

## Chapter 4 The Church Until Now

### **The birth of the church**

The creation of the universe involved a finite burst of power. Since then, it has continued on in ever dissipating glory.

In the creation of the church there was also a burst of power, but it was initially limited to the 120 believers who were waiting upon him at that time. In the dedication of the temple of Solomon there were also 120 priests ministering, who were driven out when the glory of God filled the temple. Many centuries later when the power of God gave birth to the church on Pentecost, 120 believers were driven out into the streets to carry the glory and gospel into the surrounding world.

On that day, those who were touched by this power were similarly ignited, and experienced this power of creation for themselves. Jesus spoke of this in Luke 12:49 **“I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!”**

Unlike the dissipating natural universe, the power in the church continues to increase. This is a fulfillment of the kingdom of God portrayed as a stone cut without hands in Daniel 2. In that illustration God’s kingdom grows until it conquers and replaces the kingdoms of this world. When we see God move we are witnessing creation itself taking place.

Jesus said in John that he only did what he saw the Father doing. He was taking what he saw in the heavenly realm and manifesting it into the natural realm. This principle is also available to believers as taught in Matt. 16. Here we see believers given the privilege of binding and loosing on earth that which has already been bound or loosed in heaven. We also see a parallel of this in the Lord’s prayer.

On the day of Pentecost the power and exuberance of these initial faithful exploded into an astonished world. The immediate effect was intense and joyful evangelism. This became a flood of love and sharing, in which total strangers began to connect and worship together at every opportunity.

At the outset of the physical creation, the total budget of power that would ever be needed for its intended lifespan was provided. In the case of the church however, more creation power flows as the church continues to expand. As a Biblical correlation, the Bible speaks of the present creation passing away, and a new heaven and earth coming into being.

The energy released by God in creation immediately began to coalesce into matter. These masses would in turn begin to differentiate to the various elements, compounds, and structures that we see in the world today. Similarly, rudiments of organization began to arise within the church as certain leaders became recognized, and provisions were made to meet the needs of the impoverished among them. Since then, this power has continued to flow and adapt throughout the globe into every culture and language, and into every circumstance of need and blessing.

In 1 Corinthians Chapters 12 and 14, Paul describes a few of the more prominent supernatural gifts that have been provided to guide and nurture believers. In these chapters it is pointed out that the gifts are scattered among the various believers so that everyone has a part to play in the overall organism. Besides pastors and teachers who address congregations, the Bible teaches that all of us are to be engaged in ministering to each other. This is clearly taught in 1 Cor 12, Romans 12:4-8, and in other places.

In Matt.16:16-18 we see that the church is built upon the bedrock of revelation from the father. A little caution here: The term Jesus uses as “Peter,” means loose stone – building material. The term he uses for the rock upon which the church is built means bedrock. The context indicated that this bedrock is revelation from the father (not Peter).

Ephesians 2:20 then takes us a step further: **“having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone,”** The ministries of apostles and prophets are all about taking the things revealed by God and expressing them into the church and the world. These connect the church to the revelation from the Father. Furthermore Jesus himself is a part of this foundation – albeit the very cornerstone by which the entire structure is aligned. At the risk of controversy, I would suggest that the church is not built upon Jesus, but directly upon revelation from the father – as Jesus himself stated in Matthew 16.

We find a further differentiation among the ministries in Eph.4:11-12 **“And He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ;”** We all have specialties, both naturally and spiritually, but some become more specialized and proficient in their callings. In these cases, the individuals themselves are gifts to the churches.

God can bestow any gift upon any faithful brother or sister at any time that it is needed. Paul makes this clear in 1Cor. 14 when he says that “all may prophesy.” There are a couple of gifts in which I’ve been used only a couple of times in my life – and that’s just fine. Using a hammer once in awhile doesn’t make you a carpenter; similarly, being called upon to prophesy once in awhile does not necessarily make you a prophet.

The point is to be available and fearless in the face of whatever God calls you to do at any time. The spiritual gifts are only tools, that are available as needed. The ministries on the other hand tend to specialize in certain realms of authority.

As history and circumstances continually change, the power of God maintains a cutting edge of creativity that is never dull. In the miracles recorded in the Bible, there is no record of Jesus ever performing any of them twice in the same way. When Paul is speaking of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12, he names nine categories of spiritual gifts, and five body parts. The list of spiritual gifts is no more complete than the list of body parts. As humans we are always trying to put things into neat little packages – “the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit” for instance. The only way we can keep up with what God is doing is to focus upon loving and obeying Him each day, above all other priorities.

### **What are churches like?**

So what are green plants like? In both cases the variety is endless, but there are certain commonalities. What is important is that we meet to encourage and bless each other through our respective gifts. Heb.10:24-25 is one of the passages that comments on this. **“and let’s consider how to encourage one another in love and good deeds, 25 not abandoning our own meeting together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”**

As far as scale goes, consider the mass evangelistic meetings that took place on the day of Pentecost and following. Contrast this with the words of Jesus in **Matt.18:20 “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”** As for locations we have the downtown public in Jerusalem, synagogues, various prison visits experienced by the apostle Paul, and a river bank just outside Philippi.

Pentecost was one of three annual feast periods in Israel on which people came from all over the world to feast and worship. As pointed out above, those who believed began sharing their lives and meals together with new believers from other places. Later on when extreme persecution struck the church locally, believers who had been generous to others had connections all over the world to whom they could flee.

Besides the meals and sharing of earthly goods, creative songs and other forms of worship were a natural part of the celebration. Eph 5:19 **“speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your hearts to the Lord;”** Teaching and encouragement were also natural

expressions of the Holy Spirit of God. Col 3:16 **“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”**

There was also an ever-increasing variety of supernatural gifts taking place. James 5:14 **“Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;”**

Sometimes God instructs leaders to make physical contact with believers for healings, commissioning ministries, and bestowing spiritual gifts. In Acts 13:2-3 we see the church at Antioch instructed to send out Barnabas and Saul (soon called “Paul”) to do a special work: **“While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set Barnabas and Saul apart for Me for the work to which I have called them.’ 3 Then, when they had fasted, prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.”** For another example, read 1Tim 4:14 **“Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was granted to you through words of prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.”**

Finally, consider 1Pet.4:10-11 **“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the multifaceted grace of God. 11 Whoever speaks is to do so as one who is speaking actual words of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”**

### **Lessons from the seven churches**

The Bible declares in Revelation 14:6 **“And I saw another angel flying in midheaven with an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation, tribe, language, and people;”**

The concept of “eternal gospel” threw me for a moment when I considered that the gospel wasn’t even available until after Jesus, but then I realized: Salvation – the gospel – had always been available in Jesus, but it was through the ritual of blood sacrifice until Jesus had been crucified. It then occurred to me that long before the Bible was ever written, the pathway to an ever-deepening walk with God had already been described. In this case it was written by the tabernacle that Moses had erected during the Exodus. This portable version of our spiritual journey eventually became cast in stone when Solomon built the temple. Even to this day, and even among the illiterate, this pathway of spiritual growth is illustrated by this model.

Years after the book of acts had been written, John (the last surviving apostle) addressed seven major challenges facing Churches. This work was included as letters written to seven different churches in the book of Revelation. The sequence of these letters is so beautifully woven into the various stages of Christian growth, and the sequence of components in the temple, that it provides a reassuring understanding of how we are to live and grow as Christians.

Since these churches all existed at that time and were within a radius of about 150 miles, they obviously didn’t represent all the nations and cultures of the future. So why were these particular churches selected as examples for us all? Although the towns did not represent a broad cultural sample, their challenges did. Even today the messages in these letters remain important everywhere.

Both individuals and churches are referred to as temples of the Holy Spirit in the Bible, so our understanding is enriched by comparing these letters with corresponding features of the temple.

In an effort to distill the essence of each letter, I do not fully quote each of the actual letters. But I do include the scriptural references, and strongly recommend that these are read while considering the comments on each of them below.

Note that each of these letters begins with a description of Jesus that was mentioned in chapter one (so it is best to begin by reading Revelation chapter 1). Then, after addressing the particular church’s issue and encouragement or advice, they each conclude with a “he who overcomes” clause. This speaks

of the individual opportunity and responsibility that we all have to overcome – no matter what the rest of a church may be doing.

Although there was a sequence a priest passed through as he approached the presence of God, the entire temple remained relevant the whole time. Similarly, we need to maintain all of these lessons in our hearts as we continue in our spiritual growth.

The church at Ephesus (Rev.2:1-7) is about love, and corresponds to the gate of the temple. Our walk with God begins with our response to the love God has expressed towards us. If a church's love goes cold, then regardless of whatever great things the church may be doing, it becomes useless as a representative of God. In such cases, God's glory and anointing will be withdrawn from it. Because of this, this church represents the gate of the temple, and parallels salvation itself.

I remember being surprised the morning after having told God I wanted to follow him: I found myself feeling sorry for someone who everyone else was laughing at. The day before, I would have been laughing at her like everyone else. This discovery of new love within me gave credence to my very tentative and shaky faith.

The church at Smyrna ( Rev.2:8-11) **Rev.2:8 And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:** Jesus identifies himself in this letter as the one who has experienced death and resurrection, and the letter relates to the challenges facing new believers – as they leave the culture of the world and begin their journeys into the kingdom of God.

The first item encountered after entering the temple courtyard was the altar upon which the carcass of the sacrifice slain outside the gate was consumed by fire. The very name, Smyrna, comes from a spice used in anointing a body for burial.

Smyrna is encouraged to hold fast during persecutions and betrayal as they departed from their previous culture. For us, this may involve the loss of friends, overcoming sinful habits, and rejection by family members. Only the life (represented by a portion of the blood) continued onwards into the temple.

The church at Pergamum (Rev.2:12-17) had doctrinal issues, and coincides with the bronze basin of water that we encounter next in the temple. This represents cleansing by the Word of God. The Bible is the straight edge by which all valid doctrines may be measured. We need to be constantly studying and applying it in order to maintain our spiritual direction, and to expose false doctrines. Rational understandings are important here. These are represented by the natural light of day in the surrounding courtyard.

**Rev.2:17 ....To the one who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows except the one who receives it.'**

Manna was the bread (which also relates to the word of God) that came down from heaven and fed the Israelites during their journey through the wilderness. Being hidden, would suggest that these understandings may not be available through rational scholarship. As you go on into the holy place – hidden from the courtyard – the first thing you encounter is the shewbread.

A stone is building material, and the name is a personal secret between you by Jesus that relates to your place in the body of Christ. Nobody but you and Jesus will really understand how you fit in to the body of Christ.

The church at Thyatira (Rev.2:18-29) relates to bread baked fresh daily and displayed inside the first room of the temple. This area was illuminated by the oil in the menorah, which represented the lighting

of the Holy Spirit. This is a realm of supernatural insights, gifts, warnings and understandings that are not derived directly through scholarship or rationality.

**Rev.2:19 I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first. 20 But I have *this* against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.**

Be aware that not all spiritual phenomenon are Godly. Even within the church we must discern and confront performances that are clothed in spirituality, but are in fact of demonic origin.

**24 But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say; I cast upon you none other burden.**

We need to be careful to not become fascinated with occultic mysteries.

**26 And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations: 27 and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father:**

There is spiritual authority that comes with godly spiritual gifts when they are properly deployed. Psalms 2 also speaks of this very authority **Psalms 2:8 Ask of me, and I will give *thee* the nations for thine inheritance, And the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. 9 Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."**

Listen to and obey God carefully, and he will likewise provide you with the spiritual backup to empower you in anything he directs you to do.

Sardis (Rev.3:1-6) **Rev.3:1a "...These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars:**

Jesus introduces himself as having the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars. Sardis would represent the fifth station of the temple – the seven lamps on the menorah that gave light to the holy place.

**Rev.3:1b....I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead.**

A good reputation and favor among the local people by themselves mean nothing to God, and they do not produce life if growth is no longer taking place. In Mark 1:40-45 we see a leper healed, and instructed to tell no one but the priests. Instead he went out and blabbed about his miracle everywhere, greatly hindering the reach of Jesus' ministry. Sometimes spectacular displays of spiritual gifts are exploited for attention, thus preempting obedience to God.

It is further disconcerting that a church could be dead, and they themselves would be unaware of it.

**3:2 Be thou watchful, and establish the things that remain, which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine perfected before my God.**

We need to continually monitor our programs, motives, and obedience to God's objectives. The issue here was their satisfaction with their chosen status quo. We don't make God's agendas for our lives incidental to our existence. We make our existence incidental to God's agendas.

**3:3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and didst hear; and keep *it*, and repent If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.**

In this letter God warned them that they had more work to do and to strengthen that which they had allowed to become weak – and to get on with their calling. Otherwise, God himself would become their worst enemy.

**53: He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.**

This is extremely serious. Can we get around the suggestion that those who do not overcome might have their names blotted out of the book of life?

Philadelphia (Rev.3:7-13) Philadelphia related to the altar of incense that was just before the veil that separated the holy place from the ark of the covenant.

**Verse 3:8 I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have followed My word, and have not denied My name.**

God provides additional opportunity to those who use the spiritual gifts that He has already given them (power), are obedient to his words, and who are unafraid of being known as Christians.

**3:10 Because you have kept My word of perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of the testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth.**

Believers who have remained faithful in their testimony and service to God will have already proven themselves, and will receive protection from the times of testing that will come upon the world. God gives us supernatural guidance and protection as increasing mayhem and disasters continue to stress the world around us. This will also have its prophetic fulfillment in the part of the church that will be protected in the wilderness during the final 3-1/2 years in chapter 12, while “the rest of her seed” in 12:7 remain available to persecution by the dragon’s people.

**3:12 The one who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.**

These overcomers will be granted a level of security that was not offered to the previous five churches.

Laodicea (Rev.3:14-22)

**3:15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. 16 So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth.**

Perhaps the worst state a Christian can be in is idle and satisfied with their spiritual walk. Replace idle with purposeful, and satisfied with visionary.

**17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked:**

The church at Sardis thought that they were alive when they were dead. This one thinks they are rich when they are poor. The fact is, that neither of these churches knew the truth. The common root problem is to evaluate ourselves by anything besides knowing and obeying the word of God.

They had a false sense of what was valuable. By defining what they already had as valuable, they had deceived themselves into believing that they were rich. We need Holy Spirit definitions. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, so we need to learn his thoughts, and their related values.

**3:18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to apply to your eyes so that you may see.**

So just what is this currency by which we might purchase gold, white garments, and vision? Consider **John 8:31 Jesus therefore said to those Jews that had believed him, If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples; 32 and (then) ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.**

Living in God’s words means responding to and manifesting what goes on in heaven into the natural realm.

**3:19 Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.**

Here is a promise from God that is every bit as valid as any of the promises we love. If we are loved by God, then we are far better off to repent voluntarily, than to invoke his loving discipline. It is much better to pay attention and see where we are, than to have our eyes opened for us.

**3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. 21 The one who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat with My Father on His throne.**

Even when we feel we have done everything we can possibly do, the door before us is the one to our innermost hearts. This is one only we can open. We must invite Jesus in to view and cleanse the innermost crevasses of our thinking, emotions, and hidden preferences. Three verses later in Rev.4:1 John sees a door standing open in heaven – we open the door to our hearts, and Jesus opens the door to his throne room!

**To summarize:**

Lessons taught on spiritual growth by the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, and by the corresponding stations of the Tabernacle:

1. We are awakened to love, and the opportunity to a meaningful and eternal life.
2. We are transformed from earthly priorities and interests into Godly ones.
3. We become equipped rationally by pursuing Godly knowledge through the Bible.
4. We receive supernatural insights and gifts as needed for our daily lives.
5. We evangelize and impact the world around us.
6. We pursue greater territory and levels of ministry.
7. We invite Jesus to expose and refine the thoughts and desires of our innermost beings.

What is the relevance today of prophecies that may or not be fulfilled within our lifetimes? Two millenniums of expectancy have come and gone since the book of Revelation was written, and here we are, still waiting. But during those years almost everything you could do to a person has happened to believers, who have stood and defied the worst that Satan could throw at them. We have little to fear that has not already been defeated.

The world on the other hand will be beset with judgments like they have never seen before. Like the plagues of Egypt, these judgments will be selective upon those who defy God. The historic Biblical and prophetic patterns both demonstrate that God's judgments bring freedom to God's people.

The hundreds of previously fulfilled prophecies assure us of God's control, and that the prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled will surely happen.

The teachings and practices of the Tabernacle established a culture that would guide the children of Israel as they entered the promised land, conquered, and they provided an identity that has endured to this day. The principles and lessons cast in the Tabernacle continue to guide us as well.

The values and commands of the above letters have not changed – nor will they until God calls us to himself. Indeed, He has given us all the instructions and Holy Spirit access we will need to guide us and protect us through the conquests and testings that will take place in the coming times.