

Seven Faces of the Enemy

Johan Malan, Mossel Bay, South Africa (May 2015)

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation are focussed on important aspects of the ongoing struggle between the kingdom of God and the hostile kingdom of Satan. Disciples of Christ should be mindful of the major battle for control over their souls, and take the necessary steps to prevent being spiritually blinded and deceived by the devil. He is the self-declared god of a morally depraved and spiritually confused world, and is determined to keep people away from the Lord Jesus who is the true Saviour and King of the world (2 Cor. 4:4). New methods are continuously being devised in the mysterious depths of the kingdom of darkness to lure people away from the Lord and His Word through false doctrines, thereby causing them to stumble in their spiritual lives and eventually fall under his power. The devil and his co-workers also use a wide variety of hard methods such as violence, persecution and intimidation to enforce their power.

Through human ingenuity alone we will not be able to remain standing in the midst of the severe attacks against us. However, Jesus Christ is the Head of the church and He promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against His church on earth (Matt. 16:18). He provides us with the means of grace which also serve as spiritual armour to prevail in this intense spiritual battle which rages around us, thereby enabling us to make progress towards reaching our goal of the worldwide proclaiming of the gospel. The objective of all believers should be to grow spiritually strong and finish the race in their lives of faith as overcomers (Eph. 6:10; Heb. 12:1-2).

The seven churches are typical examples of the worldwide church of Christ, but the devil is a master of deceit and approaches each of them under a different guise. It is important that Christians should recognise his changing faces and strategies, expose his evil works, resist his sly tactics and ever seek to increase in the knowledge and grace of Christ, who alone can endue them with power from on high to be more than conquerors. In the seven letters, Christ portrays Himself through His power and gracious intervention, in ways which are relevant to the specific problems encountered by every congregation. We never have to succumb to the attacks of the enemy of our souls.

Ephesus – intruded by the “angel of light”



The “angel of light” cleverly conceals his true identity among his large number of unsuspecting victims.

One of the strategies the devil has applied since the founding of the Christian church was to infiltrate congregations by using some of his henchmen who pretend to be devout and godly

men who take the interests of the church to heart. They demonstrate their orthodoxy by opposing unbiblical doctrines and rejecting false prophets who try to introduce deceptive teachings. However, despite their saintly behaviour this new breed of pastors keep quiet about the very core of the Christian faith, which is rebirth by virtue of Christ's atoning death. In a very subtle and unobtrusive way they replace a life-giving encounter with Christ with ecclesiastical rituals, thus offering full church membership through baptism, confession of faith and confirmation. The absence of the fruit of the Spirit is provided for by promoting humanly-conceived good works under the auspices of the church, which are not necessarily done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In this way, the love for Christ which was experienced in a formerly evangelical congregation, is subsequently replaced by love for the church and also for its very popular pastors who preach so eloquently and non-judgemental that their ministry appeals to a new generation of carnal believers. Churches of this nature usually remain active and draw scores of new members. But what does Christ say about this "new love" which motivates members to only serve the church? He is certainly not impressed by their outward pretence and dedication to the church, which produces nothing more than dead works arising from unregenerate hearts: "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent" (Rev. 2:4-5).

The pastors who introduce this transformation from Spirit-controlled worship to human-controlled religion in the flesh, are impostors who only pretend to be true believers: "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Paul warned the young church in Ephesus that followers of the "angel of light" will arise from within their own church and succeed in deceiving the majority of the members: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:29-30). Those who heed their teachings become followers of men, rather than followers of Christ.

The "angel of light" and his false prophets often proclaim various Christian virtues to keep people happy and unsuspecting, but they never emphasise the danger of sin, the atoning death of Christ, His resurrection, and the fact that He is a living reality through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To such deceived believers the church is the sole dispenser of divine grace, which accounts for the fact that the church becomes people's first love, rather than Christ. John reminds us that Jesus Christ "loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Rev. 1:5). He is our first love, and serving Him constitutes the "first works" that we should be doing as Christians. However, the new generation of Ephesian believers left their first love as well as their first works which emanated from God's agape love. They primarily loved the church and also tirelessly worked for the church. These members are called upon to repent from their deceptive views by returning to their first love and revert to doing the first works.

During the past almost two thousand years of church history there were various evangelical churches that made a good beginning but subsequently lost their character and lapsed into a dead form of godliness. It is obvious that in these cases the elders did not sufficiently control the doctrinal nature of preaching to ensure that the gospel of the cross remains the central focus (Acts 20:27-28). In this way, room was made for the establishment of the enemy's deceptive teachings which promoted a lifeless form of godliness. New members were introduced to the church, its rituals and doctrines, but not really introduced to the Saviour.

Smyrna – violent confrontation by the murderer of men



The devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

Satan often reveals his true nature as a murderer of men, and that becomes manifest when he incites his followers to kill indiscriminately. He was particularly intent on killing the incarnate Jesus during His first coming. Satan made use of the spiritually deceived religious leaders of Israel to persecute and eventually execute Jesus after rejecting His claim to be the promised Messiah. Jesus knew very well who was behind this campaign to kill Him and said to His adversaries: “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). The devil’s violent nature has never changed, and subsequent to the crucifixion of Jesus he set his plans in motion to kill all the disciples and obliterate the Christian church.

All but one of Christ’s disciples died as martyrs for their faith – the apostle John being the only exception – and martyrdom was also the fate of many Christians throughout the Roman Empire. This pagan empire persecuted and executed Christians for believing in “another king” and because of that they refused to worship the Emperor. However, the final instigator of evil was the devil, and that is why Jesus strengthened and encouraged believers in one of these persecuted congregations to accept their fate and keep on resisting the devil, even to death: “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

The ten days of bloody persecution probably refers to the persecution of Christians during the rule of ten successive Roman emperors – from Nero in 64 AD, until Diocletian in the year 305 AD. After the dissolving of the Roman Empire, a long period of persecution and the killing of evangelical Christians who did not recognise the authority of the pope, was instituted by the Roman Catholic Church. Countless Christians were martyred during the Dark Middle Ages. This evil practise was later continued by various pagan nations, communist states, as well as radical Islamic regimes and terrorist groups. During the coming tribulation period, the persecution of Christians will flare up to unprecedented heights. John says about the Antichrist: “And it was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And he was given authority over every tribe, tongue and nation” (Rev. 13:7). Many of the martyrs will stand firm on their Christian testimony and refuse to bow the knee to this dictator, even if it means dying for Christ (Rev. 12:11). In heaven they will ask Christ to avenge their blood on the Antichrist and his murderous gangs on earth (Rev. 6:9-11).

It is with reference to this full-scale war that Peter said: “Your adversary the devil walks about

like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith" (1 Pet. 5:8-9). The intensity of Satan's hostility knows no bounds since, as a murderer of men, it was always his purpose to kill people. The stirring up of revolutions, terrorism and wars (also religiously-motivated wars arising from serious spiritual deception); instigation to commit violent acts such as assault, torture, crime and conspiracies against various interest groups, as well as the incitement to commit suicide, are all used by the devil to give expression to his brutality and murderous ways. He does not have unlimited powers over people, but there are millions of individuals as well as various pagan nations who willingly associate with the practices of his kingdom. They prefer to use violence and other vile methods to promote their evil objectives, and that offers the devil an extensive power-base to wage his wars, to enslave people, force them into submission, and to kill them. It is obvious that Christians are often the targets of the roaring lion who only seeks whom he can devour.

The message to persecuted Christians is that they should not fear those who can kill their body but not their soul (Matt. 10:28). Trust in Him who was dead but is alive for evermore (Rev. 1:18). Through His death Jesus defeated and destroyed "him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). In Christ we have everlasting life, and therefore the second death (eternal death in hell) can never gain power over true believers (Rev. 20:6).

Pergamos – submitting to an evil world ruler who claims to be the god of this age



The devil is the ruler of the darkness of this age, who seeks universal worship.

During the entire church dispensation we are engaged in a spiritual war which is waged from different fronts: "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day ..." (Eph. 6:12-13). Lucifer was cast out of heaven, where he became so proud that he tried to exalt himself above God. Isaiah says:

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. ... I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High. Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit" (Isa. 14:12-15). However, before Lucifer's final judgement he will keep on challenging God's supremacy and attacking the interests of God's kingdom, but his final demise is rapidly approaching.

Down on earth, Lucifer did everything possible to establish himself as god, with a view to be universally served and worshipped by the nations. All the false religions emanated from him, guised in different forms of idolatry, ancestor worship and the practising of magical powers. The pagan nations are oblivious of the fact that they are actually serving the devil. Paul confirms this indirect way of worshipping the devil: "What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God" (1 Cor. 10:19-20). Everybody participating in these sacrifices and feasts have fellowship with demons, which are fallen angels that were cast out of heaven together with Lucifer and are his servants.

The devil sometimes changes his strategy from persecuting Christians to deceiving them into compromising with the non-Christian religions, and joining with them in worshipping the universal god of all faiths. He knows full well that if they do that they will deny the true God and engage in serving a foreign god. Paul says that the god of this age (the devil) has blinded the minds of people so that they would not realise that Jesus is the Saviour of the world (2 Cor. 4:4). Interfaith alliances occurred intermittently throughout the church age.

In the Roman Empire, Constantine abolished Christian persecution and introduced a period of intensive interaction between Christianity and the pagan religions in his empire, giving rise to a process of syncretism in which the church adopted and Christianised various pagan festivals. Among them was the feast in honour of the sun god (*Sol Invictus* – the Invincible Sun) on 25th December which later became established as Christmas celebrations. The main features of the original pagan feast were excessive eating and drinking, as well as the exchanging of gifts among people to express their joy that the sun started turning back during mid-winter in the northern hemisphere to usher in a new summer. Another distortion relates to Easter, a term derived from the Germanic word *Ostara* or *Eostre*, which was celebrated as a pagan feast in honour of the goddess of spring, using symbols such as Easter eggs and bunnies. The biblical feast, Passover, uses other symbols and was fulfilled by the death and resurrection of Christ, which instils new life into the hearts of believers.

Pergamos was an evil, world city which is described by Jesus as the throne and dwelling-place of Satan (Rev. 2:13). In various respects the church accepted satanic institutions and even participated in pagan festivals, thereby compromising with the heathen and openly and shamelessly practising "the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols" (Rev. 2:14). They accepted the invitation to attend interfaith meetings and ceremonies.

Christ reminds the congregation that despite the devil's great influence over the unsaved world, He (Jesus) is the Son of God who has the two-edged sword which symbolises supreme authority in the universe. When He returns it will be as King of kings and Lord of lords, and then He will fight against the apostates and unsaved rebels with the sword which proceeds from His mouth. The hidden manna with which He feeds His disciples refers to the true Gospel which is not always easily found in a world filled with deluded churches and deceptive Christian literature. Christ promised to return again soon, and then all false doctrines will be exposed and uprooted. God says, "In that day ... I will cut off the names of the idols ... and they shall no longer be remembered" (Zech. 13:2). Satan and his evil spirits will be incarcerated in the bottomless pit (Rev. 20:2-3).

Thyatira – yielding to the deceiver of the nations and his many false prophets



Satan and his false prophets have established themselves worldwide.

The devil is the deceiver of the nations, and he makes use of a large number of false prophets and false teachers to achieve his purpose. The church in Thyatira became so liberal, ecumenical and deceived that they allowed a false prophetess to deceive large numbers of Christians: "Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" (Rev. 2:20).

Apart from the spreading of interfaith deception there is not a single biblical doctrine which is not denied, twisted or wrongly interpreted by the false prophets – particularly doctrines on Christology and the atonement. Peter says: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. ... For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage" (2 Pet. 2:1-2, 18-19).

The members of deceived churches, like those in Thyatira, are warned that if they do not repent from their apostasy they will remain behind at the rapture and be turned over to the devil's false christ who will further deceive and persecute them during the tribulation period (Rev. 2:22).

Christ is the true Prophet who has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like fine brass as if refined in a furnace. Nothing is hidden from His eyes and He knows everything. He has a solution to every problem as He has passed through the fire of God's judgements upon the sins of humanity, and can set us free from the wrath of God. The overcomers will rule with Christ in His kingdom, while the temporary kingdom of the false prophets – which will culminate in the 7-year kingdom of the Antichrist and his universal false prophet – will be utterly destroyed (Rev. 19:19-20).

A wonderful promise is given to the overcomers: "But to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this [false] doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations – he shall rule them with a rod of iron ... and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:24-29). The overcomers will rule with Christ in His kingdom, and to that end they already have the Morning Star in their hearts (cf. Rev. 22:16) – who Himself is the promise of a new day that will soon dawn over this dark world.

Sardis – fatal influence of the angel of death



The angel of death has succeeded in robbing many churches of true life.

Satan is the master of empty promises, false pretence and deceitful doctrines, and that renders him the angel of death to millions of people from all faiths, having only one objective and that is to gather a harvest for perdition. However, he does not reveal to the deceived people the final destination of the road on which they are, but instead makes them think everything will be fine: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Prov. 16:25). This is the way along which Satan leads his victims – not to eternal life as he promises them but to eternal death. In Christian communities, the devil promotes the establishment of Christian churches in which all sorts of sin and fleshly lusts are given free rein, but in which people still have an outward appearance of being Christian, thinking they are on their way to heaven. Paul clearly describes a fake church of this nature, and counsels true Christians to flee from it:

“But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

The angel of death is clearly at work here! The Lord Jesus says to a church of this nature in Sardis: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1). The appearance of being Christian only on the basis of church membership may be highly deceptive. In this case a mere form of godliness is very prevalent as there is no indication among the majority of members of the Holy Spirit’s work of convicting of sin and of spiritual regeneration – and least of all believers who are filled by the Holy Spirit and also walk in the Spirit.

Jesus Christ reminds this church in Sardis – and every similar congregation everywhere – that He has the seven Spirits of God (the fullness of the Holy Spirit) and only He can revive perishing sinners and give them eternal life. The overcomers will be clothed in white garments and their names will never be erased from the book of life. As for the dead members of the congregation – it is presumptuous of them to take it for granted that their names appear in the book of life only because they belong to a church. The deceiver of the nations will prompt them to make such a conclusion, but the day will come when they will bitterly regret ever having listened to him and his local representative (the spiritually dead pastor of the congregation), while not yielding to the guidance and conviction of the Holy Spirit.

Philadelphia – resisting the counterfeit christ and his false gospel



A false christ and his false gospel may be very popular among many people, but the result will be fatal.

Jesus Christ commends the church in Philadelphia for remaining true to Him and His Word, despite the high price of social rejection and a lack of adequate financial support which they had to pay: "... for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name" (Rev. 3:8). During the first century AD the devil was already actively at work to promote false presentations of Jesus, thereby blinding people spiritually and preparing them to accept the counterfeit christ of the satanic new world order to come in the last days. Paul said to one of the large congregations of that time: "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted – you may well put up with it!" (2 Cor. 11:2-4). This is nothing less than satanic deception which is proclaimed in the name of Jesus (*another* Jesus).

The small church in Philadelphia resisted this serious form of deception, which was widely prevalent since the early stages of the church dispensation. The lack of spiritual discernment persisted throughout the ages, and will finally lead to the universal acceptance of the devil's counterfeit christ: "And all the world marvelled and followed the beast [the Antichrist]. So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?" (Rev. 13:3-4).

Those who worship the false christ, will also worship the false god of this age – i.e. the universal god of all faiths, the devil (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). In his epistle, John also exposed this form of deceit: "Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is Antichrist who denies the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22).

Christ is the living Son of God, who is holy and true. Only He can open and close doors. He is more than able to empower His servants to remain standing against the wiles of the devil. If they keep on resisting and rejecting the false god of this age, and specifically also the spirit of his false christ, they will escape the coming tribulation and not be among the subjects of the Antichrist: "Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth" (Rev. 3:10). When Christ returns to the earth as King they will rule with Him in His kingdom.

Laodicea – under the domination of Mammon, the god of wealth



The evil Mammon “buys” the souls of millions of people and makes them glory in their own virtues and abilities.

A spirit of pride, arrogance, and self-reliance prevailed in the church of Laodicea. They were full of themselves and gloried in their own excellence. That was humanism in its most extreme form, and we know that the devil sits on the throne of a fallen man's heart. Their attitude and lifestyle was so repulsive to the Lord that He completely dissociated Himself from them: “So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth. Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing – and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:16-17). An alarming situation prevails in this church. As a result of their humanistic orientation they only have a horizontal view of religion which is based on the socio-economic aspects of their existence. The vertical, man-God relationship receives virtually no attention as the humanistic and self-reliant man (particularly of the modern age) has become his own god and therefore the master of his own destiny.

The philosophy which these wealthy people have adopted is incompatible with the Christian religion because they are servants of the god of money – the devil. Jesus said: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon” (Matt. 6:24).

Mammon may be the god of this fallen world, but he is a defeated foe who will soon be stripped of all the power and influence which he succeeded in gaining over millions of deceived people. Jesus Christ is “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God” (Rev. 3:14). As the “Amen” (“so be it”) He is the final authority in God's creation, who is more than able to fulfil all God's promises to us: “For all the promises of God in Him are ‘Yes’ and in Him ‘Amen’ to the glory of God through us” (2 Cor. 1:20). If you keep on following Him and gain victory over the enemy in His Name, you will rule with Him in His kingdom: “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21).

Are you one of the overcomers who have not been led astray by the Evil One through some of the many guises in which he approaches, deceives, dominates and ultimately destroys people? Jesus says about such a person: “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of my God...” (Rev. 3:12). As Christians we carry the name of Christ. Can people see in your life, in your attitudes and behaviour that you truly belong to Him and serve Him with all your heart? If so, persevere to the end. If not, repent while the opportunity is still offered to you in this late hour.