

THE FUTURE (5)

—H. L. Heijkoop

The Prophetic History of the Assembly as Outlined by the Lord Jesus

In Revelation 2 and 3 we find the history of the assembly, not as the body of Christ, and therefore consisting only of believers, but rather in its responsibility to be here on earth as a testimony to God. It is typified by seven golden lampstands rather than by one lampstand, as in the tabernacle. Here, the personal responsibility is stressed for each assembly to be a lightbearer.

The division of Revelation is generally well known, since the Word of God itself indicates it:

1. What thou hast seen, that is Christ as judge.
2. The things that are.
3. The things that are about to be after these.

According to chapter 4:1 the third part starts at that point. The second part, the things that are, we must therefore seek in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 4 we find the glorified saints in heaven; not just the saints who have died, but saints that are raised and glorified, for they have white garments and wear golden crowns, which means that 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17 must have taken place. We don't receive a crown when we die but at the resurrection (2 Tim. 4:8). In Revelation 6:9 we find, moreover, a definite distinct group, they are souls that are not yet raised.

The foregoing suggests that Revelation 2 and 3 describe the condition from the apostolic age until the rapture of the Assembly. This is confirmed by the following considerations:

1. The *entire* Revelation is prophecy, which would include chapters 2 and 3 (1:3).
2. The letters were not to be sent separately to the addressed assemblies, but *all* letters were to be sent to each assembly (1:11). At the end of each letter it is said to each person having ears to listen to what the Spirit says to the assemblies, and not just to what is said to that particular assembly.
3. The number seven is characteristic of the Revelation. We find seven assemblies, seals, trumpets, vials, Spirits of God, etc. The number seven is the well known symbol of spiritual perfection, especially the perfection of what is worked by God. In seven days God created all things so that it was very good (Gen. 2:2). It is the assembly in its responsibility, but seen as a work of God.
4. The seven letters are set up along a very distinct plan. They present a moral order in the course of decline.
5. In other places in Scripture God also gives a prophetic review of a certain dispensation in seven types, for instance in Leviticus 23 and Matthew 13.

The Decline

The seven letters can be divided into two groups. In the first three it is first said, "He that has an ear, let him hear," and afterwards the promise to the overcomer is given. But in the latter four the sequence is reversed. It is as if in these letters the Lord has given up hope for a return of the entire assembly, and expects only the overcomers to hear. In those four the Lord also speaks of His return by which we learn that these conditions will remain until His coming. In all the letters the manner in which the Lord presents Himself takes account of the moral condition of the assembly.

In EPHESUS we have the beginning of the history of the assembly. As far as appearance goes, all is still well. The Lord mentions quite a number of commendable features, doesn't He? Yet, His eyes as a flame of fire discern even the beginning of departure, "I have against thee, that thou hast left thy first love." That is the start of all departure, our heart is no longer attached to Him as it was before (although our habits remain as yet unchanged) and the works of the Nicolaitans are already found as well.

In SMYRNA we find the great persecutions by the Roman Emperors during the second and third centuries. "Ye shall have tribulations ten days." As we know, there have been ten persecutions, the last one lasting precisely ten years. God allowed this, to bring the heart of the assembly back to the Lord Jesus.

In PERGAMOS we discover an entirely different condition. This assembly is no longer a stranger on the earth, but has an established dwelling place. And that not in the desert, but there where the throne of Satan is. She has taken shelter where the ruler and god of this world is, in the world itself. Constantine the Great has accepted Christianity, which has become the state religion,... but that at the cost of the freedom of the assembly. She is now connected with the world and the worldly power has dominion over her, even in matters of the faith. She is no longer the *ecclesia*, the called-out one, but has become a congregation of unconverted people amongst whom true believers are scattered. And no longer do we find merely the *works* of the Nicolaitans, but now these works have become a *doctrine* — a dogma. Verse 14 shows what the consequences were. Nicolaos means conqueror of the people or ruler over the people. Laos means people, from which our word laity has been derived. Here we have the unscriptural distinction between laity and clergy against which Peter warned (1 Pet. 1:3; possessions or heritage is *kleros*). The doctrine of Balaam was to bring the people out of separation, into fellowship with the Moabites, leading to fornication and idolatry (Num. 25:1-3; 31:16).

Here we find the wicked system from which THYATIRA, papacy, emanated. We see Jezebel as characterizing this assembly. Of herself she says that she is a prophetess, she teaches and insists on absolute supremacy and infallible authority for her doctrine. But according to the Word of God a woman does not have the right to teach (1 Tim. 2:14).

And in scripture the assembly is always presented as the woman, never as the man. Christ is the Man and the Word comes from Him!

Here we find the assembly allowing some to usurp the place of Christ. And they use this place to further the work of Balaam, the work of Jezebel, to bring the people of God in connection with the world, enticing them to idolatry.

Two great characteristics of Christianity are:

1. The Lord Jesus rejected by the world, but sitting in the throne of His Father, waiting till God will make His enemies His footstool (Eph. 1:21-23).
2. God, the Holy Spirit on earth, sent by the Son to be His Representative on earth (Jn. 16:7).

This assembly has rejected both these facts. While Christ, having been murdered by the world, has been absent and the devil present, the assembly has occupied a ruling position on earth. She has arrogated to herself the right to possess the highest authority.

Besides this, her head calls himself the representative, the vicar, of Christ and has usurped the authority and the rights of the Divine Representative of the Lord Jesus on earth (Jn. 14:16-17, 26; 16: 7-11, 13-14; 1 Jn. 2:20, 27).

Is the manner in which the Lord presents Himself not symbolic? "These things says the Son of God." Is there anything more prominent in the Roman doctrine than that it degrades Him to being the son of Mary? It honours Mary above Him, And when Rome recognizes Him as Son of God, it only gives occasion for her to glorify Mary even more — she, according to Rome, becomes the Mother of God and the Queen of Heaven, which are names without scriptural support.

In Thyatira corruption is too advanced — the Lord no longer expects repentance of the whole body. But although the Lord can no longer acknowledge her as a testimony, yet she will remain until the Lord's coming. We find her again in Revelation 17.

In SARDIS we have a new beginning. Here we don't find the great sins of Thyatira. Here there is no claim to infallibility, no corrupt doctrine, no persecution of the saints, no insisting on being the highest authority in the world. Here the evil is negative — there is no life!

During the reformation God opened many eyes to see the corruption of the Roman Church. By His blessed work He did set up a new testimony that had no part in the abominations of the papal system. But they did not keep what He gave them. That is the cause of their judgment. The beginning of the reformation was an act of faith. But it did not take long before a political element was introduced into it. Rome had caused much dissatisfaction through its iron rod. And, therefore, many used the reformation as a political tool in their battle against Rome. How difficult it was to reject such help. Princes, politicians, soldiers, all offered help. To reject this help meant to be exposed to further persecution by Rome. The

reformers accepted help from the worldly powers... and in this way became dominated by them. This is how the state churches of protestantism came into existence. It was not just the Assembly of God, but a Christianized world with scattered Christians within its confines. The church didn't rule the world, as had been the case with Rome, but now the church leaned on the world and was practically subjected to it.

"Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." What help is an orthodox confession when there is no life from God? The Lord can no longer recognize Sardis as the testimony but it will remain until the coming of the Lord (v. 3, 1 Th. 5:2). But now the Lord acknowledges Philadelphia as His testimony.

PHILADELPHIA is characterized by two things: The Word of God and the Name of the Lord Jesus. Aren't these the characteristics of the mighty movement that the Holy Spirit brought about after the Napoleonic wars? In all countries, in all state churches, life entered the dry bones. And the Spirit of God caused those thus quickened to depart from the great state churches and to return to His Word and the Name of the Lord Jesus.

Admittedly, not everyone broke entirely with human institutions and edifices. All didn't have an equal amount of light about God's thoughts. But wasn't there a general attempt to act according to the light that was possessed and according to Divine principles? Our hearts are warmed, aren't they, when we think of those men who gave themselves entirely to the service of God, searching the Word of God to receive wisdom, and who then, with unshakeable faith, began the unknown road with Him?

What the Lord thought of this movement we read in Revelation 3:17-13. Philadelphia and Smyrna are the only letters in which no reprimands occur. He presents Himself to them and gives to the overcomers the most precious promises.

But, as in everything, so in this — man failed. Although Philadelphia will exist until the coming of the Lord, then to be taken up by Him, it is only a small and weak remnant. The large mass of those in Philadelphia has not overcome and has not retained what once was possessed.

Out of Philadelphia comes LAODICEA. What change! "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. Thou, because thou art lukewarm, I am about to spue thee out of my mouth."

Laodicea is where grace has been appropriated and the Christian position is arrogated. It is there, where Christian language is habitual and the assembly position is in good order, but where all this is found without any result for the soul.

Don't we find this to be a remarkable description of our condition, that which developed out of Philadelphia? Much knowledge is present. Marvellous words are spoken. Beautiful confessions are adopted. We have missionary associations, Bible societies, Christian schools and what have you. And I would be the last one to condemn all of this. But where is the consecration of the heart? Where the power of faith of our fathers? Where is the subjection to the Word of God, even in the smallest things of our practical life? Where is the preparedness to suffer rejection for the Name of the Lord Jesus, Who was crucified by this world? Have we not grown altogether too lukewarm and are we not conformed to this world? Has the good life, the social well-being, not made us to be afraid of suffering as well as very easy going?

Is the Lord Jesus, the faithful and true witness still the centre of our practical assembly life? In how many of the free churches is the Word of God still the recognized authority as far as their organization and the service are concerned? Don't most of us consider it a point of honour to have as much as possible an official church organization? What value is attached to recognition by the "main line" churches and by the government? Can the Lord Jesus be there where His Word and His Name have no longer practical authority?

And how is it among those who profess to be gathered together to His Name in accordance with His Word? Is that profession also a practical reality? Are they aware that they are gathered together to His Name? Is it His Word alone that holds true authority for them? And is that sufficient for them? Or must He also say to them, "Behold, I stand at the door and am knocking!" He searches for truth in the heart! Mere forms have no value to Him!

What a shame to see what we have done to the testimony which God has entrusted to us. May God give us a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Ps. 51), so that we may actually bow before Him and confess our guilt.

RETROSPECT — INTROSPECT — PROSPECT

Never can Truth be worn out like a garment,
The Word must always in our conscience ring.
It is not touched by streams of human ferment,
But is a living, freshly flowing spring.
Even in stormy, troubled times and days
It will retain its God-inspired face.

Was it illusion that once moved our fathers
Giving them courage and joy to proclaim
Fresh witness to Him alone, Who gathers
The two or three with power to His Name?
This once bright witness now is only dimly seen,
Through our unfaithfulness it fell into this ruin.

In faithfulness, oh Lord, Thou didst afflict us
Since from the simple, straight and narrow way
Our feet have slipped to worldly fashion, riches,
Which are but folly, pride and vanity.
Canst Thou not turn us, Lord? Is there no hope?
Shall we again in human darkness grope?

Our ears were dull! Oh, had we only minded
Thy many warnings, full of tender care.
But gifts and numbers had our vision blinded,
— We did not see how poor, yet proud, we were! —
Like wine, though sparkling with enchanting light,
Weakens the sense for truth, and grace, and right.

How many, therefore, quickly were misguided
To look on earth for safety, peace and rest.
O, had we only in the Lord confided
Who knows His people's need and safety best!
But, neither did we wait, nor were we still,
Instead, we went ahead with human skill.

And though we claimed to value blessings highly
As shown us by the Lord, found in His Word,
We didn't notice how Satan slowly, slyly
The spirit of the world among us poured.
And then — he smiled in evil mischief cold —
We shunned the well from which our blessings flowed.

We all were busy, planning, working, building,
Each having thoughts, ideas his own.
Like Martha we forgot the needful "one thing":
To listen to our Lord, now seated on the throne.
But — matchless is His honour, Name and grace —
Woe us, if we will give Him second place.

We bow to Thee in shame and humiliation,
The wall is fallen and the gates are burnt!
Let it repent Thee Lord, grant restoration,
Deal not to us Thy judgment that we earned.
From hearts and lips comes tremblingly the cry:
"Shall Satan's craft the witness all destroy?"

Thou gavest us this trust to keep it
Untainted by the currents of the time.

We failed in this! For we have tried to make it
More human, less divine, not so sublime.
Raise firmer witnesses to bear Thy banner,
More watchful, well acquainted with Thy manner.

And help them in their fellowship together
To be preserved from parties and from strife.
Protect them through all rough and stormy weather,
Teach them the power of eternal life!
Make them to listen to Thy Spirit's voice
While in their heavenly calling they rejoice.

With longing, Lord, we wait for Thy returning
To fetch Thy bride into Thy Father's home.
"Behold I come!" For this our hearts are yearning
While here on earth we still as pilgrims roam.
From party-strife, discord and shameful failure
Deliver us, to perfect rest and rapture.

No spot or wrinkle there will mar the glory
Of those with whom Thou wilt Thyself display
To wondering worlds, ending grace's wondrous story.
No earthly taint is seen there, nor decay!
No heart will ever from Thyself depart,
Thy praise alone will fill each raptured heart.

Renewed creation in Thy glory views Thee
United with Thy Joyful, heavenly bride.
Each knee shall bow, each tongue confess Thee,
Thy praise shall swell like mighty ocean's tide.
Truth, peace and righteousness shall fill the scene
Where nothing but Thy light and love are seen.¹

CONVERSION

—*J. van Dijk*

In the last issue we looked at repentance and the use of this word in Scripture. Now let us look at the closely related thought of conversion.

As we noticed, generally there is no indication of direction with repentance. However, direction is connected with this word in two instances. In Acts 20:21 we read of repentance towards God, signifying that we come to recognize God's holiness and how we have offended Him; and in 2 Corinthians 7:10 we find repentance to salvation, which indicates its purpose, its final outcome. If our repentance does not result in a sense of God's holiness it misses the character of true repentance and is mere sorrow, grief of the world, such as experienced by Cain (Genesis 4:13), Esau (Hebrews 12:17), and Judas (Matthew 27:3, 5). We know their end (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Once we agree with God's judgment as to our past actions and the attitude we had toward God, once we repent, could we possibly go on with the same actions and in the same attitude towards Him? To do so would be illogical! Unless we considered that, in spite of His offer of forgiveness in Christ Jesus, God was unable to forgive us (Genesis 4:13, Mine iniquity is too great to be forgiven). To come to God, to turn to Him, requires faith in us that He is a rewarder (Hebrews 11:6); we must believe that He is willing to forgive us although we fully deserve His judgment. And so the immediate result

¹ 1 This poem, translated from the German, was written in 1936 shortly after the meetings of so-called "Brethren" were forbidden. The anonymous poet, aware that the chastening hand of the Lord was upon them, speaks with deep agony, confessing unfaithfulness and worldliness. Who would deny that much, if not all of what is expressed, would be a most appropriate cry if it were to rise from our hearts today?

of repentance is conversion, a turning to God for mercy and forgiveness. And God, who knows the character of true repentance, says: 'It is to salvation' (2 Corinthians 7:10). This is a tremendous assurance, since we can rely upon the Word of God and the fact that God Himself assures us there of the end result of our repentance.

In contrast with repentance, the word conversion in Scripture is always connected with the thought of direction, its basic idea being "to turn" and most frequently it is also translated this way. Therefore, conversion always contemplates the condition we turn from or the Person we turn to. Turning from is described in the following verses: Acts 3:26; 14:15; 26:18; 1 Thessalonians 1:9. In Acts 14:15 it is turning from vanities, a term referring to idols, similar to 1 Thessalonians 1:9, where idols are mentioned. In Acts 3:26 and 26:18 it is turning from wickedness and darkness. The first two verses referring to the Person we have to do with, the second two refer to the realm we are in. This leads us to 2 Peter 2:9 where we read of God, Who called us out of darkness to His wonderful light. Once we were darkness, but now light in the Lord (Ephesians 5:8). We take on the character of the realm we are in.

Acts 3:26 indicates that conversion, although generally viewed as an action taken by man in his responsibility, is yet at the same time caused by God and therefore closely connected with new birth, which alone causes us to be alive to God (Romans 6:11, 13), whereas before we were dead (Ephesians 2:1). Therefore, although, together with repentance, conversion is always presented as being man's responsibility, still God is active in it.

God gives blessing in turning each one from his wickedness. How else could it be? As always, even when God appeals to man in his responsibility, God Himself is at work, as in repentance, so in conversion. Yet man's responsibility is thereby not in the least diminished. You don't understand this? Well, I don't either! But, as we saw, God's Word says so and, therefore, it is true.

Appropriately, this verse in which conversion is seen as God's work, is the only one without any indication of to what, or to Whom we are converted. Several verses miss the preposition "from", but only this verse leaves out the word "to".

Once we read of turning to Light (Acts 26:18), twice of turning to the Lord (Acts 9:35; 11:21), three times the term "to God" is used (Acts 15:19; 26:20; 1 Th. 1:9). In the last mentioned verse the thought is connected with the purpose of conversion: "To serve the living God." This connects this verse with Acts 14:15, the only verse in which conversion is said to be to the living God. In both verses the Living God is in direct contrast to vanities or idols, things which in themselves are dead, nothing, except where they are viewed as portraying demons (1 Cor. 10:20).

Reviewing, we have seen that man is fully responsible to be converted, yet God has an active part in this as well. Since conversion involves a great change in position, bringing man from darkness to God's light, to God's presence, it is clear that new-birth is directly connected with it. When we experience true repentance and conversion, God sees new birth. There is no new-birth without repentance and conversion, and, vice versa, no one has truly repented and been converted without new-birth.

The last remark may call for some further explanation. As said, repentance and conversion are both man's responsibility. We are not able to recognize the actual repentance of our fellow man since it is entirely a matter of the heart. Only when it demonstrates itself in his conversion do we realize that repentance has taken place. But it is quite possible for someone to simulate conversion. Simon did so (Acts 8). Only God knows the heart. He knew there was no true repentance, but merely the grief of the world, and Simon knew it too, I doubt not. Yet, Simon misled others as to his true heart condition, by his outwardly taking the place of serving God. But God will bring this out in time. When true repentance is lacking, conversion (beginning to serve God) is only counterfeit and soon fruits of the Spirit will be found lacking. There is no life!

When Peter discovers this to be Simon's condition, he tells him: "Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter (because the basic requirement, new-birth, is lacking), for thy heart is not upright before God (you have not repented). Repent therefore of this thy wickedness and supplicate the Lord, if indeed the thought of thy heart may be forgiven thee (forgiveness was not a thing Simon had so far received in the presence of God, although he might have had it administratively on the earth through baptism); for I see thee to be in the gall of bitterness (his condition was worse than of anyone merely in his sins), and bond of unrighteousness (fully in bondage to Satan)."

In his answer Simon shows Peter to be right, he shows that he does not believe (Heb. 11:6) that God rewards those who come to Him. He asks Peter to pray for him. This however is no substitute for repentance. God describes persons like Simon in Hebrews 6:4-6. Simon believed only to the same extent as the devils (in James 2:19). He did not believe in God's forgiveness based on His mercy shown to us in Christ Jesus.

If we ignore God's goodness in leading us to repentance and we take on an outward Christian attitude, without inwardly repenting over our past, our condition before God has become worse than it ever was before. If anyone reading this is in

such a condition we would like to repeat Peter's advice to Simon, for the benefit of that person. Ask the Lord that the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. God is full of mercy, even though our sins necessitated the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross. But God has raised Him from among the dead and appointed Him as the Judge of man. Nevertheless, today God still forgives all our sins if and when we come to Him confessing them, and trusting in the Lord Jesus.