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The Superintendent of the Church

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For some 4,000 years the sons and daughters of Adam had eagerly longed for the appearance of the promised Seed with an anticipation made keener by the passage of long centuries of patient waiting. "When the fulness of the time was come," at long last, "God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law" (Gal. 4:4). One silent night, under the starry vault of the Bethlehem skies, the long-looked-for event of the ages took place. Myriads of shining angels broke forth into a paean of praise to celebrate the event; heavenly music floated in the evening air as the celestial choir sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).

The Messianic Hope

Our brief survey of Bible history shows that the pulsating heart of the Hebrew economy was the Messianic hope. The Incarnation, a historical event when the divine Logos assumed human flesh—that profound, unfathomable mystery of all mysteries, which is too deep for the human mind to explain or even to fully comprehend—is considered by many thinkers to be the climactic emergence of God in history. For instance, George Arthur Buttrick states, "History is dialogue; the conversation proceeds for every man and for all history in the strange language of unique yet related events, with one Event [the Christ event] as key to the translation."—GEORGE ARTHUR BUTTRICK, *Christ and History*, p. 135.

And, ineluctably connected with the Incarnation is its equally mysterious concomitant, the crucifixion. Someone has rightly said that the transcendent supreme event of the ages is the redemptive death of Jesus Christ. Buttrick concurs with this when he says, "Bible history is focused history. The forwardness climbs to a lighted hilltop, and all history beyond that point is in that light, moving on to the fulfillment of the light. The focal point is Christ; and the lighted hilltop, though the light is darkness, is Calvary."—*Ibid.*, p. 25.

The Man on the Cross

Indeed, the Man on the cross is the crux of history. The great controversy between the forces of good and evil raged with white intensity on the cross. The love of power and the power of love met in mortal combat in this revolted planet. The powers of evil seemingly triumphed as they witnessed the bloody sweat of Gethsemane and the cruel cross of Calvary. But that was not the end of the struggle. That was the *axis of history*, which split time into before and after. But when God rings down the curtain on the total historical process, He will be victorious over the archenemy. □

The Superintendent of the Church

By WALTER F. SPECHT

IN JOHN the revelator's vision of the glorified Christ, so vividly portrayed in the first chapter of the Apocalypse, he sees Christ in the midst of seven golden lampstands. It is better to use the term *lampstands* than candlesticks. Candles as we know them today were not in general use in John's time.

"The seven [golden] lampstands," our Lord explained to John, "are the seven churches" (Rev. 1:20, R.S.V.).¹ The fact that they are of gold would indicate that they are precious in Heaven's eyes. The church is very precious to Christ. "Enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard."² Christ paid an infinite price for the church.

Our Lord is not only "in the midst of the lampstands;" He "walks among them" (Rev. 2:1). Thus is set forth the profound truth of His presence and activity in His church on earth. John was present on the Mount of Olives near Bethany when Jesus lifted up His hands and blessed the disciples and then "parted from them" (Luke 24:50, 51). Years later the apostle Peter spoke of Christ as one "who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him" (1 Peter 3:22). By the resurrection, ascension, and glorification, Christ, as Paul put it, has been

exalted "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named; not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1:21). Jesus Christ shares in the sovereignty of heaven and earth. Paul wrote that He "ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things" (chap. 4:10), or as *Today's English Version* puts it, "to fill the whole universe with His presence." Thus while the ascension took Christ away, He is not really away. He is yet present in His church on earth. He is not an absentee Lord who withdrew at the ascension and will return at the Second Coming. The ascension has not really separated Christians from their Lord. He ascended "that he might fill all things" and He is present in the Christian communities today. His parting promise was "Lo I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Churches on Circular Route

So John is given a vision of Christ walking among the seven golden lampstands, representing the seven churches. These seven churches were, to begin with, seven literal, historical churches in the Province of Asia.³ These were the churches John had left when he was carried into exile. Would he not as their pastor feel a deep concern regarding their spiritual welfare? These seven Christian communities were linked by being on the circular route that ran north from Ephesus to Pergamum, then southeast to Laodicea, joining there a return route west to Ephesus.

But seven literal churches cannot exhaust the meaning of the messages that follow in the Apoca-

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lypse. Just as Paul's letters to the churches in Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, and Rome have a message for us as well as for the Christian congregations to which they were originally sent, so the messages to the seven churches of Asia are God's word for Christians today. Seven is a sacred number that occurs 54 times in the Apocalypse and signifies completeness.⁴ Therefore from as early as the late second century it has been suggested that when John wrote to the seven churches, he was, in fact, writing to the whole church in all its completeness. This idea is found in the Muratorian Canon, the oldest extant list of New Testament writings, which not only lists the New Testament books but gives brief explanatory notes about each. Regarding the Apocalypse it says, "For also John in his Apocalypse, even if he writes to seven churches, yet speaks thereby to all churches."⁵ The problems of the seven churches are representative problems and the warnings and promises presented apply wherever they are needed. Thus Ellen White applies the messages given to Ephesus and Sardis to the church of today.⁶ Each of the messages to the churches ends with the words: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Whoever hears the book read is admonished to appropriate the warnings and promises given. So each message is spoken not only for that church, but for all the churches, for each person who has an ear to listen.

Interpreters of the continuous-historical school go one step further: they make the seven churches symbols of various periods of the history of the church. In harmony with this principle Ellen White wrote: "The names of the seven churches are symbolic of the church in different periods of the Christian Era. The number 7 indicates completeness, and is symbolic of the fact that the messages extend to the end of time, while the symbols used reveal the condition of the church in different periods in the history of the world [Christian Era]."⁷ So the seven churches span the Christian centuries.

The picture of Christ walking among the churches is a portrayal of His continual and eternal vigilance. This is emphasized by Ellen White: "Thus is symbolized His relation to the churches. He is in constant communication with His people. He knows their true state. He observes

their order, their piety, their devotion. Although He is high priest and mediator in the sanctuary above, yet He is represented as walking up and down in the midst of His churches on the earth. With untiring wakefulness and unremitting vigilance, He watches to see whether the light of any of His sentinels is burning dim or going out."⁸

And so Christ is in the midst of His people today, walking from church to church, from congregation to congregation, and from heart to heart. "He walks in the midst of His churches throughout the length and breadth of the earth. He watches them with intense interest to see whether they are in such a condition spiritually that they can advance His kingdom. Christ is present in every assembly of the church. He is acquainted with everyone connected with His service. He knows those whose hearts He can fill with the holy oil, that they may impart it to others."⁹

Superintends Work of Church

Thus the truth is emphasized that Christ not only ministers in the heavenly sanctuary above, but He also superintends the work of His church on earth. He not only walks among the churches, but it is He who supplies the lamps with oil and kindles the flame. Jesus is the Lord of the church, which Paul speaks of as His body, "the fulness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23).

One other symbol connected with Christ needs explanation: the stars in His right hand. "As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, . . . the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches" (Rev. 1:20). How are we to interpret the term "angels" here? This is a difficult question and various answers have been given by commentators. The Greek word *angelos* means, literally, "messenger," "one who is sent." A messenger can be celestial or human. Usually in the New Testament the term is used either for messengers of God, or for evil spirits. But there are a few passages where it obviously refers to human messengers. (See Luke 7:24; 9:51, 52; James 2:25.)

In the book of Revelation apart from the eight references to the angels of the churches, the word is used some 59 times to refer to supernatural messengers. But there are difficulties in insisting that the same meaning must apply to the messengers of the churches, and it seems, on the whole, best to apply the term to human messengers,

either to the elders or pastors of the various churches or to special human envoys sent to them.

Regarding the seven stars in the right hand of Christ, Ellen White specifically states that they are the symbols of the ministers in Christ's church. Note the following:

"These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand" (Rev. 2:1). These words are spoken to the teachers in the church—those entrusted by God with weighty responsibilities. The sweet influences that are to be abundant in the church are bound up with God's ministers, who are to reveal the love of Christ. The stars of heaven are under His control. He fills them with light, He guides and directs their movements. If He did not do this, they would become fallen stars. So with His ministers. They are but instruments in His hands, and all the good they accomplish is done through His power. Through them His light is to shine forth. The Saviour is to be their efficiency. If they will look to Him as He looked to the Father they will be enabled to do His work. As they make God their dependence, He will give them His brightness to reflect to the world."¹⁰

It is indeed a beautiful picture. Ministers are in the right hand of Christ. He holds them safe. No one can snatch them from His hand. He is the one who guides and directs them. They are instruments in the hand of our blessed Lord. They are under His special care and protection.

It is a serious and sacred thing to be a minister of Jesus Christ. A minister is an ambassador of Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20). A minister acts in Christ's name, by Christ's authority and in Christ's stead. Christ Himself speaks through the word of His ambassador. It is through the instrumentality of chosen men that Christ carries on the pastoral ministry of His church. Christ is Himself "the chief Shepherd," "the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 5:4; 2:25).

"Ambassadors for Christ have a solemn and important work, which rests upon some altogether too lightly. While Christ is the minister in the sanctuary above, He is also, through His delegates, the minister of His church on earth. He speaks to the people through chosen men, and carries forward His work through them, as when in the days of His humiliation He moved visibly upon the earth. Although centuries have passed, the lapse of

time has not changed His parting promise to His disciples: 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' From Christ's ascension to the present day, men ordained of God, deriving their authority from Him, have become teachers of the faith. Christ, the True Shepherd, superintends His work through the instrumentality of these undershepherds. Thus the

position of those who labor in word and doctrine becomes very important. In Christ's stead they beseech the people to be reconciled to God."¹¹ □

Continued next week

REFERENCES

- ¹ All Bible texts in this article not otherwise credited are from the Revised Standard Version.
- ² Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 12.
- ³ Asia in the New Testament does not refer to the con-

tinued by that name, or even to Asia Minor, but to the Roman province located in what is now Turkey.

⁴ See Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, pp. 632ff.

⁵ A complete English translation of the Muratorian Canon is given in F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, pp. 232ff.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 8, pp. 98, 99; Ellen G. White in *Review and Herald*, Feb. 25, 1902.

⁷ ———, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 585. Many of the Futurists also interpret the letters to the churches as representing periods of church history. Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, p. 141.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 586.

⁹ ———, *Testimonies*, vol. 6, pp. 418, 419.

¹⁰ ———, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 586, 587; see also White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 13, 14.

¹¹ ———, *Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 393.

When You're Young

By MIRIAM WOOD

Christian Energy

A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE for youthful Christians is in the making just now; as a matter of fact, it is already in the reality stage. For the first time in the lifetime of many (at least in formerly affluent America), people are discovering what it's like not to have a superabundance of everything. Just how the populace generally is going to relate to this provocative dilemma is a question. Interestingly enough, many youthful spokesmen have been telling us for several years that the trouble with the industrialized world in general (and the United States in particular) was that everybody had "too much of everything." What everyone needed, we were told, was "belt-tightening" and sacrifice. Now that opportunity has presented itself, though "necessity" seems to fit the picture somewhat better.

People who've lived somewhat longer are not strangers to these opportunity-necessity experiences. Their reminiscences of bleak periods in history are usually tinged with wry smiles and with while-I'm-glad-I-lived-through-it-I-wouldn't-want-to-do-so-again kinds of attitudes. History, though, is no respecter of generations. Merely because one has lived through wars and depressions he hasn't the power to shake his fist at the cosmos and declare himself immune from further stringencies.

It has been my observation that though some people accept the theory that sacrificial living is a good thing—on some sort of general principle—very few are that gung-ho about it in actuality. That's understandable. Doing without is inconvenient, uncomfortable, depressing, and diminishing. That is, it can be all of these things. As one speeds along superhighways in a powerful car, enjoying the frequent oases of light, bustle, and activity comprising service stations with unlimited gasoline and eagerness to sell, a remark that "we're all getting too soft" acts as a kind of absolution of the spirit. There! We've said it. Now we can forget it. And nothing has changed.

But to drive along a dark road in a very small car, watching the gas needle going down, down, down, and seeing along the road not the familiar bright oases but dark, ominous outlines of stations closed as tight as a prison brings one to cold reality instantaneously.

What is a young Christian to do in times like these? Is he to complain bitterly because his long-planned ski trip has to go down the drain? Is he to be constantly flat out with resentment? Is he to allow himself the egocentricity of feeling that a massive injustice is being done to him personally?

Worse, is he to spend his time attempting to circumvent the problem—dishonestly?

The latter thought came to my attention when I read an article in a recent issue of the *Washington Post* in which the author pointed out that some people may just find a "way around" gas rationing, should it be imposed. He said that

persons who apply for a driver's license in the District of Columbia are not asked to surrender any other licenses they may have from other States. This practice came about, I suspect, because so many legislators in the District have homes in other States. I'm not sure the author did the public a favor, though, when he concluded by wondering aloud (in print) what was to prevent people from surrounding States from securing a District of Columbia license in addition to their regular license. If gas rationing comes, and each license holder is entitled to a prescribed number of gallons a week, obviously the two-license person would be in much better shape than others who must make do with one allotment. Just how the plotter would go about listing a home address, I have no idea; but then, I don't plan to engage in this dishonest scheme, so I won't need to know.

Young Christians will find, as they get further into the predicted (and real) shortage of gasoline and other consumer products that human beings are pretty prone to a "me first" philosophy. More than that, the unsanctified heart is able to come up with the most dazzling rationalizations as to why its owner is entitled to more than his share of whatever is scarce. And it all sounds good and logical on the human level. "Everybody is doing it, so why shouldn't I?" then enters the picture. This specious reasoning is as old as Creation itself, but it's still a pretty effective anesthetic for the conscience.

The fact remains, though, that the Christian is obligated to put others before himself; he is obligated to be his brother's keeper; and he is obligated to give Caesar his "things." Whatever one's personal opinions may be of various shortages—whether they are real or contrived—he is honor and duty bound as a Christian to use no more than his share, to make no arrangements that cannot bear the light of the harshest day. If he can do all these things cheerfully, he certainly will be a joy to the people who have to associate with him, but even if he does them grudgingly, it's still his "Christian duty," though the last two words have been used in jest for a long time.

I'd like to point out one very small bright spot in the picture. It's this. During periods of shared stress, people of good will actually do draw more closely together. Those who swallow hard and take whatever comes in good grace find that they're members of a rather warm, large family. (The evaders and connivers don't reap this bit of serendipity, for obvious reasons.) Trouble does actually act as a kind of binding agent; the feeling of isolation common to so many people in today's impersonal world may be less acute in coming months.

The young Christian facing his first experience with austerity won't have the slightest difficulty if he takes as his guide this question: What would Jesus do during a period of shortage?