

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

[Essay delivered at the District Convention of the South Atlantic District meeting at Bay Pines Lutheran Church in Seminole, Florida from July 7-9, 1982]

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The words which you have chosen as the theme of your convention essay are found in the second part of the second-last verse of Holy Scripture, Revelation 22:20. They are the prayer of the Apostle John, responding to the promise of Jesus in verse 20a: "Yes, I am coming soon." Seven times in the Book of Revelation the Lord had spoken of his early, sudden, and unexpected return. Obviously, our Lord had been teaching the apostle (and all believers) to expect (and long for) that return.

The prayer is the response of faith, affirmative and urgent. Amen; this is most certainly true; so shall it be. Jesus' servant John prayed this in exile, when he was very old, when the pressure was on him to acknowledge Caesar as Lord.

In the year 67 A.D. Emperor Nero had been proclaimed "Lord of the whole world." By the time of Domitian's reign (81-96), it was the custom to introduce imperial edicts with the words, "Our Lord and God commands...." So the emperor was a divine person and loyal subjects of the Roman Empire were to acknowledge him as such. A sacrifice at the imperial altar, a pinch of incense before his statue, some act to prove allegiance to the state and to the religion of the state. John refused to do it and he was a leader of those who refused to do it. In 93, or thereabouts, he was exiled to the island of Patmos, about 60 miles from Ephesus in the Aegean Sea. He was there because he confessed, "Jesus is Lord," and refused to go through the "formality" of acknowledging Domitian as a divinity.

To address Jesus as "Lord," as John does in this prayer, is also to confess him as the living God. The word for Lord (kyrios) was the word used in the Greek Old Testament to translate the special covenant name of God which appears in the Hebrew Old Testament: "Jehovah," or "Yahweh." To call Jesus "Lord" is to identify him as the God of free and faithful grace, the Savior-God of Israel. To address Jesus in prayer is also to confess that he rose from the dead. sixty or more years after his crucifixion, death, and burial this prayer is saying: "On the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father, from whence he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead."

The Old Testament people of God prayed for the LORD to come and ransom captive Israel. God heard and answered and came, as the priest Zacharias and the widow Anna and Simeon confessed. The New Testament church prayed this prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus," at the Lord's Table when they gathered for his Supper. In the early second century, and almost certainly before that, they said (in Aramaic): "Maranatha (Didache 10:6)." They asked for his presence in the Supper: "Our Lord, come." The same word expressed the truth that his presence in the Supper is already assured: "Our Lord has come. And, it looked forward to his visible return: "Come, our Lord."

The church has prayed the prayer for nearly nineteen centuries. Not only in connection with the Sacrament of his Body and Blood, not only in the Advent Season, not only in the "common table prayer." But whenever believers feel the pressure of a hostile and unbelieving environment, recognize their vulnerability to the devil's attacks, know the temptation to grow weary in well-doing, they pray: "Come, Lord Jesus. Lord, hasten your return."

There are times when we simply rejoice in God's salvation and are happy to enjoy his creation. There are times when his blessings are so evident in our lives and he gives us so much joy in being his people on earth and doing his work that we think we might like to live here forever. We have sought his kingdom and righteousness and he has added much. At those times, we may not especially feel like expressing the words of this prayer.

The Lord gave us the Book of Revelation and taught us to pray "Amen, Come Lord Jesus" so that we do not grow too comfortable in this world, become complacent. Especially, however, he gave them to us for our assurance in difficult, discouraging, perilous times.

The prayer is a "now" prayer. I'm sure that's why you chose it as a theme. The questions which President Wiechmann chose as "parts" for this essay make it clear that he regards it as a prayer for today: What should we be doing today? What should we be watching for every day? What does the Lord promise us now?

The answers to those questions must be found in a "now" book. The daily newspapers, the nightly newscasts, the weekly news magazines can help to make us realize that we need answers; they can't provide them. The current best-selling novel, the latest computer game, the academy award-winning movie might make us forget the questions and that would not be spiritually healthy. We must look for the answers to those questions in the same place we found the prayer: in "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place (Re 1:1)." We are his servants; we have ears to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22)." This revelation was intended for the church of all time and for every Christian. It does provide timely answers for the timely questions which provide the framework for this essay.

After what you have read and heard so far, it will not surprise you to hear that the essay will not reflect the careful and artistic structure of the Book of Revelation. We should say something about its structure, however, as well as its purpose and proper interpretation.

Between the introduction (1:1-8) and the conclusion (22:6-21) there are seven visions. In the first three we see the church confronted by and contending with the powers of this world. These visions are "The Son of Man in the midst of his church (1:9-3:22) ," "The seven seals (4:1-7:17) ," and "The seven trumpets (8:1-11:19)." In the latter four visions we see the Lord of the church opposed by the powers of darkness and triumphing over them. They are "The three beasts and the Lamb's progressive victory (12:1-14:20)," "The seven bowls (15:1-16:21)," "The fate of Babylon (17:1-19:10) ," and "Judgment and the New Jerusalem (19:11-22:5)."

The visions are full of vivid symbols and fantastic creatures. They employ the numbers 3, 7, 10, and 12 (and their multiples) symbolically. There are 406 verses in the Revelation and a check in Nestle's index reveals 314 Old Testament quotations or allusions, a clear signal that this Book of Revelation is saying: "All the ancient prophecies are fulfilled in Christ; His work is the fulfillment of God's promises; what happens in this new age is what he foretold." The book, like all of Scripture, focuses in Christ and his saving work and his final victory. Sometimes that is done in plain prose, sometimes in fantastic imagery, sometimes in obviously symbolic language. A literal interpretation of this book requires that we treat this symbolic language as symbolic, that we treat visions as visions.

Each of the seven visions presents the same basic facts and truths from various aspects, sometimes in vivid detail, sometimes with the broadest strokes. There is conflict between the Kingdom of God (his gracious rule, saving sinners) and the Kingdom of Satan (his lying, murdering attempt to undo God's grace and Christ's Kingdom of God finally triumphs; victory is already assured).

Each vision spans the entire period of the New Testament, from Christ's birth to the Day of his second coming, including today. The Apocalypse does not line up the church's history or world history in sequence, providing a schedule of events to be checked off. It does not provide a blueprint in detail of events which we can mark on our calendars. Rather, it sheds light on the entire history of the church in the world, the course of the gospel and of opposition to it, in such a way that we can say of all history: "There God was judging the nations and controlling his events and preserving his elect, and that's what he's doing now." And, if we will hear and believe it, we can say: "In all of this, Christ is the Victor and we are winners with him." When the times are out of joint, when disaster strikes, when things seem terribly wrong—in history or in current events-- we can know that the just and holy God is punishing unbelief and at the same time delivering his own people from every evil.

The Book of Revelation speaks vividly and frequently of our Lord's return to judge the living and the dead. It does not tell us that date and it was not written to provide us with clues so that we could determine the date. What it does do is assure us that he will come quickly, suddenly, unexpectedly.

The Revelation was addressed to seven churches in the Roman Province of Asia, which was western Asia Minor, which is part of modern Turkey. Those were not the only churches in that province, necessarily, but they formed a circuit on the imperial post road. They are addressed in chapters 2 and 3, in sequence, as though John were setting up a mail route.

As noted earlier, the purpose of "the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him," was "to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw (1:1f)" This information was to strengthen them in a time of testing, to renew their hope when they might be tempted to despair, to bring them good news in tribulation, to assure them of final victory in Christ.

It is important for us to keep that practical purpose in mind. They needed encouragement right then; a detailed prediction of events in the centuries to follow, while it might satisfy some people's curiosity, would not give them what they needed just then. For those first recipients of John's writing, this was a now book. It was not futuristic science fiction. They read (or heard) it, and they understood. Since then it has been the subject of much idle speculation. Amateurs and scholars in every generation misread it. It has spawned sects and cults in every century. We struggle with it. But John's first readers understood.

Its purpose remains what it was: to warn us of the devil's dirty tricks and to point us to Christ and the final victory in him. So let us read it in its historical setting, let its prophecies embrace the entire New Testament period, let it speak to us in our deepest needs. It is a book for today, revealing "him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father(1:5f)."

I have wrestled with the questions which this essay is to answer, prayerfully. I am sure the Apocalypse answers them. I have struggled to find a way in which its answers could be presented in a coherent way. I have decided to proceed by briefly examining each of the seven letters to the seven churches and let them provide answers which are timely. There will be limited reference to the contents of the other six visions, but we will concentrate on the seven letters which are contained in the "Vision of the Son of Man in the midst of His Church."

While the seven letters were addressed to historical churches in seven locales, they contain encouragement and admonition for all churches at all times: the Spirit says these things to the churches. They are also personal, intended for everyone who has ears to hear and who knows that his hope of the final victory is in Christ alone.

At **Ephesus** there was an orthodox church which left its first love (2:1-7). What the Lord said to that church was recorded for our learning.

We should be watching for any symptoms of what was ailing that church. The Lord said to the congregation at Ephesus: "You have forsaken your first love (2:4)." Here was a church that knew what the Lord's business was about, and they did it. Here was a church that got going when the going got tough. It practiced church discipline. It put false apostles to the test of God's Word and refused to accept or tolerate their errors. The Lord was not unappreciative of those characteristics and that record. But his evaluation of that congregation was: "You have forsaken your first love."

How did that show itself? Was their discipline legalistic: "Three steps of Matthew 18 and out, so we can maintain a clean congregation here"? Had their witness to unbelievers become cynical and calculating: "People like that never make good members anyway"? Had their worship grown so stereotyped that it was all form and no fervor? Had it become so individualistic and innovative that visitors from sister churches were bewildered at the way everyone seemed to just be doing his own thing? Had they failed to administer welfare and relief in any organized way because they didn't think that was the church's business? Or, had they organized their charity so that it became the business of a few experts in that sort of thing? In their contacts with other Christians had they demonstrated a hypercritical unwillingness to walk in the shoes of others for the purpose of at least understanding them? Was their orthodoxy bought at the price of love? Did they pose false alternatives: "We can be loving or we can be orthodox"? Had their labor in the Lord become drudgery? Had their perseverance taken on a certain bitterness? Did they rationalize: "It is our concern for doctrine that hampers us in evangelism," when the real problem was that they were lacking in love for souls?

We do not know how that manifested itself in the church at Ephesus. We do know what we should be watching for in ourselves: lovelessness or "less-love-ness." In the seventy-eighth generation of the church, the sixth generation of our Synod's existence, after one generation of our mission in the southeastern United States we should watch for signs that we are no longer amazed by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, astounded by the love of God, responsive to the Spirit's prompting. It is not orthodoxy that dulls love but a lack of love that makes orthodoxy dead.

What should we be doing? "Remember," says the Savior, "the height from which you have fallen (2:5)." There was a time when you were "high" on love for him who first loved you. Remember? Remember! Then, "Repent and do the things you did at first (2:5b)." Repentance is a turning from and a turning to. Turn from self-love, love of things, love of leisure, lovelessness. Turn back to the things you did at first.

What were the things that they-- that we-- "did at first"? Rejoice that God has given you his name in Holy Baptism, turned you from an orphan on the way to hell to an heir of eternal life. Consider the practical significance of that washing with water: daily drowning of loveless Old Adam, daily renewal of the man who imitates Christ's love. Appreciate the Word of Life as you did when you were learning the story of salvation and first realized that God had done these things for every human being and that therefore he has done them for you. Speak again as a child to the Father. Cherish the Supper where the Host is also the Meal, where you receive him and thus receive life. Cherish the Table where your brothers and sisters in Christ gather as a family and share in the foretaste of the eternal banquet. Deal compassionately with those brothers and sisters, be considerate and caring with your fellow human beings whom you don't understand or whom you understand too well. Love as you have been loved from eternity: with no illusions,

but seeing the need and acting on it. Don't wait for some emotional "zing," but recognize the neighbor's need, determine the Lord's will, and do it. The Lord doesn't say, "Remember and feel bad." He says, "Remember and return." Return and do better. Not necessarily heroic deeds, but practical service. Not great feats of self-sacrifice, but a cup of cold water for Christ's sake. Not soaring emotion, but everyday loyalty.

When we as individuals remember and repent and return to our first love, then the church is doing that. We don't wait for the corporate body to pass a resolution of repentance, to show the fruits of repentance, to show evidence of revived love. The Lord makes this a very individual thing; he calls on me to repent.

But if I do not heed him and you do not heed him then we will forfeit the grace of God, the light of the gospel, the mission he has given us to carry out. "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place (2:5)." No synod or church body can presume to have a secure and permanent place in God's scheme of things. We should expect the Lord's constant testing of our reason for being, and the test which he applies here is love.

What should we be doing? Certainly, we should be doing the things which the Lord commended in the church at Ephesus. They worked hard and they didn't give up. They exercised doctrinal discipline. They hated the practices of the Nicolaitanes, which the Lord also hates (2:6). The Nicolaitanes turned the liberty which we have in Christ into license. They turned the forgiveness of sins into an opportunity to violate plain morality. They compromised with paganism in the public festivals. Today, they would participate in the various services of civic religion. They would give churchly sanction to easy divorce and promiscuity. They would develop a marriage ceremony for homosexuals who wanted to build an "enduring relationship" and they would try to sanctify "living together" with the Word of God and prayer. The Lord hates these things; the church at Ephesus hated them; we are to express and exercise the same holy hatred. But, paradoxically, we are to express and exercise this holy hatred as loving people.

Where is that love to come from? It is the gift of God and it comes from his Word: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (2:7a)." Like faith and hope, love is nurtured when we give attention to the Spirit's Word. "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near (1:3)." Even this last-accepted, least-loved, much-abused Book of Revelation can do that for us.

What the Lord promises us now is that wherever we are, no matter how isolated, no matter how tempted we are to compromise, no matter how our love is rejected and abused, his strength is ours. He "holds the seven stars (the churches) in his right hand." He is present to preserve and prosper our work: he "walks among the seven golden lampstands (2:1)."

What the Lord promises us now is this: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (2:7)." He who by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil once overcame s been by the tree of Golgotha overcome. Christ overcame him and we are in Christ and we are victors with him; eternal life is already ours.

At **Smyrna** there was a persecuted church which was, nevertheless, rich (2:8-11). How rich they were in the things that really count is evident from the fact that the Lord had no rebuke for them, no failing to call to their attention.

But that did not mean that their walk with Christ was an easy stroll in the botanical gardens: "I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich ! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan (2:9)." There was strong opposition from local Judaism. The exalted Savior's verdict on these people is essentially what

he pronounced on certain disaffected Jews during his ministry: “‘If you were Abraham's children,’ said Jesus, ‘then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does... You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies (Jn 8:39-41:44).’”

The Adversary, the slanderer, the liar, the murderer was doing his dirty thing in Smyrna. He was using religious people to do it. They slandered the Christians, bore false witness against them to the Roman authorities. There was pressure on the Jews, too, during Domitian's reign. It was convenient for them to point the finger away from the "hatred of the human race" of which Rome accused them and point it at those atheistic and treasonous Christians who would not burn incense at Caesar's altar or acknowledge the emperor as "Lord." The fact was that the Christians did not acknowledge Domitian as a god. The slander was that they refused because they were irreligious and subversive. Perhaps there were other slanders as well; these would do, for they were capital offenses. Meanwhile, as a result of the bad-mouthing that went on, the Christians were suffering economic hardship.

Some of the believers at Smyrna would be imprisoned, the church would suffer persecution for a time, there would be the temptation to deny the Savior in the face of death.

What should we be watching for? Without being melodramatic about it, without feeling sorry for ourselves, we can all probably say today that we have been slandered by religious people and organizations who regard us as smug and aloof naysayers-- always against what well-meaning religionists try to do, satisfied to live and worship apart from American folk religion and ecumenical undertakings. The great central government has chosen our little Synod as defendant in a number of issues relating to the operation of our schools. Involvement in courts of law, at the level of the local congregation, high school association, or synod always constitutes a drain on funds that were intended to underwrite the church's mission. It does not edify the faithful or attract the unbeliever, usually.

Without becoming paranoid, we must realize that the devil is always working on new devices to distract us from the real work of the church, to discourage us in our walk as Christians. We have no reason to assume that we are exempt from the worst that Satan and his synagogue can do. "If Christ wore a crown of thorns, we should not expect people to place wreaths and roses on our heads," said Luther. In some generations (may God prevent it in ours) there is bloody persecution. Always there is a certain amount of pressure. Sometimes there are concentration camps and firing squads. Always there is a certain amount of ridicule.

"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood ?' Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed (6:9-11)." Until the Lord returns, there will be martyrs. In this century there have already been more people (in absolute numbers) put to death for their connection with the name Jesus than in all the centuries before. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

What the Lord promises us now and for any future he may have in mind for us is implicit in his self-description at the beginning of this letter to his own at Smyrna: "These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again (2:8)." He was there at the

beginning of creation and will be there in the day when all history is wrapped up. He is the eternal God and everything is in his control. He is because he came to life again. Our Lord is not a dead teacher; we have not convened here to honor the memory of a moralist who died too young. He lives!

The old evil foe means deadly woe. The old dragon keeps thrashing around. The lion stalks his prey. Death lies in ambush. Whatever uncharted and unimagined dangers lie in the future, Christ is there. Even in death the Son of Man who died and rose again will be with us. Meanwhile, he has put a limit on the time of testing: "ten days (2:10)." It will be bad enough; it will not be easy. But there is a limit and he has set it.

He promises: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life (2:10)." The victor's crown, a gift of grace. "He who overcomes will not be hurt at all in the second death (2:11)." He promises us now that we will not even be singed by the fires of hell.

Meanwhile, what should we be doing? "Be faithful." Be full of faith. Among the first readers of this letter was a young man whose name suggests that his faith brought forth much fruit, Polycarp. He lived to become a very old man, the supervising pastor of the church in Smyrna. Some seventy years after this letter was written, Polycarp was called upon by the Roman authorities to deny Christ and save his life. He responded: "Fourscore and six years he has been faithful to me. Can I be unfaithful to him now?" February 23, 165 he was burned at the stake. But he will not be hurt at all by the second death.

When we were confirmed the pastor asked us, "Do you...intend to continue steadfast in the confession of this church, and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it...? Do you intend... to remain true to the Triune God, even unto death?" What was the answer to those questions? In every case, "Yes, with the help of God." The faithful Lord who calls on us to be faithful is the One who keeps us in the faith

Would to God that I might, even
As the martyred saints of old,
With the helping hand of Heaven,
Steadfast stand in battle bold!
O my God, I pray Thee,
In the combat stay me.
Grant that I may ever be
Loyal, staunch, and true to Thee. (TLH 470.3)

At **Pergamum**, there was a confessing church which neglected discipline (2:12-17). It took courage to confess in that city: Satan had his throne there. It was a great center of idolatry and Jesus' faithful witness Antipas had been put to death there (2:13).

What comfort it must have been to Christians in such a place where the Adversary had his throne to hear Jesus say: "I know where you live." What an assurance it is for us! He knows the environment in which you work, where your children go to school, what the devil's special tactics are in your metropolitan area. He knows that there is a neopaganism of the worst kind turned loose in our land. The abortion mills offer 1,000,000 or more human beings to the child-eater Moloch every year. The love-goddess Venus obsesses the minds and takes over the bodies of adolescents of all ages. In the teens it is sowing wild oats and among married couples it is called open marriage and the middle-aged suffer midlife crises which propel them into what used

to be called adultery. The press reports it and pseudoscience encourages it and society accepts it and how often are we really shocked anymore?

The Lord knows where we live, but so do all kinds of doorbell pushers. They exhort us to hug our kids today and teach us that "family is forever." They are red, white and blue Americans. They use the name of Jesus Christ and claim to be his Latter Day Saints, but he is only one of their gods. They have given up polygamy only to embrace polytheism. Others offer a "full gospel" which really means the gospel of Jesus Christ plus whatever laws and requirements they may add to whip people into line and make them doubt that salvation is God's free gift. Others are zealous to teach us about "Jehovah God" and use the Bible to do that. But they have robbed the Bible of its historical content, have thrown away the key to the Scriptures (Christ crucified), and have denied the Lord who bought them.

We should be watching for the paganism of irreligion and organized religion. We should be confessing Christ's name in the face of all this confusion and anarchy. We should be living by the promise of Jesus that we will be admitted to his heavenly banquet (2:17).

The church at Pergamum did that, but the Lord had to remonstrate with those Christians: "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality (2: 14)." The reference is to what is recorded in Numbers 25:1.2, the sin of the Israelites with the gods and the women of Moab.

What some members of the congregation were engaged in was probably prompted by "practical" considerations. To practice one's trade or profession or business required membership in guilds. Membership in the guilds involved participation in the sacrifices to the patron deities of the various crafts and occupations. That was idolatry, of course. Then the meat that had been offered to idols was shared by the guild members-- they had a banquet. It was not unusual after the banquet for all the guild members to visit the temple prostitutes or to make other arrangements for engaging in sexual immorality.

Now, the guild members in the church evidently argued: "Our livelihood depends on it. We have to belong. We need to cultivate and maintain these business contacts. It doesn't really mean anything, and our kids will starve if we leave the guilds." The church in Pergamum tolerated it. Perhaps they said, "We won't have any members left if we discipline these people. We can certainly understand the situation and exercise a little charity. If we excommunicate them, then they won't hear the gospel at all anymore. Besides, what if word gets out that we're cracking down on these things ? Who will ever want to join our congregation ?" And so, they also found it possible to tolerate the teaching of the Nicolaitanes (2:15). Lifestyle became doctrine and the gospel would certainly be lost.

What should we be watching for? We should watch and pray that we do not grow lax in discipling through that kind of rationalization. We have seen in our generation the havoc that can be wrought in a Lutheran synod that lets considerations of bad press and a black eye in the media override the need to exercise discipline. False tolerance is not an expression of love. It is not love to let the sinner continue in his sin, the false teacher enjoy equal time and status. It only confirms them in their delinquency. It teaches indifference to others, causes the weak to fall, discourages sister congregations, "justifies" the world in its unbelief.

As we try to grow numerically, broaden our financial base, do the building that needs to be done, open the school and keep it open, help fund the Synod's budget, we may be tempted to neglect discipline. If we work with one eye on the world's reaction, seek its approbation, hope to

attract a few influential people by demonstrating that we are not narrow, we may hear (if we still have ears to hear) our Lord saying: "I have a few things against you."

What should we be doing? If we have been discipling and disciplining (the same thing really), then we should certainly continue to do so with the means the Lord has given us. That is, we should continue to teach his Word in its purity and administer his sacraments as he instituted them. It is the gospel which makes disciples and keeps them and gives them maturity. If we have not been discipling through the faithful use of those means then, says he who wields the sharp double-edged sword of grace and judgment: "Repent." If we are not finally ready to take final steps against those who teach and live contrary to God's Word, the Lord has a few things against us and says, "Repent."

In **Thyatira** there was a productive church which compromised (2:18-29). The Lord said to them: "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first (2:19)." A church that was doing more than it had done at first! Does that sound like your congregation? A stronger program of education, support for more workers, a better evangelism outreach, improved giving? Does that sound like our Synod? Any survey of our history suggests that we are doing more than we did at first.

But, before Thyatira can bask in that praise, "the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze (2:1) says: "Nevertheless." "Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols (2:20)."

Whether or not this woman's name was actually Jezebel, she was doing what King Ahab's wife did. She was working on the inside, in the midst of the people of God, to involve them in idolatry and to engage them in sexual immorality. That mixing of God's truth with a measure of false religion should be accompanied by fast and loose sexual practices is not startling to anyone who pays attention to the cult scene. Historically and currently, the pattern has been repeated. A strong leader with a smooth tongue and a persuasive manner arises within a Christian context, teaches a few fascinating doctrines without explicitly denying the truth of biblical Christianity, and eventually begins rewriting the sixth Commandment: "Thou shalt commit adultery in the name of high religion."

This was happening in the church at Thyatira. The woman who was making it happen called herself a prophetess. She and her adherents had the gall to say that other Christians should learn "Satan's deep secrets"-- presumably so that they could become free, strong, enlightened Christians. She and her adherents were too informed and advanced to worry about false gods or to live simple, God-fearing, chaste and decent lives.

What should we be watching for? We should watch for any notion that Christians can play with fire and not get burned. We should beware of the threat from the inside, the temptation to compromise God's Word. We should be on guard against anyone in the church who proposes an "advanced" or "enlightened" teaching which does not agree with God's plain Word and Luther's pure doctrine. In a sex-saturated society we must beware of the heresy that "it doesn't matter how you live as long as you believe right." We should be alert against a false tolerance that poses as Christian maturity, that excuses sin and calls it by fancy names.

"Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,

We first endure, then pity, then embrace." --Alexander Pope

What should we be doing? The Lord did not explicitly command the church at Thyatira to exercise church discipline, not in this letter. It had failed to do so, in the name of tolerance. Now he was going to do it in a harsh and dramatic way: "I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead (2:21-23)." Is not the implicit teaching of this letter that we should exercise discipline in matters of faith and life, that the Lord regards this as serious business, that we are all in grave danger if we fail to do it, that it is a shameful thing if the Lord has to do it another way because we have failed to do it his way?

What should we be doing? "Only hold on to what you have until I come (2:25)." What they had and what we have, what he wants us to hold on to until he comes, is the gospel. We are to hold on to that so that we do not try to combat today's new immorality with the old moralism, legalism, pietism which try to motivate Christians with blue laws and prohibitions. God helping us, we are to hold to the truth that Christ freed us from sin, not to sin. We are to hold on to the "faith alone, Scripture alone, grace alone" and the proper distinction between law and gospel of our Lutheran Confessions, because they are a true exposition of God's Word. God nurturing us, we are to hold on to our liberty in Christ, which permits us to recognize that things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden are "indifferent." We are to hold on to and cultivate the evangelical sensitivity that realizes that we must not use our liberty in Christ in a way that causes brothers and sisters in Christ to sin or causes the unbelievers to despise the message of God's Word. God instructing us, we are to hold on to our gospel freedom so that we do not despise the gifts of sex and food and drink and recreation which God has created for the enjoyment of his redeemed people.

Meanwhile, the Lord for whose coming we wait and pray promises us himself now: "the morning star (2:28)." The morning star ushers in a new day, a better future. Jesus is the morning star. Throughout this Book of Revelation he makes it clear that the future holds temptation, tribulation, testing. But we are entering that future with him, in his grace, and that makes it bright.

In **Sardis** (3:1-6) there was a prestigious church which was dead: "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead (3:1)." Where did they get that reputation in the eyes of men? Good, statistics, efficient administration, model programs, an enviable record in Christian education? Were they the first of the seven to go off subsidy? Whatever it was that gained them prestige was not what caused their spiritual death. But it did not prevent their falling under the Lord's verdict: "You are dead." There was no persecution there, no heresy, no failure to discipline. But there was no life. Restating it, there was a certain lack of integrity: "I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God (3:2)."

What should we be watching for? We should watch lest our trust shifts from what our Savior has done for us to what we are doing, or what people think we are doing, or what we think we are doing. If a church or an individual is dead, that means that faith has died out. We should watch lest we mistake the sleep of death for peace with God and one another. We should watch out not to be so elated with our reputation that we are no longer able to recognize ourselves as lost and condemned creatures who have been rescued by God's grace alone. We should not be complacent about our biblical orthodoxy as though we could not lose it. We should watch lest it become dead orthodoxy. Our singing can be impressive, our praying fervent, our preaching eloquent, our teaching pure. If these are not from a trusting heart they are dead works.

God can still use them to benefit others, but woe to us. We should beware lest habitual prayer become mere habit, regular proportionate giving become mere routine, upright living become mere conformity.

What should we be doing? Even if we are not dead, the fact remains that we have no spiritual life or capacity in ourselves. Therefore, what the Lord of the church says to the congregation at Sardis he says to us: "Wake up: Strengthen what remains...Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent (3:3)."

How can a dead church wake up? What capacity for awakening does a church member who is spiritually dead have? What potential for revival would a dead synod have? No potential, no capacity, no ability. Then what can possibly happen when the Lord says, "Wake up " Ask Jairus, the widow of Nain, the family of Lazarus. Ask about the power of the Word, the gracious power behind the Word and in the Word, and its results. The gospel which calls for faith creates faith; the Lord who says "Wake up" is waking us up.

When we honestly consider our deeds and the motives from which they spring, we can only concur in the Lord's evaluation of them: they are not complete. When we diagnose our love for God and man, testing it by the standard of health which was demonstrated by him who loved us and gave himself for us we realize that it is always "about to die." If we try to evaluate the quality and quantity of our faith, if we seek reassurance by introspection, only despair remains.

What to do? "Remember...what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent (3:3)." What we have received and heard is the good news of God's free grace in Christ. To obey it is to trust God's promises alone-- not our intentions, decisions, "spiritual" resources, positive thinking. To repent is to turn from every evil work, every self-righteousness; turn to the blood and righteousness of Jesus.

What does our Lord promise us now? "He who overcomes will...be dressed in white. I will never erase his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels (3:4,5)." The Lord is encouraging us to look forward to the day when we sit down at the heavenly feast, clothed in the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness (Is 61:10). He is assuring us that our names are on the guest list. He is promising to tell the Father and the angels: "Yes, I know him; yes, she belongs here; yes, they are my guests." These are promises which look to the future, but what they promise we have now by faith, and by these promises we overcome.

There was a struggling church at **Philadelphia** which the Lord promised to prosper (3:7-13). The church had little strength, but the Lord set before it an open door (3:8). The church had to contend with the opposition and slander of the synagogue, but the Lord promised to bring those false Jews to acknowledge the Christians' love for the Lord. The church was not as prestigious as some of its sisters, but the Lord knew it and promised to acknowledge it.

There are those among our brethren who have seen close parallels between that church in Philadelphia and our own Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Why not ? Struggling with little strength, keeping his Word, slandered. We can identify with those things. But we do not gather in conventions to feel sorry for ourselves. Rather, we want to appropriate the Lord's promises which are included in this letter, apply his warnings to ourselves, be about the assignments he gives us.

What does the Lord promise us now? "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut (3:8)." What the Lord promises, what he has demonstrated in the history of our Synod (and of this district) for the past twenty-five years, what we are invited to lay hold on before he comes (soon) are greater opportunities and responsibilities to be about his business.

The open door is the invitation to witness, to evangelize, to preach the gospel, to train and send workers. "What he opens, no one can shut (3:7)." God forbid that we fail to see the open door where he presents it, fail to enter where he provides the opening.

"I know your deeds...I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name (3:8)." The world may not even know you exist. The heterodox and apostate churches may never acknowledge you have a right to exist. But I know your deeds.

The Lord promised to preserve that church at Philadelphia from the hour of trial that was impending, that was "going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth (3:10)." We will not presume that this verse guarantees for our segment of the church for all time that it will not suffer active persecution. But we can be sure that whatever the future holds, the Lord is promising to preserve our souls, keep us in the faith, guard us against the ultimate disaster of denying his name and losing our crown. That is not because we keep the Word so well, but because he is gracious, because he who promised is "holy and true (3:7)." He does not promise exemption from suffering on earth, but release from all suffering in heaven.

"I know of a morning bright and fair
When tidings of joy shall wake us,
When songs from on high shall fill the air
And God to His glory take us,
When Jesus shall bid us rise from sleep.
--How joyous that hour of waking!" (TLH 592.3)

He promises, "I am coming soon (3:11)." He promises a permanent place in the fellowship of his elect (3:12a). He promises to brand us indelibly with God's name, the church's name, his own name (3:12b). That will say to the devil and to Satan's synagogue and to all enemies of the truth: "Hands off ! These are my own."

What should we be watching for? Obviously, we should watch for the open doors which the Lord sets before us. Marxism, Islam, and the nationalism of emerging nations in the "third world" have slammed many doors shut. But there are other doors and there are other means. There are staff needs to be met in the countries where the Lord has permitted us to work until now. There are metropolitan areas in our own land awaiting a second resident pastor. There are neighbors and friends and relatives dying in their sins because no one has put the Crucified before their eyes. There are possibilities in broadcasting and the ministry of the printed word which we have barely begun to explore.

It is important to notice in this letter to Philadelphia that the Lord had a mission assignment for that orthodox church. He commended their orthodoxy and he pointed them to the open door. We should watch for and reject the notion that faithfulness to the whole Word of God is some kind of handicap in evangelism, that to be confessional is a detriment to gospel witness, that we could be more "successful" in missions if we were not so "picky" about right teaching. The church at Philadelphia and the Lord's testimony concerning it bear witness that concern for the truth and concern for souls belong together. The moralism, legalism and earthbound activities of those who have "liberalized" God's Word bear testimony to the fallacy of posing false alternatives.

We should watch for any slackening of purpose, of losing our sense of urgency. Jesus' "soon" may not seem soon to us. "In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our

fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation (2 Pe 3:3.4).” The Book of Revelation was written to make us yearn for that coming, to assure us that he is coming, but also to awaken and sustain in us an urgency to be about his mission in view of his coming.

What should we be doing? "Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown (3:11)." What they had, what we have, is the Word of Life.

Holding on to the Word does not mean merely retaining it, paying lip service to it, adhering to the "formal principle" of theology. It means taking it to heart, heeding its warnings, trusting its promises, acting on its directives.

Again, holding on to the Word does not mean hoarding it or hiding it. It is something to be shared, as any decent human being would share food with a beggar, medicine with a dying man. Really holding on to the Word is being ready to give it away. What we should be doing is what we are doing and we should always be doing it better, more clearly, with a greater willingness to risk rebuff or ridicule and leave the ultimate result of our witness to God.

If, by the grace of God, we as a Synod are like the church at Philadelphia then let us, with the help of God, be like the church at Philadelphia.

The church at **Laodicea** was a lukewarm church, and the Lord called it to repentance (3:14-22). "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold-- I am about to spit you out of my mouth (3:15.16)." The ruler of God's creation is repelled, nauseated by those who are "ingloriously neutral in the things that matter most." He will not tolerate a confession that says: "Here I stand, but I could do something else if you prefer."

What should we be watching for? We should be watching for a respectable religiosity which can take the gospel or leave it. We should be watching for an attitude in ourselves that is certainly not against Jesus and his church's mission, but that could get along just as well without them. We should be watching for a spirit in ourselves that can be equally comfortable in going along with the world in its values and morals or in conforming to what the Word of God requires of us.

How do Christians get that way ? Those in Laodicea got that way through a misguided sense of their own sufficiency in spiritual things. "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing (3:17a).'" They belonged to the right church, mouthed the correct creed, had been baptized according to the proper form, "paid their dues," went to divine services, had the doctrine of the Lord's Supper straight, held office from time to time.

But they were in fact spiritually "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (3:17)."

Who of us has never wondered whether the verdict "lukewarm" and the threat "I am about to spit you out" applies to us? If my eternal salvation depends on always burning to do the Savior's will, always yearning to share Christ's love, always turning fervently to the Spirit for gifts to use in God's service, then I am lost. If Christ is going to spit out everyone who is not hot to win souls, care for souls, pray for souls, I am lost. I am lost. "Wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." Here the Savior preaches the law to show me my sins, my lost state; to show me where I will go if I am left to myself.

What should we be doing? "I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see (3:18)." We are told that fine jewelry, quality cloth and medicinal salve were products of Thyatira. What the Lord is offering under these apt pictures is simply the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. We have no currency that can buy such gifts,

no line of credit to secure what we need. We will have to rely on his generosity, his gracious good will. We can:

“You who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.” (Is 55:1)

What could warm them up, warm us up? The gospel. No beating of drums, flourish of trumpets, leading of cheers. No resolve on our part, no decision of the will, no plan for self-improvement, nothing we might generate. Only the good news which tells what Christ has done, that he has done it for us, that it is all done. What warms us up is that the Lord who rebukes and disciplines us with the harsh words of this letter also loves us, is doing it because he loves us.

What should we be doing? "Be earnest and repent (3:19)." Again, what he wants from us is what only he can give us. Augustine said it: "Give what you command and then command what you will."

There is more in this letter, more in the Seven Letters, much more in the Book of Revelation than we can examine today. There is much more in the limited material we have touched on than this essay has presented. Before concluding, there is something we should do. We should look briefly at Chapter 20 of this great Revelation and see that the Lord does not promise a future reign of 1000 years upon the earth and that we should not be watching for it.

One of the reasons that the Apocalypse was the last book to gain acceptance by all the churches was that various heretical and sectarian groups had made it "their" book. They had made it their book because Chapter 20 was their chapter. Chiliasts, millennialists, people who look for a 1000-year reign of Christ on earth before the final judgment, have appeared in the church at various times and places since the mid-second century. Not only among such cults as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons, but also among many conservative Protestants, the doctrine of the millennium is held or tolerated.

In a book which records a vision, a book full of symbols and symbolic numbers, there is this chapter full of symbols and the number 1000. To read this chapter literalistically is to be a millennialist. To read this chapter literally (according to the author's intention) is to recognize that it employs symbolism and must be interpreted in the light of other Scripture passages which do not speak symbolically.

A verse-by-verse exegesis of this chapter would constitute an essay in itself, and we do not have the time. But let us note some important facts about Revelation 20.

It does not say that our Lord's Second Coming will usher in the period of 1000 years. It does not speak of a bodily resurrection when it speaks of the "first resurrection (20:4,5)," but of the resurrection of the souls of the martyrs. The "second resurrection," the resurrection of the bodies of all the dead, is described in verses 12 and 13 and it will occur on the day of judgment. That is the only one that will occur. It will include those whose names are written in the book of life as well as those whose names are not there inscribed (12,15). This accords with John 5:28,29-- "...A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." It agrees with John 6: 40--"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." This is

described in the Savior's words regarding the separation of sheep and goats on the day of judgment (Mt 25:31-46). (All underlinings in this paragraph are the essayists.)

The binding of Satan (Rev 20:2) occurred in the atoning death of Christ, who has removed the one tool Satan had to use on us: our sins. Announcing and anticipating his sacrificial death, our Savior said: "Now the prince of this world will be driven out (Jn 12:31)." "The prince of this world now stands condemned (Jn 16: 11)." (Emphasis added)

What binds man is sin has been removed. Now Satan is bound and will be released only at the end of the 1000 years to claim his own and go to eternal torment with them (Rev 20:7-10). On that day God's real (but hidden) triumph will become an experienced and manifest triumph.

The 1000 years is simply the time in which we are living, the messianic age between our Lord's first and second coming. It is the time of fulfillment of all God's promises and prophecies, the time of completeness. Ten is the biblical number of completeness, and ten to the third power is 1000, and the 1000 years are the whole time of the gathering of the nations which was prophesied in the Old Testament. Revelation 20 speaks of the same time period which the rest of the Apocalypse treats: now and whatever time remains until the Lord returns in glory. There is no millennial age because there is no age after a this age-- only eternity. Daniel (Dn 8:26 and 12:4) could not leave the scroll unsealed, because another age was to follow the age in which he lived. That age has arrived, and John (Rev 22:10) could open the seventh scroll and leave it open because what comes next is eternity, not 1000 years of preliminary triumph on earth. Revelation 20 simply does not teach "that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed (Augsburg Confession, Article XVII)."

Meanwhile, we watch for his return as Judge. We live as forgiven people. We live by his promise: "Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years (20:6)." We are experiencing that right now.

It is difficult to find an end for this meditation, as it was difficult to make a beginning. Let us return to the verse from which the title of the essay was taken. "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." The three questions which we have been asking are answered in summary for us here.

What should we be watching for? His early return. "Yes, I am coming soon." Today, Lord? Today ? In the meantime there will be no immediate observable victory over sin, death and hell. Disasters will continue; false Christs will arise and deceive many; famine, inflation, depression, war are to be expected. Death will still do its dirty thing. We should not expect "better times" until the final trumpet call because the mass of humanity will not heed the call to repentance. The gospel will still evoke reaction, resentment and opposition. The forces that oppose God's Word and reject his grace will not topple the King of kings and Lord of lords, but they can still wreak havoc among Christians who grow slack or careless. Satan is still preparing his last best shot. We will go on (Lord, keep us steadfast) watching for that day when he will raise up you and me and all the dead and give unto you and me and all believers in Christ eternal life.

What should we be doing? Pray for his coming. "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." In the face of open, obvious unchristian movements and forces: hold out. Against the more subtle and therefore more dangerous counterfeits of the gospel: remain loyal. God's speaking to and wooing of a lost world still goes on through his believers: preach the gospel. Stay awake. It is the wrong time to relax. Do not add to or subtract from the sayings of this book, but live in trust and

obedience to all its words. Consider the dread alternative. Live that life of daily repentance of which Luther spoke in the First Thesis of the 95: not doing penance but turning to Christ and his merits. Invite others to do so.

Everything in the above two paragraphs is to be found elsewhere in the Book of Revelation, in sections we have not touched upon. But it is all summed up in the words of 22:20.

What does the Lord promise us now? Throughout the Book of Revelation there are more promises than instructions. That should not surprise us who do not live by moral codes but by the promises of God. What he promises us is that what we pray for in the Third Petition is being accomplished. His will was done in creation, is being done in history, will be carried out in the final wrapping up when history has fulfilled God's purpose.

Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen. When the church, when each of us, prays this prayer from the heart because we long for and are confident of his early return, then the Book of Revelation has accomplished its purpose. And so has this essay. God grant it. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen. (22:21)."