is a sense in which there is nothing wrong with this. God has set overseers in the Church, and these are to be held in esteem (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). Indeed, contrary to the modern principle of resentment of all form of authority, it is written: *Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you* (Hebrews 13:17). It must be remembered, however, that the corollary to such submission and obedience is the adherence of the leaders to the Word: *Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God* (Hebrews 13:7). Here is the whole key to reconciling the leading of the Holy Spirit with submission to a God-given oversight: the rule of the Word is the rule of the Spirit.

When, however, the form of church government is being progressively changed from its original pattern, there is grave danger ahead. Although a godly, Spirit-led elder would not seek to lord it over the flock, a man of a different spirit, given the scope of an increasingly centralised form of government, can impose an iron hand. He can gradually drive out the rule of the Spirit, both from a local church, and from those other churches he has under his control.

In view of the increasing trend along this line in the 2nd and 3rd C, it is no wonder then that the gifts of the Spirit fell into increasing disuse. No man who wishes to keep the control of an assembly in his own power would be pleased at the specific guidance of the Holy Ghost. It would mean that his own rule would have to be submitted to the mind of the Spirit. Thus the Head of the Church was increasingly deposed from His rightful place.

7. The significance of the disappearance of the offices of the apostle and prophet

As well as the gifts of the Spirit, the ministry of the apostle and prophet increasingly also came under attack. This seems very odd in the light of their clear importance in the New Testament:

- *God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets...* (1 Corinthians 12:28).
- Apostles and prophets are the first two gifts given by Christ to the Church after His ascension in order to bring her to the full stature of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:8, 11-13).

(Incidentally, this latter reference should demolish the peculiar belief, still heard on occasions, that the only apostles were the original twelve chosen by the Lord. This error is quite obvious since the apostles referred to in Ephesians were not chosen before Christ's ascension, but afterwards. Furthermore, no Scripture justifies the view that this ministry has ever ended, any more than that of the evangelist, or pastor and teacher. Further incidental proof that apostles were still common in the early church is found in the reference to false apostles being tried by the Ephesian church (Revelation 2:2). Had there been only the twelve, there would have been no scope for anyone to call himself an apostle. Cp 1 Thessalonians 2:6, where Paul classes Silvanus and Timotheus as apostles; and Acts 14:4, 14, where Barnabas is so designated).

The vital importance of apostles and prophets in the Church is thus obvious from their primacy in the work of building the Church to the full stature of Jesus Christ (cp Ephesians 2:20). One of the chief reasons for this is that they are vehicles of living revelation to the Church of her high calling and purpose (Ephesians 3:4-5). The very name "prophet", for example, implies one who is capable of knowing the living mind of the Lord for His Church. This ministry is more than that of a teacher. The prophet finds the living Word for his day; the teacher expounds it.

Clearly, therefore, such ministries from the ascended Christ posed a serious threat to the progress of the Nicolaitan spirit. Even more than the gifts of the Spirit, these had to be quenched to impose a governmental structure able to pave the way for a later take-over by the spirit of antichrist. How appropriate is this name "antichrist"! Not only does it mean against Christ, but also in the place of Him. The day would thus come when the Headship of Christ over His Body would be replaced by another spirit. It was therefore essential to remove the two key offices in the exercising of Christ's headship through whom He was able to keep the Church in living contact with His mind. As these were removed, progressively the Church would lose her overall sense of direction. Unlike the pastors and teachers, whose ministry centred on individual local churches, the apostle and prophet were men who could guide the Church as a whole. The historical processes that led to the gradual fading away of these ministries are therefore of more than academic interest.

8. The demise of the apostle and prophet historically traced

(i) Gradual decline during the 2nd C

It is generally agreed that the gradual disappearance of these two groups coincided with the rising importance of the bishop. Prophets, for example, are not met with by the 3rd C. Prophecy declined as episcopacy grew in power, so much so that the bishop inherited the authority of the apostle and prophet.

The exact history of this transition, like that of the rise to power of the bishop over the presbyter, is shrouded in obscurity. For the first half of the 2nd C the roving ministry of the apostle and prophet co-existed with the local bishop. Gradually, however, the emphasis increasingly fell upon the permanent office of the bishop. As standardisation increased, and the form of worship became more formal and fixed, the important leadership role of prophecy declined. This led to the elimination of those possessing Spiritual gifts from positions of authority.

(ii) The grand struggle: the Montanist crisis (late 2nd C)

The great spiritual struggle between the Holy Ghost's control and leadership of the Church and the rule by increasingly formal and standardised leadership centred on the bishop came to a head in the Montanist crisis.

The Montanists were named after Montanus who, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, began to teach in Phrygia, central Turkey (156 AD), protesting against the prevailing laxity in the relations of the Church to the world. About 172-173 AD he claimed to be possessed of the Holy Spirit, and began to prophesy. His followers also spoke in tongues. The Montanists hoped to raise up congregations which would return to primitive piety, living in the light of the Lord's return. Above all they sought to give the Holy Spirit His rightful place in the Church.

When reading the full history of the Montanist movement, it should be remembered that, whilst there are certain questionable items, much of the information about this movement comes from their opponents who had a vested interest in painting them in the blackest colours. Wherever the exact truth lies, however, it is certain that the uproar caused by this movement crystallised the mortal battle between those who sought to give the Holy Spirit unrestrained sway in the guidance of the assemblies, and the increasing control exercised by the bishop.

Initially Montanus' prophecies had wide effect throughout Turkey. Here separate churches were set up, whilst in North Africa and the Western Roman empire his influence lay more in those desiring reform but who remained within the existing system.

The opposition to Montanism eventually won, but at a costly price.

It is very significant that the reality of prophecy itself was not questioned during this period. The bishop of Rome had even acknowledged the prophetic gifts of Montanus and his followers until influenced otherwise. This, however, was a period when the gifts of the Holy Ghost were dying out; prophecy was falling under increasing suspicion. As a result of this struggle and the rejection of Montanism by the majority of the churches, this process was hastened. By the end of the 3rd C, tongues, interpretation and prophecy had generally disappeared from the experience of the churches, and the functions of the apostle and prophet had been absorbed by the bishop.

Much of the reason for this was the reaction against the emphasis by the Montanists on the need for the leadership of the Holy Ghost through these gifts. The real battle, then, was against the growing concentration of power in the bishop, who was increasingly distant from the direct leading of the Holy Ghost.

How surely was the spirit of antichrist leading the Church from her vital union with her Head.

Henceforth prophecy was suppressed, and such inspiration considered demonic. So, in the western Medieval church active prophecy had no place. Owing to Montanus' emphasis on

tongues, his excommunication led to a climate unfavourable to this practice, and it too declined, not to recur for many centuries.

No wonder then that Christ came to be regarded as far away, and the clergy as having His affairs in their hands. The Church had been separated from the living voice of God, and those ministries most associated with the bringing of the revelation of His eternal purpose to the Church.

Oh, lonely pilgrimage!

That Montanism was not radically wrong seems clear from those who rose to support it. Irenaeus (born c130 AD), for example, the famous anti-heretical writer, went to the bishop of Rome to request tolerance for it. The most ardent supporter, however, was Tertullian (born between 155 and 160 AD), held in high esteem by all sections of the Church of his day. He went so far as to leave the orthodox view completely, criticising it as unspiritual, institutionalised and condemned by worldliness. The rise of episcopal power greatly worried him, and he spoke out against those who imagined that the Church was constituted by bishops rather than Spiritual men.

The truth of his words may be seen by the official response to Montanism, which emphasised the neglect of the bishop's divinely appointed rule (??). The search for miraculous gifts was acknowledged to be good, but the supreme miracle was conversion and every believer alike has the gifts of the Spirit. Furthermore the response maintained That the supernatural is discerned in the normal ministry of Word and sacrament (??), not irrational (??) ecstasies which lead to pride and censoriousness.

Though there may be elements of truth in this response, it is not difficult to discern the hand of that deadening spirit which drives the rule of Christ out of the Church. Furthermore, such an attitude is still with us today.

9. The loss of the millennial hope

One of the prime emphases of the Montanists' prophecies was the literal resurrection of the body and the nearness of the return of Christ. Vivid descriptions of the millennial rule were given. The same close link between prophecy and the Second Coming will be seen again later among radical Reformation groups.

This link is no coincidence. If it be remembered that the Holy Ghost is not only the guarantee, but also the foretaste of our inheritance (Romans 8:23; 2 Corinthians 5:5; Ephesians 1:14), the closeness of this link will be much clearer. Although we await the world to come, yet according to the Bible we already taste of it:

*... and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come.
(Hebrews 6: 4-5)*

According to Vincent, the term "heavenly gift" does not so much imply the origin of the gift as its nature. The Holy Ghost, then, is an advance taste of heaven. In partaking of the Spirit, we taste here and now the reality and power of the world yet to come, even though it is still future.

When the disciples, for example, enquired when the Kingdom was to be restored to Israel (Acts 1:6-8), Jesus' reply did not mean that they should not worry about that for the time being. His true meaning was that although it was not for them to know the times and seasons, even so they would experience a foretaste of that Kingdom when the Holy Ghost came upon them. On the day of Pentecost the disciples received that which Joel foretold for the day of the Lord, when the kingdom would be ushered in. It was not the day of the Lord, but when they received the Holy Ghost they tasted the realities of that day ahead of its fulness.

Let us consider this from another angle. When John sent from prison to ask whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus referred him to the works accompanying His ministry (Matthew 11:2-5). Why? Because these works confirmed the prophecy of Isaiah concerning what would happen during the Messianic Kingdom (Isaiah 35:5-6). Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom was at hand, and vindicated this by performing works which would accompany its full outward setting-up on earth. Likewise the Church even now enjoys the foretaste of that glory which shall be unveiled fully when Christ returns in the clouds of heaven to reign. That foretaste is the indwelling Holy Ghost. Through the Spirit the Church in part reveals the Kingdom. She is given power over all evil spirits, and every kind of sickness and disease, (Mark 16:17-18) revealing the Kingdom in earnest.

So, the Holy Spirit, the millennial kingdom of Christ in glory, and the Second Coming are all very closely linked. The Holy Ghost is the believer's inner anticipation and revelation not only of the *truth* of the return of Christ in glory but of *the power* of it. It is no coincidence therefore that major Spiritual outpourings are always accompanied by a strong awareness of the return of Christ in glory. I emphasise 'in glory' since the Spirit is the 'Spirit of glory', and even in persecution we rejoice with "joy unspeakable and full of glory". The literal translation is "glorified" which implies a joy that even here savours something of our future glorification. As Paul said:

I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

The Second Coming then, is not simply an awareness of the doctrine of Christ's return but a revelation and consciousness of God's ultimate victory. Although the Kingdom is not yet fully manifested, the Holy Spirit is Himself the personal embodiment of the end, the constant and ever-abiding consciousness of the return of Christ, a consciousness not necessarily associated with its temporal nearness.

What is the significance of the foregoing? In view of the connection between the Second Coming and the Holy Spirit, it is not surprising that great emphasis was laid upon the Second Coming by the Montanists. Nor is it surprising that once the struggle had been decided against Montanism the expectation and power of the Lord's Coming were lost to the Church, at the same time as, and as a consequence of, the loss of the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

A belief in the literal reign of Christ for 1000 years on earth at the climax of human history was held by most Christian writers of the first two centuries. Reacting against the Montanist emphasis on it, however, the Church as a whole laid this doctrine aside. Henceforth very few of the early fathers held a literal millennial hope. (See my *Philadelphia Church Age* for fuller details.)

By the 5th C the teaching of Augustine (354-430) prevailed. He claimed that although the world would end one day, the Church had entered the millennium at Pentecost. Thus was lost the expectancy of the bodily return of Christ in glory.

How great indeed is the darkness of a Church which turns from Holy Ghost government. Having now lost those means instituted by God whereby Christ could direct His Church through the Spirit, she was turning increasingly to a humanised government lacking in a divine sense of prophetic revelation direction. Now we find a further parallel loss: the decline in a living expectancy in her blessed hope - the appearing in glory of her great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, and her own consequent transformation into His likeness.

10. Holy Ghost manifestation in the 2nd & 3rd C

Although the Church was fast losing her first glory, it must not be assumed that she was wholly powerless. I have dwelt at great length on the downward trend in order to try and explain the underlying spiritual conflict behind early Church history. There was much that was good, however.

Instances of healings and casting out of devils, for example, are often referred to in early documents. These were the vindication of the Gospel message that Jesus had conquered demonic forces on the Cross. Justin Martyr (d 163 AD), for example, referred to many demon-possessed who were healed in Jesus' Name. So did Origen (185-254 AD). Tertullian (born c.165 AD) likewise referred to examples known to his readers of the power of the Name of Jesus which compelled demons to obey as evidence of the truth of the Word.

By far the greatest ministry of which we have any record, however, is that of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (c. 130-202 AD). (Incidentally, though a bishop, he understood this term as equivalent to a presbyter in the true Biblical sense). He spoke of those who mock the gifts of the Spirit, not accepting the gifts of prophecy in the Church. In his writings he said,

“I have heard many brethren in the churches who, by the Spirit, speak in all kinds of tongues, and to the edification of others bring what is hid in man to light and reveal the secrets of God. Those who are in truth Christ's disciples... do in His Name perform miracles.. Some really do cast out demons. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them and they are made whole”.

So remarkable was the manifestation of the Spirit in this godly brother's ministry that he could even refer to a case of a man being brought back from the dead.

In view of the connection shown in the previous section between the manifestation of the Spirit and the consciousness of the return of Christ, it is not surprising that Irenaeus preached clearly the literal hope of an earthly millennium.

Unfortunately, however, Irenaeus is one of the last of the early Church fathers who could still consider himself as belonging to the age of miracle and revelation. He stands nonetheless as a living testimony that, despite her decline, the Church could still walk in the full power of the Spirit if she would only hold fast to her Head.