

# Ecclesiastical Corruption and Apostacy.

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*Paper 11 of 20 'Plain Papers on Prophetic and Other Subjects'.*

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The subject of our last paper was "The Privilege of the Church to be always expecting her Lord." It was our endeavour to show, and we trust that we succeeded in showing, that the hope of the Church is not dependent on the course of events on earth. Several passages, regarded by many Christians as predicting the *inevitable* occurrence of important intervening events, or even the necessary lapse of ages ere Christ could return, were considered at length, and shown to have no such force or intention. The commission to the eleven (Matt. 28: 18-20) was thus examined, and the inference sought to be drawn from it in favour of the inevitable postponement of Christ's coming, shown to be not only without foundation, but contrary to numerous express testimonies of Scripture elsewhere. The parables in Matt. 13 unfolding "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," were also examined; and we saw that early in the apostolic age these mysteries had been so far evolved, as that no one could conclude on their account, that the coming of Christ must necessarily be delayed. We examined at length the two epistles to the Thessalonians; and while we found that the English translation of 2 Thess. 2: 2, *does seem* to affirm that "the day of Christ was not at hand," we saw this to be a mistranslation, and that the notion opposed by the apostle, was not that of the *nearness* of the day of Christ but that of its actual *presence*. They were not to be troubled as though the day of Christ were *present*. Then finally, we saw how the apostle distinguishes between the *parousia* (coming) of Christ, when the saints, whether raised or changed, shall be translated to meet Him in the air, and the *epiphaneia* of His coming, by which the man of sin is to be destroyed. The latter cannot be till the man of sin has come. The former is not dependent on any series of events on earth. The completion of Christ's body, the Church, according to the counsels and good pleasure of the Father, is all for which it waits. It is this which is the hope of the Church. For this we are to wait continually. The Thessalonians were converted to this waiting posture of heart. The apostle waited for it as the epoch of his full joy in them as the fruit of his labour in the Lord. They supposed indeed that their departed brethren would be excluded from this joy, but he assures them it will be otherwise. The dead in Christ shall rise first. Along with those waiting on earth, these risen saints shall meet the Lord Jesus in the air. He takes care to maintain in their souls the posture of present expectancy, by saying, "We which are alive and remain." How easy to have said "they" if it had been certain that centuries would intervene! They needed no instruction as to "the day." It was for the world; and they knew that on the world it would come suddenly as a thief in the night. When deceivers had troubled them as though "the day were present," the apostle varies not his doctrine. He repeats to them that the day and its terrors are for the world; the coming of the Lord Jesus and our gathering together to Him, the portion of the saints. He beseeches them by the latter to dismiss all distracting thoughts of the former. And while keeping thus the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ before their souls as the immediate hope, he further instructs them as to "the day," that it cannot come, till the man of sin has come, on whom the first stroke of the threatened judgments of that day is to fall. Blessed be God, for the harmony of Scripture throughout. It does not contradict in one place what it affirms in another. It does not exhort us, in a multitude of passages, to be always waiting and looking for our Lord, and then, in some other solitary passage, caution us

against this posture of heart. It instructs us indeed as to the course of the world, and the progress of evil within the professing body, and the judgments which are to overtake both; but it never, in instructing us thus, interposes aught between our souls and the one, proper, heavenly hope of the descent of the Lord Jesus into the air, and our gathering together to Him there. It is happy thus to recur to that which is our own proper hope, ere entering on a subject, necessary indeed to be considered, but calculated to solemnize rather than to gladden our hearts; namely, the predicted progress of evil on the earth — the steps by which human iniquity and Satanic corruption reach that height of daring rebellion against God, which provokes the interposition of His wrath. We "wait for his Son from heaven," "even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come."

Two great forms of iniquity constitute the subjects of prophetic warning. Ecclesiastical corruption and apostasy is the one; the open revolt of the civil power against God is the other. These two, though thus distinct, are nevertheless most intimately connected with each other; and as it is ecclesiastical corruption which takes place, and paves the way for the open revolt of the kings and nations of the earth against God and against His Christ, it is well that it should be first considered. It is, moreover, what immediately bears on ourselves, as being God's merciful warning against the forms of evil which are around us, and to the seductions of which we are continually exposed.

In one of our earlier papers attention was called to the solemn warning of the apostle, that if the Gentile professing body continued not in God's goodness, utter excision was what awaited it; and we endeavoured in that paper to show, by an appeal to history and to facts, that Christendom has not continued in God's goodness, and that nothing therefore remains for it but to be "cut off." Our present object is to trace what the New Testament foretells as to the course of the dispensation, as well as to notice what it records of the incipient workings of evil even before the volume of inspiration came to a close.

The parables in Matt. 13 having been frequently referred to already, we only now produce that of the wheat and tares, as being the earliest divine intimation that Christianity would, as matter of fact, be corrupted. The supineness of the servants affords opportunity to the enemy to sow tares, where good seed had been already sown. The evil once introduced would, in effect, be only removed by judgment at the end of the age. "Let both grow together till the harvest" is the solemn rejoinder to the servants' request to be permitted to gather out the tares. "The harvest" alone shall bring to an end the effects of the unwatchfulness of the Lord's people, and of the malicious activity of Satan.

Matt. 24: 48-51 sounds the note of warning, not indeed as a positive prediction of what would be, but as depicting the awful consequences of what might be. "But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to smite his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken: the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Impressive as is this warning, it is, as we have seen, conditional; but the opening parable of Matt. 25 positively foretells the slumber and declension among Christians which have actually taken place. While the Bridegroom tarries, all the virgins, wise as well as foolish, slumber and sleep. It is only the cry raised at midnight, "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh," which awakens the

slumberers. They awake, moreover, to the discovery by some of them — a discovery terrible to those immediately concerned — that their lamps are expiring, and that it is too late to obtain a fresh supply of oil. "Verily, I say unto you, I know you not," is the awful reply of the Bridegroom, when, the door having been shut, these foolish virgins ask for entrance. Solemn testimony this, to the character of a vast amount of christian profession; and equally serious as to the forgetfulness by true Christians as well as mere professors, wise virgins as well as foolish, of that which is the true object of christian watchfulness and expectation. May we not remark, too, dear reader, ere leaving these earliest predictions of corruption and decline, how the expectation of Christ's return is here treated as the test of the condition of His people? It is when the evil servant begins to say in his heart, "My lord delayeth his coming," that he begins to smite his fellows, and to riot with the drunken. It is the expectation of the Bridegroom that leads the virgins to go forth, with lighted lamps, amid the night of this world's darkness, to meet the One whose coming will introduce them to the light and gladness of the marriage feast, while all else are left to the *outer darkness*, no longer relieved even by the torches of the waiting and expectant virgins. During the tarryance of the Bridegroom, they exchange their outside, journeying, expectant attitude, and the diligent, vigilant care of their lamps, for the indulgence of repose *within*. "*Go ye out to meet him,*" is the cry which accompanies the midnight announcement of the Bridegroom's speedy arrival. Sure token that having *gone forth* to meet him at the first, *they had returned within doors* to enjoy their slumbers undisturbed. Ah, dear reader, it is the living hope of the Bridegroom's coming that separates the saint from this evil world, and makes him a watcher, with girded loins and well-trimmed lamp. It was as this hope declined that Christians got settled down in the world, slumbering in ease and self-indulgence. It is the revived hope of Christ's speedy coming, necessarily connected now with a note of warning, which again produces any manifest separation from the world. God grant that none who read these pages may awake to see their lights go out, and seek in vain for oil, when the Bridegroom Himself has come, and the door is shut!

At the time these parables were spoken, the Church had not been formed. It was in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus that the foundation of the Church was laid. The building of it on that foundation commenced at Pentecost. Christ died "to gather together in one the children of God scattered abroad." The Holy Ghost is the gathering power. "By one Spirit," says the apostle, "are we all baptized into one body, and have all been made to drink into one Spirit." What a spectacle of love, and unity, and power, did the Pentecostal Church present! Some of the strongest barriers of human selfishness, those which consist in distinctions of rank and wealth, melted away before the presence of the Holy Ghost, who testified in power the ascension and heavenly glory of that Jesus, who but a few weeks before had been put to death. Pardoned through His blood, and actually, vitally, one with Him in glory (though they might not as yet be instructed in this feature of their calling) all mere human earthly distinctions vanished, "and all that believed were together and had all things common: and sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all, as every man had need." (Acts 2: 44, 45.) It was not that selfishness in some coveted or claimed what others possessed, — but that love in each one thought of others rather than of himself, and thus all freely ministered to the extent of their entire possessions. Bright, happy days! We may well linger over the divine record of this earliest period of the Church's history. "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus:

and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses, sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." (Acts 4: 32-35.) Such was the Church — such was Christianity at the commencement. Look around, dear, reader, on all that now bears these names, and say whether the gold has not become dim, whether the most fine gold has not been changed!

Scarcely has this picture of the original blessedness of Christianity been placed before us by the pencil of inspiration, ere that pencil has to trace the dire workings of the enemy, whose object is to mar the perfectness, and spoil the beauty of the scene. Covetousness, desire of religious reputation, and actual falsehood in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, — carnal preferences and partialities on the one side, or else evil surmisings on the other, in the case of the alleged neglect of the Grecian widows, soon — alas! how soon — tell the tale of human weakness and Satanic craft. Grace provides indeed for the emergency, and Stephen, one of the seven deacons appointed on the occasion, attains the honour of being Christ's first martyr. Philip, another deacon, bears the gospel beyond strictly Jewish limits, going down to Samaria, and preaching Christ with great power and blessing there. Those scattered by the persecution go everywhere preaching the Lord Jesus; Saul is converted, and raised up to be the apostle of the Gentiles; and the Church begins to learn and manifest its association and oneness with a rejected and heavenly Christ, where Jew and Gentile, bond and free, are unknown distinctions. But though Christianity assumes thus its earth-rejected place; though blessing, wider in its range, and more absolutely heavenly in its character, ensues on the decline and scattering of the Pentecostal Church at Jerusalem; never do we find the blessing so unmixed, so free from every active element of evil, as in those first, bright, happy days, described in the early chapters of the Acts. And as to the scene of the widely extended and successful labours of the apostle Paul, we find him, ere those labours close, expressing, in the most affecting terms, what he knew would follow on his departure. In his farewell address to the elders of the Church at Ephesus, he says, "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: 29, 30.) The incursions of evil from without, and the development of evil within, formed the substance of Paul's anticipations, as to the place which had been the theatre of such abundant blessing, and where all Asia had heard from his lips the word of God.

Turning to the epistles, we find intimations in the very first of the existence already of such grievous wolves, and of such schismatic teachers, as those against whom the Ephesian elders had been warned. "Now, I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." (Rom. 16: 17, 18.) At Corinth divisions were rife; discipline was neglected; brother was going to law with brother, and that before the unjust; christian liberty was abused, to the entanglement of weak consciences; the supper of the Lord was the scene of scandalous disorders; the very gifts of the Spirit were used for display instead of edification; and, to crown the whole, there were some who even affirmed "that there is no resurrection of the dead." Such were the disorders which called forth from the pen of Paul the First Epistle to the Corinthians. This epistle seems to have been made a great blessing to them; and, in the second, the apostle acknowledges the depth and reality of their repentance. But though on the whole they had

faithfully cleared themselves, there were still many amongst them concerning whom the apostle had the worst forebodings. "For I fear," he says, "lest when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults: and lest when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness, and fornication, and lasciviousness which they have committed." (2 Cor. 12: 20, 21.) How evident that the enemy had been diligently at work, and that at Corinth, at least, the tares were already plentifully sown.

The Churches of Galatia were in a state of corruption still more serious. The very foundations were being sapped. "False brethren, unawares brought in," had been but too successful in introducing the fundamental principle of apostacy, namely, that of justification by works. These false brethren had bewitched the Galatians. Having "begun in the Spirit," they were now seeking to be "made perfect by the flesh." The apostle "stood in doubt" of them. He was "afraid, lest he had bestowed upon them labour in vain." Nothing could be more touching than his solicitude on their account — nothing more tender than the terms in which he expostulates with them. "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice." Nor can there be more salutary instruction for us, dear reader, in our day, than that afforded us by the importance which the apostle attaches to the error which had gained such a footing among the Galatians. Well did the apostle know, that anything joined with Christ, or added to him, for justification before God, was the virtual overthrow of Christianity. Circumcision, and appointed feasts, and new moons, had all been of importance under the law; they had been made so by divine appointment for Israel. ]But now that Christ had come and had suffered, for the Galatians to turn to these Jewish shadows was just as though they had returned to the idolatry from which they had been converted. "Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years." (Gal. 4: 8-10.) With the apostle, Jewish ordinances and pagan rites all stood on one level. They were "weak and beggarly elements." Would that his warning voice might reach the souls of many, in these days of return to ordinances by numbers who, like the Galatians, had clean escaped therefrom! Christians of Protestant England, and of the nineteenth century! if Paul feared that he had lost his labour because the Galatians were turning thus to ordinances, what is to be said of the so-called Christianity around us? Romanism is avowedly a system of ordinances. Half Jewish they are, and half pagan; with designations borrowed either from christian truth, or from history, real or fictitious. But what of the multitudes on their way to Romanism, who lay full as much stress on ordinances as Romanists themselves? The Lord, in His mercy, awaken His people to a sense of the dangers which surround them.

In the Epistle to Philippi, we have affecting notices of the evil which the apostle saw coming in. On the one hand, he says of Timothy, "For I have no man like-minded who will naturally care for your state: *for all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's*:" (Phil. 2: 20, 21) and on the other, he says of certain persons, "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ; whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things." (Phil. 3: 18, 19.) Self was becoming thus the centre, and earthly things the object,

of numbers who bore the name of Christ. Such notices of the character of the evil which had begun to work in the Church, are of the deepest interest: as well as the contrast furnished by the context of the passage last quoted. "For our conversation (citizenship, *politeuma*) is in heaven; *from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Ah, this is the grand security against apostacy! "Where the treasure is there the heart will be also." Just as the servant, when he says in his heart, "My lord delayeth his coming," begins to indulge himself and oppress his fellows; so here, when the Church ceases to realize that HEAVEN is the place of its inheritance and privileges and titles, and the descent of the Saviour from heaven its hope, its own things — earthly things — become its object, and in minding them, it becomes the enemy of the cross of Christ.

The danger treated of in Colossians, and against which the apostle most earnestly warns them, is that of "philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." They were not to be beguiled of their reward by any man, "in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he had not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding the head." How easy to discern here the germs of the whole system of evil which has since been developed. It is under fairest pretensions of humility, that men have interposed, or sought to interpose, between the head and members, not only the officious services of an elaborate hierarchy on earth, but the mediation of saints, and the worship of angels in heaven! It was against the beginnings of all this that Paul so warned the Colossians. It was in view of these perils, which then threatened, and which have since desolated the Church, that he underwent the agony he describes. "For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." Alas! where are now the Pauls to bear thus on their hearts in living sympathy the state of the whole Church before God?

The well-known prediction in 1 Tim. 4: 1, claims a place here. "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their consciences seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth." One can scarcely fail to discern here the grand lineaments of popish error. The evil foretold is characterized as a departure from the faith, so that it is the introduction of error where the truth has been believed and known, where "the faith" has been held. Seduction, untruth, and hypocrisy, are its grand features; a seared conscience, impenetrable by the truth, its fearful accompaniment; enforced celibacy, and ascetic privations, its fair pretensions, by which it gains a character for sanctity among men. Who can question the fulfilment this passage has already received, and is still receiving, in the prodigious delusions of Romanism?

The Second Epistle to Timothy is full of instruction as to our present mournful subject. It is written from the verge of a martyr's grave, beyond which the writer looks by faith to "that day" in which "the Lord, the righteous judge," would give to him "a crown of righteousness." Nothing daunted by the death which he knows to be at hand, and undismayed by the far deeper trial of having to witness the growth of evil within the Church itself, he writes to his son Timothy, exhorting him "not to be ashamed of the testimony of their Lord," but, on the contrary, to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." He does not conceal from him the defections which

were taking place; neither does he flatter him by false hopes of a better state of things previous to the Lord's return. Nay, it is the progress of evil he predicts. "This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes." — This is what had come to pass. As to what would ensue, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God; *having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.*" (Chap. 3: 1-5.) How characteristic and how solemn are these last words! Those which precede might serve, alas! for a description of mankind at almost any period, as, in fact, they are used with very slight differences in Romans 1 to describe the state of the Gentile world ere the light of the Gospel dawned thereon. What gives point and emphasis to the traits here enumerated, as a characteristic description of "the last days," is, that they are all found in connection with "*a form of godliness.*" All the evils native to the heart of man, rampant and uncontrolled, but still sought to be sanctioned by "*a form of godliness.*" Such were Paul's anticipations of any future on which his son Timothy might calculate on this side the coming of the Lord.

It was not that Timothy was to be discouraged. No; but that all his confidence might be placed upon, and all his hopes directed to, that which the sure progress of evil in the world and in the professing Church, would never be able to move or to touch. The apostle can faithfully apprise this young evangelist of the worst that was to ensue, because he has a refuge to commend to him, (a refuge and a hope already known to him,) above and beyond the whole sphere in which the evil has its existence and its power. "Evil men and seducers" were to "wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived:" the time was to come when they would not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts," would heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears, and" would turn away their ears from the truth and be turned to fables;" but all these things were to be so far from discouraging Timothy in his work, that it is in full view of them that Paul says, "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word: be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine."

The epistle to Titus is not without its characteristic notice of the evils which were springing up among those who bore the name of Christ, or which were pouring in upon them from without. Hebrews also, as is well known, was written to guard the saints against the judaizing tendencies of the times; and it is in that epistle those awful warnings against apostacy are contained which have caused such exercise of soul to almost every true believer in Christ. But in 2 Peter we have predictions as distinct and solemn as those already quoted from Paul's epistles. "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not." (2 Peter 2: 1-3.) The description which follows, of these false teachers and of their destruction, with that of their dupes and victims, is most fearful. "But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government;

presumptuous are they, self-willed; they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities. Whereas angels, which are greater in power and might, bring not a railing accusation against them before the Lord. But these (as natural brute beasts made to be taken and destroyed) speak evil of the things that they understand not, and shall utterly perish in their own corruption; and shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time." Still it is evident that whatever depths of moral debasement may be reached by those in whom these predictions were to be fulfilled, there is some kind of religious pretension kept up. "Spots they are, and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings, *while they feast with you*; having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls; an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children; which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, but was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass, speaking with man's voice, forbade the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever." (2 Peter 2: 13-17.) Whether this kind of religious disguise be still maintained when the scoffers of the last days appear, may well admit of a question. But even then we find traces of a previous religious standing. How else are we to account for the expression "since the fathers fell asleep?"

1 John we pass by for the moment. It will require to be considered along with 2 Thess. 2. But Jude demands our immediate attention. The inspired penman of this epistle was giving "all diligence to write of the common salvation," but found it needful instead of expatiating on that happy theme, "to write and exhort" the brethren, that they "should earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints." The need for such exhortation arose from "certain men" having "crept in unawares" — "ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." He gives example after example of the destruction of apostates, angels as well as men; and traces the apostacy of Christendom, from its beginnings with those ungodly men who had even then crept in, to its overthrow by the coming of the Lord, "with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all; and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him." It is deeply interesting to notice the three-fold character of evil which Jude attributes to these apostates. What a progress in iniquity does it disclose! "Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core." Natural evil, that is, self-righteousness and murderous cruelty, "the way of Cain" — ecclesiastical evil, teaching error for reward, and so corrupting men's souls, "the error of Balaam," - and open revolt, "the gainsaying of Core," — such are the stages in this downward course.

The seven letters to the Churches in Rev. 2, 3 present further instruction as to our present subject, of the most interesting character. Viewing them, first, as literally addressed to the then actually existing Churches of the seven cities whose names they bear, they disclose to us the serious extent to which evil had even then already progressed. Love declining at Ephesus; those who held the doctrine of Balaam at Pergamos; Jezebel, with all her seductions and impurities, at Thyatira; a lifeless form at Sardis; and in Laodicea such loud and boastful pretensions, along with a state of lukewarmness so loathsome to Christ, that He is about to spue them out of his mouth — such is the last view we get in scripture-history of the actual state of the then

professing Church of Christ. Five out of the seven churches selected to be thus addressed have now been enumerated; the other two are exceptions. Poverty and persecution at Smyrna, and, at Philadelphia, the faithfulness of a feeble few whom the Lord delights to own and to commend, are the only exceptions, and scarcely sufficient to relieve the gloom which rests on the whole scene, as presented to us historically in these seven epistles.

But if such be the aspect of these chapters, viewed historically, what is to be said of their contents when regarded in a prophetic light? That they were intended to bear a prophetic meaning, as well as to have an historical application to the seven local churches to which they were addressed, can scarcely admit of a doubt when everything bearing on the question is considered. Think of the mystic character of the book in which they are found — a book so symbolical from the first chapter to the last, that if these two chapters are not to be so viewed, they constitute the only exception. Think of our Lord's own words in introducing this chapter — "*the mystery* of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches; and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches." (Rev. 1: 20.) Think of the number seven, and of its use in the Apocalypse throughout — seven churches, seven stars, seven candlesticks, seven angels, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven vials, seven last plagues. Think of the eminently symbolic language of these addresses to the Churches — "the synagogue of Satan," "Satan's seat," "the doctrine of Balaam," "that woman Jezebel," "the key of David," "the New Jerusalem." Above all, think of the important place assigned by our Lord to these chapters, as one of the three divisions of the book: "Write," He says, "the things which thou hast seen, (Rev. 1,) and the things which are, (Rev. 2, 3,) and the things which shall be hereafter" (Rev. 4 and onwards). How can we think, in view of all these things, of limiting the sense of Rev. 2, 3 to the application of their statements to the literal seven churches of Asia of that day? or even to this, alone, with the moral application to individuals afterwards? The number seven, when used symbolically, is always universally understood to express completeness or perfection: and surely we are warranted in the belief that these seven churches were selected as affording in their respective states, and in the encouragements, exhortations, warnings, or threatenings addressed to them, a divinely perfect or complete view of the condition of the professing body from John's time onwards, as long as anything exists on earth which can be addressed as even a nominal Church of Christ. The end of it is to be spued out of Christ's mouth.

Viewed in this prophetic aspect, what we find in the addresses to the churches in Rev. 2, 3 is as follows: — The commencing decline in the apostolic age, as expressed in that to Ephesus — the leaving the first love. Persecution from without, used of God to stay the progress of declension within. This is Smyrna, and would embrace the period from John's day to Constantine — the period of the ten persecutions of the Roman Pagan Empire; perhaps the very number ten referred to in the "tribulation for ten days" which Smyrna was to endure. From the establishment of Christianity by Constantine the downward course is rapid. The throne of the world is no less Satan's for the public profession of Christianity; but his tactics have changed. The roaring lion is exchanged for the serpent, the adversary for the deceiver. The doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to allure Israel to their ruin, when he could not obtain the Lord's permission to curse them, was held at Pergamos. Balaam's artifice, so successful against Israel, was that of seducing them to unlawful alliances with the daughters of Moab. Spiritual uncleanness — the alliance with the world of that which professed to be Christ's spouse — was the evil taught at Pergamos, and

which represents the corruption ensuing so rapidly on the civil establishment of Christianity. Thyatira is still a further stage. There, "that woman Jezebel" has established herself as a prophetess; and while seducing Christ's servants to evil, she has children of her own, who owe to her all their religious character and standing, and whose end the Lord declares in those solemn words, "I will kill her children with death." Space, too, had been given to Jezebel to repent, and she had repented not. It is the Popery of the dark ages — idolatrous, persecuting, and, Jezebel-like, practising its wickedness under a religious disguise. It and its children are left to the judgment which is to overtake it, when Christ shall smite the nations with a rod of iron. Any true saints meanwhile ("the rest in Thyatira") are comforted by the prospect of Christ's coming as "the Morning Star," and are charged to "hold fast" till He comes. Sardis is what the world, as well as the Church, knows as Protestantism — the abiding, visible effects before man's eye which have followed upon the glorious work of the Spirit of God at the time of the Reformation; and which, while orthodox in its creed, "having a name to live," is really in a state of spiritual death. We put it to the consciences of our christian readers, whether, leaving Rome aside, and looking at the national Churches of Christendom, and the great professing bodies which have branched off from them, this be not a solemnly accurate portraiture of their state? True saints there are: "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments." Christ fully owns all such. But as to the Protestant part of Christendom as a mass, what is it but the world under a christian name and profession? And being in reality "the world," Christ threatens it with His coming in the character in which His coming is to overtake the world. "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." Philadelphia is the faithfulness of a feeble remnant, who, in the presence of a great professing body, designated "the synagogue of Satan," and subjected to its scorn, has a little strength," and "keeps Christ's words," and does not "deny his name;" and keeping thus "the word of Christ's patience," is to be "kept from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." Laodicea is the last state of the professing body upon earth; a state characterized by high pretensions and self-sufficiency, but so utterly nauseous to Christ that He declares, "So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." The threatening first addressed to Ephesus, is, after the most marvellous long-suffering, executed on Laodicea. But the terms of this solemn sentence would not imply more than the utter rejection by Christ of that which bears His name on the earth. What becomes of it, when so rejected, is the subject of other portions of the prophetic word.

We turn now to 2 Thess. 2, where the apostle is guarding the saints against the idea "that the day of Christ was present." He first assures them that this could not be, by reminding them of "the coming (the *parousia*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to him," which must necessarily precede "the day of Christ" — the period of the execution of judgment on the world., He then argues, that "the day" cannot come "except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he, as God, sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God." Here we have the distinct predictions of a falling away, literally, "the apostacy;" and also of the revelation of the man of sin. Paul had told them of these things when at Thessalonica, and they knew thus what it was that was withholding the revelation of this man of sin. "For the mystery of iniquity," says the apostle, "doth already work; only he who now letteth, will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his

coming." Thus we have three things: — the mystery of iniquity, which was even then working, only there was a hinderer which would continue to hinder until taken out of the way; the apostacy; and the revelation of that Wicked, or the man of sin. Without at present attempting to interpret these expressions, it is sufficiently evident from what is said of the last, that it is to him John refers in his first epistle: "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time." (1 John 2: 18.) The mystery of iniquity was already working: there were many antichrists, morally resembling "the antichrist" of whom they had heard, but whose coming was delayed by the hinderer, then, as now, untaken away. As to what distinguishes the antichrist, or the man of sin, John's testimony is, "He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son." The open, utter denial of the Father and the Son is to be the mark of him whom we have seen elsewhere described as "opposing and exalting himself above all that is called God or worshipped." Whether these features of "the antichrist" can consist with any profession of Christianity, however nominal and empty, is a question on which we do not now enter, but which we would suggest for the consideration of our readers.

One thing, however, is evident, that the working of "the mystery of iniquity" continues so long as the unnamed hinderer remains, and that it is not until he is taken out of the way, that the man of sin is *revealed*, that "the antichrist," properly so called, appears. With regard to this mystery of iniquity, which was already working in Paul's day, there is one point to which, in closing, we would invite attention. There are, in the New Testament, three mystic women treated of as symbols of evil; and these three appear to us to indicate three stages in the progress of the ecclesiastical corruption. The first is the woman in Matthew 13, who "took leaven and hid it in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened." Is not this the commencement of the evil? the first introduction into the unleavened mass of those corrupting principles, of the existence and working of which in apostolic times we have seen such ample and varied proof? It was then "the mystery of iniquity" began to work. Then we have, in Rev. 2: 20, "that woman Jezebel;" symbolic, as we have seen, of Romanism as a system, established and bearing children amid that which had once been the Church of God. Jezebel was not a daughter of Israel, but a Zidonian princess, in marrying whom Ahab, king of Israel, disobeyed the law of God; and it was for her sake that he went and served Baal, and made a grove, and did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were above him, and, in short, "sold himself to work evil in the sight of the Lord." Jezebel was the instigator of all this, and the ruthless, heartless persecutor of God's people. Still she could use God's name, and proclaim a fast, and pretend great horror of blasphemy, and this even at the very time when, by treachery and false witness, she was perpetrating the murder of Naboth of Jezreel. Such is the divinely-selected symbol of Popery! Reader, is not the awful picture drawn to the life?

But there is a third mystic woman, who is introduced to our attention in Rev. 17, and who is described as "the great whore who sitteth upon many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication," and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk. The apostle sees her as "a woman sitting upon a scarlet-coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns." This woman is "arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornications." "And upon her forehead," says the apostle, "was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE

MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus; and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration." Such is the last view Scripture affords us of corrupt Christianity — papal, no doubt, as to that which mainly fills the scene, but not exclusive of anything under other names, which shares the papal spirit and character. This woman is not a harlot merely, but the mother of harlots, and abominations of the earth! Jezebel may symbolize her as a corruptress and, mother of children *within*: but to set forth her seduction of *the nations*, and the pomp and magnificence of her rule, she is shown to us as here, seated on the beast, arrayed in gorgeous apparel, with her golden wine cup in her hand, with which she makes the earth's kings and inhabitants drunk. And she is in the height of her glory, when the vengeful stroke descends. "How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow. Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her."

One difficulty as to this interpretation must not be passed over. Babylon the great, forms the subject of two chapters in the Apocalypse. It is from Rev. 17 we have chiefly quoted, and if it stood alone there could be no difficulty in recognizing ecclesiastical corruption, of which Rome is the head and centre., in the woman there described. "Drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus," would of itself establish this interpretation. But in Rev. 18, when the fall of Babylon has been declared, we find all the merchants, and shipmasters, and sailors bemoaning her downfall; and the entire description in chapter 18 suggests the idea of a vast maritime, commercial power. This, as is well known, Rome is not, and here is the difficulty to which we refer. But we have only to suppose the extension of Rome's influence over those regions in which she once reigned paramount, and the difficulty vanishes at once. We say not that this will be accomplished; but our sad abuse of the light and blessings of the Reformation on the one hand, and the present aspect of religious society in these countries on the other, make this solution of the difficulty very far from being improbable.

Into the details of Babylon's overthrow we cannot now enter. They connect our present subject with the past and future history of the fourth Gentile monarchy. This again will be found to link itself with the prophetic history of the Jews' return to their own land, and their re-establishment there. The antichrist, the man of sin, will be found connected with corrupt Christianity as having paved the way for him, and prepared men's hearts to receive him. It has always been so. Religious corruption sears the consciences of those who are its agents or its dupes; while, by its manifest hollowness and hypocrisy, it outrages the natural conscience of the spectators, and provokes them to discard religion altogether. If one might borrow an illustration from profane history, where could a more striking one be found than has been furnished in modern times by the first French Revolution? Popery had ruled there with an iron hand for centuries, immolating its ten thousand victims, and loosening, by means of its absurd superstitions and immoral practices, all the bonds of moral and religious obligation among the masses of the people. It was thus they were prepared for the infidelity of the Encyclopaedists, and for the unmeasured horrors of the Revolution. Terrible specimen, on a somewhat contracted scale, of what is yet to transpire throughout the western professing world! The mystery of iniquity, the apostacy, and Babylon the great, prepare men's souls to "worship the beast" when his deadly wound has once been healed, and "the dragon" has conferred upon him "his power,

and his seat, and great authority." The antichrist will be connected thus with the last of the four Gentile monarchies in its final form, as revived and energized by Satanic power. The Jews, having returned to their own land in unbelief, will be found (with the exception of a godly remnant) in league with this daring enemy of God, and will suffer under his iron rod. The epiphany of Christ's coming will destroy "the man of sin," and overwhelm his guilty and infatuated adherents with utter, desolating judgments. The remnant of Jews spared through these troubles will, with the spared nations, form the germ of the population of the millennial earth. Over these Christ and His glorified saints will reign. But we again remind our christian readers, that it is for the descent of the Lord Jesus into the air, and our gathering to Him there, that we wait. This first stage of the Lord's coming is dependent on none of those things we have been considering. It may be at any hour, any moment. All else may occur between it, and the epiphany of His coming, by which the man of sin is to be destroyed.

The Lord keep us waiting for Himself, in holy separateness from all that leads onwards to that whirlpool of destruction in which the wicked shall then be overwhelmed.