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Are You a 'Philadelphian' Christian?

by James McBride

Some church administrations promote the notion that the 'Seven churches of Revelation' (Chapters 2-3) represent specific 'eras' of church history. The 'best' era and the one to which 'you must belong' is usually selected as that of 'Philadelphia'. By virtue of the promises Jesus gives the church in that town, they are the 'goodies'. As human nature will have it, such claims for a specific denomination tend to instil an aura of superiority - evident in some such groups.

Three such eras are considered to be current: Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, and will be - according to this interpretation - in existence at Christ's return. Laodicea, especially, is singled out for special condemnation: *'lukewarm'*. Apparently because of their demeanour they are slated, by these groups, to experience the rigours of 'the Great Tribulation' in order to bring them up to spiritual speed.

As dates - contrary to Jesus' caution about setting them - are usually wrapped around each so-called era it's too bad if you were born at the wrong time, in the wrong century. This dating is itself fuzzy, and there isn't much consensus as to when each so-called 'era' begins - or ends. Also implied is the 'uncertain certainty' that we now live in the 'end-time'.

Not considered is the undoubted New Testament portrayal of the church of God not as a head-quartered denomination but as individual local assemblies united in spirit and holding generally to similar -sometimes plain wrong - beliefs. Just like the seven west Asian assemblies. You must, it's claimed, hold to a specified number of 'revealed truths' to be part of the true church. Competing churches squabble over what these are. Find yourself converted outside the

'right' church and your salvation isn't secure.

Save My Skin

The main thrust of the desire to be Philadelphian is that you will 'flee to the wilderness' protected by God from the predicted awesome end-time events.

Becoming a Christian since the 1930s qualifies you, it is said, for this special status. Unless, of course, you have gone off the boil - spiritually lukewarm. Or, you belong to the 'wrong' church. Or, like 'Sardis', you are stone cold dead.

It's clear from Scripture, however, that as the end draws near Christians will be persecuted - and some will die, martyrs for the faith. Referring to those times Jesus, addressing the faithful, said: *'Then they shall hand you over for persecution and they will kill you, and you will be hated of all nations on account of my name' (Matthew 24:9). These must not have joined the 'right church' - though Jesus doesn't differentiate. He had words about this: 'Whoever seeks to conserve his life for himself shall lose it, and whoever loses it shall revitalize it' (Luke 17:33).*

God's Shield

This isn't a denial that some Christians may indeed receive divine protection. It happens all the time, even in our day. The Psalmist conveys God's promise: *'A thousand may fall right beside you and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not come near you' (Psalm 97).* The protection, note, is *where you happen to be* - not because you have been whisked away to a 'place of safety'. An example is the protection God afforded Israel while Egypt was being laid waste around them. Or, the protection of Daniel from the

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lions that were breathing down his neck. Or his contemporaries shielded from Nebuchadnezzar's furnace.

Indeed some Christians living in Jerusalem as 'Armageddon' approaches are urged by Jesus to instantly drop all and *'flee to the mountains'* (Matthew 24:16). A sensible precaution. Back in 70AD as the Romans attacked Jerusalem, the Judean brethren hot-footed to Pella in Transjordan.

You may consider it more a reflection of God's loving character that those thus protected - and not martyred - are the spiritually weak. Laodicean in their spiritual attitude, perhaps, but still considered by Jesus as part of his church (Revelation 3:14), and worth rescuing. Jesus, even now, is walking among his brethren and grooming all of us for Kingdom glory.

Role of Law

There's a widely-held view - harking back to a misunderstanding of the role of law in the Scriptures - that salvation depends on how well we obey the Commandments. For those commands and their subsidiaries define sin.

When we 'repent' God grants His holy Spirit. The Spirit is 'a piece of His mind' implanted in us - and will prompt us to submit to His law. It's a Christian duty to comply, for our obedience is evidence of our conversion. Without the Spirit we *'are none of his'* and with it we willingly submit to God's instruction in His Word - all of it, as it applies.

Each of us is responsible for how we build on the Foundation - which is Jesus Christ who dwells in each of us after conversion. The quality of our 'construction' determines our *role* in God's Kingdom. If, however, we have God's Spirit - and persevere until death - yet fail to build with quality materials we will still be saved. Wrote Paul to the brethren in Corinth: *'Whatever quality each one's work may be, the fire will test it. If one's construction survives he will receive pay [reward]. If one's work burns down he will be the loser; though personally he will be saved, yet only as passing through fire (ch 3:12-15).*

Christians are being judged now - day by day, and our various trials - some tested 'as by fire' - are carefully monitored by our Father to ensure we are not overwhelmed by them. He always provides a way for us to shoulder them (I Corinthians 10:11-14).

As is evident from how Jesus deals with each of the seven churches (Revelation 2-3), he is dedicated - in all ages - through instruction and correction to shepherd all his willing brothers and sisters safely into the fold of his Kingdom. That sometimes demands the fiery heat of persecution and trials - for any one of us, no matter to which 'era' or to which church we belong. At the same time, as in the church in Smyrna, fierce persecution comes even when the brethren are using spiritual 'gold' materials.

More important is that we take note of the spiritual and moral lessons Jesus highlights in his oversight of these seven assemblies. They apply in *all* ages, to *all* churches.

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