

## THE CHARACTER OF GOD'S CHURCH

Throughout 1974 Seventh-day Adventists all over the world will be studying the Revelation of John in their weekly Sabbath school classes. Special attention will be given in these sessions, as well it might, to the letters to the Seven Churches. As one reads the account given to the Apostle John, not all was well with God's churches.

*Ephesus*, told that she had abandoned her first love and her first works, was admonished to repent or her Lord would come and remove her lampstand. *Smyrna* was encouraged to be faithful unto death. *Pergamos* and *Thyatira* were counseled — by him “who searches mind and heart” — to repent. *Sardis* was warned to “awake, and strengthen what remains . . . [or] I will come like a thief . . . upon you.” *Philadelphia* was told that it had but little power. And *Laodicea* — described as wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, naked, and in jeopardy of being spewed out because she was lukewarm — was counseled to be zealous, to repent, and to obtain eye salve from the Lord so that she might see again.

After their sins and weaknesses had been revealed, all the churches were given the same final charge: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” In other words, John pleaded that the churches accept whatever light the Spirit of God presented to them — if there was still any willingness on their part to listen.

The picture of God's Church — as given in the appeals to the Seven Churches recorded in this passage of Scripture — is that of an ever-

repenting, awakening, more faithful, still imperfect church. Its desperate, continuing need was *to listen* to its Lord and *to see* what had never been seen before. Only thus could it become a church ever growing in fellowship with its Lord, in spiritual power, in vision, in knowledge, in works, in love, and in witnessing — and thus become the Church triumphant.

Aimo Nikolainen, a Finnish theologian, wrote a thoughtful article on the Revelation of John. The following paragraph is quoted from it.

5 The individual local churches, the historical ones (such as the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea), represent the one church of God (the eschatological people of God) only so long as she is willing to repent and turn. When one reads (in the seventh and fourteenth chapters) of the 144,000 who are sealed, it is easy to receive the impression that John had entertained a rigid and static view of the church. However, the *militant church*, which becomes the *church triumphant* only at the victorious return of Christ, is identical with the historical churches and congregations. The mystery of the seven stars and the seven candlesticks (Revelation 1:20) is theologically very important. Every individual church is *the* church. In spite of the fact that she represents a historical entity, she is simultaneously "heavenly" and has also her "heavenly" representative, the angel of the church. This status is valid only as long as the candlestick remains, as long as the church is willing and able to repent and change. John speaks, therefore, of repentance under two different circumstances: when a single pagan or a group of them become converted to faith in Christ (as in Revelation 9:20-21; 16:9, 11), and when the Christian church corrects itself, does again "the first works," and remembers what she received (Revelation 2:5; 3:3). The conversion to Christianity is a one-time event, but reformation is something which must continue. The true church is a reforming, a changing church."

Translated from the German of Aimo T. Nikolainen, *Über die theologische Eigenart der Offenbarung des Johannes. Theologische Literaturzeitung* 93:162-170 (March 1968).

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