



We now come to the second church in Revelation 2, the church in Smyrna.

It was the next city on this postal route, some 35 miles north of Ephesus and a coastal port of great wealth, founded around 1,200 B.C. The city was located at the mouth of the river Hermus and had a deep bay that reached far inland. This enabled trading ships to sail into the heart of the region of Lydia, creating a trade route between Anatolia and the Aegean Sea. Old Smyrna was destroyed in a war in 580 B.C. and was rebuilt in 290 B.C. according to elegant, geometric Greek standards.

It became one of Rome's closest allies and dedicated a temple to the goddess of Rome in 195 B.C. In 133 B.C., when king Attalus III died without an heir, his will conferred his entire kingdom, including Smyrna, to the Romans. Then, in A.D. 26, they dedicated a temple to Emperor Tiberius on the breathtaking acropolis called "the Crown of Smyrna." In contrast to Ephesus, which today is in ruins, Smyrna is still a large seaport with a population of around 200,000 inhabitants.

So Christ now focuses on the congregation at Smyrna and describes it historically and also prophetically, for He tells John regarding these churches, "Write *the things which you have seen* [past], and *the things which are* [present], and *the things which will take place after this* [future]...The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches" (Rev. 1:19). We see Jesus in the midst of these seven churches, indicating not only a historic, but also a prophetic description, for Revelation later traces the Church up to Christ's return. Jesus is ready to return to the earth in the next chapter--not in John's or these seven churches' day.

He says, "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 'I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.' He who has an ear,

let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (Rev. 2:8-11).

Christ identifies Himself as the one who gave His life for mankind, was resurrected, and is now the Head of the Church. He mentions the works of the Smyrna Church which include many tribulations and becoming physically poor but spiritually rich.

Barclay explains why Christians were usually poor, "The poverty of the Christians was due to two things. It was due to the fact that most of them belonged to the lower classes of society. The gulf between the top and the bottom of the social scale was very wide...There was another reason for the poverty of the Christians. Sometimes they suffered from the spoiling of their goods (Heb. 10:4). There were times when the heathen mob would suddenly attack the Christians and wreck their homes. Life was not easy for a Christian in Smyrna or anywhere else in the ancient world."

What does it mean to be spiritually rich? We see in Revelation it means (1) being faithful and loyal to Christ's name (Rev. 2:13); (2) not compromising with God's truths nor adding pagan beliefs (Rev. 2:2, 6, 24-25); (3) keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 12:17; 14:12); and persevering to the end, faithfully obeying God's Word (Rev. 3:8).

Since they were considered by God as "spiritual Jews," as Paul defines them in Rom. 2:28-29, and true keepers of God's commandments, they rejected the Christian impostors, mostly Gentiles, who blasphemously claimed to be God's people. This is not dealing with normal Jews, who weren't infiltrating the Church, nor were of the synagogue of Satan. It refers rather to those claiming to be "Jews" or the true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), but who were really of the synagogue of Satan (a law-breaking church pretending to be the true one).

In Revelation, the counterfeit church is symbolically described as a powerful but corrupt woman (as Jezebel—Rev. 2:20, or later as Babylon, a harlot riding on a beast--Rev. 17:3, pretending to be the genuine church, but having its teachings originating in Babylon instead of Jerusalem). She had adopted the teachings of the Nicolaitans, who compromised God's truths with Babylonian myths

and adopted a double-standard of tolerating immorality by turning grace into license. Jesus calls them "those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. *Thus* you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitians, which thing *I hate*" (Rev. 2:14-15).

As Barclay points out, "We may note that the Nicolaitans and those who hold the teaching of Balaam were, in fact, *one and the same*. There is a play on words here. The name *Nicolaos*, the founder of the Nicolaitans, could be derived from two Greek words, *nikan*, to conquer, and *laos*, the people. [The sorcerer] Balaam can be derived from two Hebrew words, *bela*, to conquer, and *ha'am*, the people. The two names, then, are the same and both can describe *an evil teacher, who has won victory over the people and subjugated them to poisonous heresy*." So the false church had similar teachings to Balaam and was seductive as a harlot.

The terms "Jezebel" and "Balaam" are symbolic of teachings that historians trace back to Simon Magus in Rome. Adolf von Harnack says that Simon Magus "proclaimed a doctrine in which the Jewish faith was strangely and grotesquely mixed with Babylonian myths, together with some Greek additions. The mysterious worship...in consequence of the widened horizon and the deepening religious feeling, finally the wild syncretism, whose aim was a universal religion, all contributed to gain adherents for Simon" (*History of Dogma*, Vol. 1, p. 244). This fits well with the teachings described of the Nicolaitians and the synagogue of Satan--a counterfeit Christianity throughout church history led by a deceitful Satan. He would mount a vicious persecution on the true Christians at Smyrna and some would become martyrs. Christ urges them to hold fast and they would receive the crown of life, meaning eternal life, nor would they be hurt by the second death.

It is revealing that commentators are puzzled by the reference to "the second death" since they believe the punishment of the wicked is instead eternal suffering in hell fire. Barclay lamely says, "Of such things it is not given to any man to speak with confidence." And, *The Preacher's Commentary* admits, "The term 'second death' (Rev. 2:11) appears here in this context...*Whatever the term means*, it pictures for

the Christians at Smyrna *the larger context into which their life and their death are placed*." As you can see, they "wonder" what it can mean since it contradicts their belief in the immortality of the soul. Yet it is crystal clear to those who believe the second death means exactly that--a total cessation of life and the end of a person's consciousness. Thus there is no such thing as suffering forever in hell fire and it shows God as a truly merciful Being! This belief in the wicked eternally suffering in hellfire has turned off more people to Christianity than just about any other doctrine, and thankfully, it is totally false.

Christ now ends by exhorting the Smyrna church to overcome the obstacles in the way. It is up to them, armed with His strength, to achieve the spiritual victory and gain the crown of life.

We have thus covered the historical aspects of the church in Smyrna. Now we will focus on the *prophetic elements* of this church as we understand them, for only God has the last word.

Several lines of evidence point to these descriptions of the Smyrna church as also covering the era *after* the apostolic age and not just being about some present problems of a local church.

#1. Christ's focus now goes from the first star in Ephesus to the second in Smyrna. It is notable that after John died, probably at Ephesus, the person to take his place was his disciple, Polycarp, bishop of nearby Smyrna. Tertullian cites "original records" about Polycarp being ordained by the apostle John.

The historian Irenaeus wrote in the second century, "But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, *by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna*, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true" (*Against Heresies*, 3.3.4).

*The IVP Commentary* adds, "By the early second century, (a decade or two after John's visions), the congregation at Smyrna had a pastor or bishop named Polycarp. Ignatius of Antioch wrote letters, which still exist, to both Polycarp and his congregation. Polycarp himself wrote a letter to the

Philippian Christians in Macedonia and (according to an account in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*) was martyred in Smyrna in the year 156. Nowhere were the words, be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life, more aptly fulfilled than in the life and death of Polycarp." So, just as John ended in Ephesus for the first church era, so Polycarp begins as leader in Smyrna what we believe is the second Church age.

#2. The false teachers had now gone from being a group to a synagogue [church] of Satan, or a full-fledged, organized church. It was in the second century, after the death of the apostle John, and the end of the Jewish Christian leaders in Jerusalem, around A.D. 140, when the false church filled the void with mostly Gentile leaders steeped in Greek philosophy and grew considerably. Eusebius records the differences between the churches of the West and East, one led by the bishop of Rome and the other by the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, probably a Jewish Christian. He writes that about AD 155, Polycarp was obliged to go to Rome to correct the bishop Anicetus about changing the date of the Passover. Anicetus refused, but went along with Polycarp's instructions while he was there. With Polycarp's death, Polycrates, Polycarp's disciple at Ephesus, took the helm and again censured the Roman church for changing the Passover date, writing a letter mentioning how Polycarp had received the instructions on the Passover directly from the apostles but it was to no avail. Victor, the bishop of Rome, temporarily excommunicated Polycrates and the churches in Asia (Turkey). This caused a deeper division between the Church of God and what had become "the synagogue of Satan" with its false teachings.

These Asian churches had become too "Jewish" for the Gentile leaders in Rome and elsewhere. As Henry Chadwick writes, "The Jewish Christians, excluded by their fellow-countrymen, continued to observe sabbaths, circumcision, and other Jewish feasts. As this distressed many Gentile Christians, they became lonely, unsupported groups....From Irenaeus onwards, *Jewish Christianity is treated as a deviationist sect rather than a form of Christianity with the best claims to continuity with the practice of the primitive church at Jerusalem*. The Jewish Christians called themselves Ebionites, a name

derived from the Hebrew word meaning 'the poor'" (*The Early Church*, 1967, pp. 22-23). Thus they had become "poor" in part by being ostracized and persecuted, but they were actually spiritually "rich" – being that faithful small flock!

F. F. Bruce adds, "As for the remnant of Jewish Christians, their subsequent history is but *scantily documented*" (*New Testament History*, 1969, p. 391). We wonder why. The answer--to hide the records and doctrines of the faithful true church.

#3. Christ warns this church that it would suffer ten days of withering persecution, incarceration and death. This appears to be symbolic of a day for year principle found in Revelation and deals with a ten-year period of intense tribulation.

The period which is equated in church history with this ten year persecution is the one decreed by the Emperor Diocletian, from A.D. 303-313, the longest and worst of the Roman persecutions. *Gill's Commentary* says on Rev. 2:10, "The Diocletian persecution *lasted ten years*...and some think that this last persecution...is here particularly meant, and not without some good reason since it is usual in prophetic writings, and in this book of Revelation, to put *days for years*; so that *these ten days may be the ten years the last persecution held*, and at which time *the period of this church state ended, and that of Pergamos took place*."

Chadwick adds, "On Feb. 23, 303, the Christian cathedral...was dismantled and next day an edict was posted declaring that all churches were to be destroyed, all Bibles and liturgical books surrendered, sacred vessels confiscated, and all meetings for worship forbidden...Not until 304 were all citizens of the Empire required to sacrifice on pain of death...in February 313 in Milan they (the two emperors) agreed on a policy of religious freedom for all" (op. cit., p. 121).

The end of the Smyrna period finalizes with the Roman Empire now united to the Roman church, which formally happened in AD 325 at the Council of Nicea, where Easter was adopted instead of the Passover, and Sunday over the Sabbath (back in AD 321), and Constantine warning non-Catholic Christians to support the Catholic Church *or else*. Thus, the true Church must flee for its life. That leads us to the next Church era—Pergamos.