

The Seven Churches of Asia as A Historical Sketch of the Church On Earth

(Revelations chapters two and three)

Introduction:

Matthew 16:18 "Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it."

As we consider the history of the Church on earth, we ought to be thankful for this verse. So often it seems that the gates of hades have very nearly overpowered the church.

The Holy Spirit seems to have given us a prophetic outline of the history of the church in the letters to the seven churches at the beginning of the Book of Revelation.

It should be comforting to see that God knew well exactly what the failures of the church would be--and still affirmed that the gates of hades would not prevail against it.

In Revelation chapter 1, John sees the Lord Jesus Christ as the "Ancient of Days" of Daniel 10:4-6.

He is pictured as ready to judge the world. His eyes are like a flame of fire; His feet like heated bronze; and his heart of love is restrained by a golden girdle. But He is seen in the middle of the seven lampstands, which are the seven churches being addressed. Before His awesome judgments are executed on the earth, He passes judgement on the various phases of the church on earth through the letters He dictates to John for the seven churches of Asia.

As we consider the letters to the seven churches as representatives of the seven phases of the church's history, it is well to observe the general format of the letters.

Christ is presented to each church in some special feature of John's vision of Him in chapter 1 that is especially appropriate to that phase of church history represented by that church.

First, Christ tells each church what He appreciates about it. He acknowledges their special problems.

Next, He tells them where they have failed or been unfaithful.

Then He calls on them to repent of the wrong or else He will judge them.

Each time He admonishes **everyone** to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. It all applies to some extent to all Christians of every age.

Finally, He promises a reward to those who overcome that is especially apropos to the circumstances faithfully encountered. The reward might apply to others as well, but the thought of it would be especially comforting to those faced with the special problems of that day.

EPHESUS- ("Desirable" or "Permitted") The Church in it's Original Purity

>>REVELATION 2:1-7<<

As Christ begins His assessment of the seven phases of the church, He is presented as the One who is in the midst of His church in all its phases.

He holds their "Angels" or spirits in His hand*

*I think the use of "Angel" here is probably like Peter's "Angel," or ghost in Acts 12:15. Perhaps it alludes to the general attitude or spirit of each phase of the church. (Revelation 3:1 associates the seven stars with the "Seven Spirits of God.")

They had good deeds, toil, and perseverance. They did not endure evil men. They recognized and refused false apostles. They hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which Christ also hated.

They failed in that they had lost their first love for Christ. His work was more important to them than He was.

That should be a word to all of our consciences.

It is our affection that He wants.

How very quick our hearts grow cold!

All the good doctrine and good works in the world won't keep us faithful to Christ.

It is love for Christ that keeps us faithful. Live in it by remembering His love for us!

Christ's Judgment: "Remember from where you have fallen, and repent...or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent." (V 5)

The lampstand implies the light or testimony of the church. God is not hypocritical. He will not let the church claim to be more spiritual than it really is. If it has lost its first love, He will not pretend that it still lives in it. He will remove their testimony to such a relationship with Himself unless they repent.

Historically: The church did not maintain its original spiritual devotedness to Christ very long. The Apostles were scarcely gone before the church forsook their God-appointed system of subjection to Christ through the guidance of the godly to follow popular individual leaders. Within the first 100 years we see the development of individual human heads of local churches gradually subverting the headship of Christ as expressed through the recognition of all the elders He chose to provide. (Instead of being **an** elder, individuals became **the** elders of the various assemblies. Assemblies looked to their "Bishop" instead of to Christ for leadership). For Instance:

Clement, AD 30-95: Bishop of Rome

Ignatius, AD 50-107: Bishop of Antioch

Polycarp, AD 70-155: Bishop of Smyrna

In fairness to these men, It is unclear just when these individual leaderships developed. Church historians may have assigned retrospective titles to godly men who would not have tolerated them. But Diotrophies obviously was headed that direction even in the days of the Apostle John. (III John 9-11)

Note that there were overcomers at Ephesus, as at all the churches. We may not be able to change the course of the church today, but we can be individual overcomers.

The Promise to Overcomers: They would be allowed to "Eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God."

Adam and Eve demonstrated their loss of love for Christ in the Garden of Eden, choosing to follow Satan instead of Him. They were expelled from their "Paradise" before they could proceed to eat of the Tree of Life. Those who overcame in not losing their first love were promised that they would be granted to eat of the Tree of Life in the Paradise of God.

SMYRNA- ("Bitter"--from "Myrrh") The Church in Persecution

>>REVELATION 2:8-11<<

Christ is presented to those in danger of martyrdom as the One who died and rose again. Death is not final for them. He has been through it and conquered it!

They suffered tribulation and poverty, but they were spiritually rich.

No failure is recorded against those who suffered for Christ.

Christ's Judgment: Don't fear. The tribulation is limited by a sovereign God. An eternal "Crown of Life" awaits those who give their lives for Christ.

Historically: The church suffered general persecution from the Romans to varying degrees from the martyrdom of Steven until the Roman Emperor Constantine proclaimed official religious toleration for Christians in AD 313. Christians became the political "Scapegoat" for the declining Roman Empire during this period. It was illegal to be a Christian, and punishable by death. Stories of the dreadful persecution and the heroic faithfulness of Christians abound. It is said that Nero, Emperor of Rome from AD 54-68, used to line his garden walks for evening festivities with flaming torches of Christian martyrs being burned to death in flaming tar.

The church has, of course, suffered severely at other times-as it does today in some Communist and Moslem countries. While Smyrna probably refers historically to the first 300 years of the church, any persecuted Christian could certainly appropriate its spirit as well as its promise.

Overcomers: Would not be hurt by the second death. How appropriate for those suffering so much from the first death!

PERGAMUM- ("Fortified") The Church Mixing with the World

>>REVELATION 2:12-17<<

They held Christ's name fast, and did not deny His faith, even though they dwelt where Satan's throne was. They failed in that they tolerated some who held the teachings of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to trip up Israel with idolatry and immorality.

When Balaam was not permitted by God to curse Israel for Balak, he evidently taught Balak that the way to vanquish Israel was to entice them away from their God. By enticing them to their immoral idolistic sacrifices, he seduced them away from God, and caused the death of thousands of them at the very hand of God Himself. (Numbers 22-25)

To hold the teachings of Balaam would be to encourage the church to mix with the world.

They also tolerated some who held the teachings of the Nicolaitans.

We don't know what the teachings of the Nicolaitans were. We know that Christ hated them.

Perhaps Christ let their doctrines pass into obscurity because the specific doctrine doesn't matter.

The point is that they were tolerating people with seriously false doctrine, and Christ rebuked them for it.

The Pergamum church was upbraided for tolerating both immorality and bad doctrine.

Christ's Judgment: He would make war against them with the sword of His mouth unless they repented.

Historically: When Constantine legalized Christianity, it suddenly became popular to be a Christian. Many false professions were made for personal advantage. As Christianity became officially recognized, the church became politically inclined. Constantine himself, who displayed little evidence of rebirth, presided over the famous Council of Nicaea (AD 325), where orthodox doctrine on the deity of Christ was defined. Though it maintained the basic doctrines of Christianity, the church degenerated into a political battleground rather than a spiritual force.

This era essentially ended in a political struggle for supremacy between the Bishops of Rome and the Bishops of Constantinople. By AD 590, Gregory, Bishop of Rome, had pretty well established the supremacy of Rome, firmly entrenching the Roman Catholic Church as the significant organization of christianity in the West. The Eastern faction of Constantinople developed into the lesser Greek Orthodox Church.

Thus, the phase of the church represented by Pergamum was characterized as being "Where Satan dwells." The church of Christ was hopelessly mingled with the ungodly world that crucified Christ.

Overcomers would get the hidden manna. If the worldly church failed to feed them, the Lord promised His faithful food from heaven. And in the midst of men's unscrupulous use of the church to make a name for themselves, the true overcomers were promised a new name from the Lord himself.

THYATIRA- ("Continual Sacrifice") The Church of the Dark Ages Dominated by Medieval Catholicism.

>>REVELATION 2:18-29<<

Christ is presented to Thyatira as the Son of God ready to execute his judgment on her.

They had love, faith, service, and perseverance. They were better in their later history than at their beginning. They failed in that they tolerated that wicked woman, "Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and teaches and leads my bond-servants astray." She caused them to practice immorality and idolatry.

Christ's Judgment: He would bring those who countenance Jezebel into great tribulation unless they repent.

Historically: When the Roman Bishops gained supremacy, they became the influential power of the West. They claimed God's authority to control politics and religion as head, or Pope, of His church. They elevated their own edicts above the authority of the Word of God, setting aside the foundation of the Apostles and prophets when

convenient. Thus the Roman Catholic Church became the wicked woman who calls herself a prophetess, for she claimed to speak the word of God.

The popes themselves often lived in sin and open immorality. They elevated the virgin Mary to a level equal with Christ, thereby bringing in idolatry by praying to and worshipping her. As they won worldwide converts through their extensive missionary conquests, they incorporated heathen holidays into Christianity to make Christianity more palatable to these heathen "Converts." Thus originated holidays like Christmas (Christ-Mass), Easter, Halloween, etc., which the Scriptures never suggest that we celebrate.

Drunk with power, Catholicism claimed the sole right to interpret the Word of God. It suppressed education to prevent people from reading the Scriptures or thinking for themselves. Only the priests were able to read, and it became a serious crime to even possess a Bible. The learning of the great civilizations of the Greeks and the Romans was lost to the common people. Controlling both politics and religion, the Roman Catholic Church was largely responsible for plunging the world into the era of ignorance known as the Dark Ages. The Dark Ages lasted to varying degrees for about 800 years, from around AD 600 to perhaps AD 1400.

Time and again God raised up overcomers who resisted the evils of Catholicism in the Dark Ages. The Catholic Church persistently persecuted them to death until she was indeed "Drunk with the blood of saints." (Revelation 17:6) The heroic tales of faithfulness to death by those who endured unbelievable torture rather than give in to the falseness of Catholicism surpasses the imagination. There were truly overcomers both outside of and even within the Roman Catholic Church who generally paid the price of faithfulness to Christ with their own blood.

Overcomers who refused to bow to the authority claimed by the Catholic church were appropriately promised, "Authority over the nations." And how appropriate that the overcomers of the Dark Ages were promised the "Morning Star". This is probably the expectation of the coming of Christ. (Revelation 22:16,17 & II Peter 1:19) **V 25** Please note that beginning with Thyatira, we have the Lord's coming mentioned. This indicates that the Thyatiran and the succeeding phases of the churches history will still be in existence when He comes.

SARDIS- ('Escaped?') The Reformation and Nominal Christianity.

>>REVELATION 3:1-6<<

They had a name that they were alive, but in reality they were dead. Still, there were a few in Sardis that had not soiled their garments.

They failed in that their deeds were not perfect before God. They had forgotten what they had received.

Christ's Judgment: He would come upon them like a thief if they did not repent.

Historically: Around the 1400's, and even before, God began to raise up more religious leaders who were able to effectively oppose the medieval Catholic Church. The Bible was translated into the languages of the people. The timely invention of the printing press helped to make the Word of God available to the people. Slowly the power of the Pope was eroded away by the Reformation.

Some of the great Reformers were:

John Wycliffe: Authority of the Word of God

Martin Luther: Salvation by Grace (Lutheran Church)

John Calvin: God's Sovereignty (Presbyterian)

Many others: Recovered basic truths of Christianity

Over a period of several hundred years, the reformers and their followers fought hard for the truth of God-bit by bit-often purchasing it with their own lives. Their efforts were often mingled with the political aspirations of others, who rode the tide of religious reformation to bring about generally desirable political reform. Thus the Reformation also ushered in the dawn of freedom, education, and prosperity for the Western world.

But the political and materialistic influences did their damage. Some groups in the Reformation persecuted each other in their struggle for supremacy as severely as the Catholic Church had done before

them. The victories they won seem to have outlasted the truths they fought for. The Lord said of Sardis, "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." The general result of the Reformation was a cold denominational Protestantism that was characterized by a lack of reality. Christianity without repentance and rebirth through faith in Jesus Christ is not alive! Today many of the main-line denominations started by the reformers have largely lost the truths recovered by the reformers. So Christ pleads with Sardis to "Remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent."

Overcomers, where most had soiled their garments, were to be clothed in white. Where Catholicism consigned them to hell, overcomers in Sardis are assured that their names are forever written in the Book of Life. Christ would own those who rose above the deadness of Protestantism to truly confess His name as His to His Father.

V 3 The Lord's coming will be like a thief in the night, for the bulk of Sardis is not ready for it.

PHILADELPHIA- ("Brotherly love") Fundamental Christianity

>>REVELATION 3:7-13<<

Christ is pictured as the Holy and True One who opens and shuts as He wills with the key of David.

They may have only had a little strength, but they had deeds that the Lord appreciated. They kept His Word, and did not deny His Name.

No failure is recorded against them. Despite their weakness, they were faithful. It was enough!

Christ's Judgment: He threatens judgment, not on faithful Philadelphia, but on those who despise her.

Historically: As Protestantism departed from the Word of God, many true Christians pulled away to insist on the basic truths of Christianity. The verbal inspiration of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the resurrection, salvation by grace alone, and the necessity of being born again were insisted upon. They are called "Fundamentalists," because they faithfully insist on the fundamental truths of Christianity. They keep His Word, and allow no doctrine that essentially denies His Name.

Overcomers in the weakness of Philadelphia will be pillars in the temple of God, etc. Note what that Name comes to mean to those who do not deny it on earth.

V 11 Christ's coming is held out to them as very soon-a moment by moment hope. And verse 10 suggests that it will be before the Tribulation that is to come upon all the earth. Are we part of "Philadelphia"???

LAODICEA- ("The voice of the people") Modernism

>>REVELATION 3:14-22<<

The Lord addresses unfaithful Laodicea as the "Faithful and true witness, The beginning of the creation of God."

The Lord does not find anything to praise in Laodicea. Though it calls itself by His Name, it is neither for nor against Christ. It is a complete denial of basic Christianity-worse than anything before it.

Their deeds are neither hot nor cold. They consider themselves wealthy and in need of nothing, and don't realize that they are spiritually wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. He counsils them to obtain that which is lacking from Him.

Christ's Judgment: He would spit them out of His mouth because they were neither hot nor cold. They needed to repent.

Historically: The 1900's have witnessed the degeneration of much of the Christian testimony into Modernism. It questions the basic truths of Christianity. Jesus Christ was a good man, but not God. The resurrection didn't really happen. The Bible is written by men and is not necessarily correct. Follow Christ's teachings on love and forgiveness if you can, but let's not get carried away with all these ideas of morality and sin and guilt. Man is basically good! Modernism is not based on the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, so it is not Christian at all. Christ is pictured as without their hearts, standing at the door and knocking for admission.

Overcomers who respond to Christ's invitation of salvation will sit with Him on His throne.

Christ's coming is not mentioned to Laodicea, as it will be left behind. It will likely continue on as the false church when the true is caught up to be with the Lord.

Disclaimer

Having reviewed the letters to the seven churches of Asia, one legitimately asks, "Are they really a historical sketch of the church of Christ?" They certainly parallel the facts of history remarkably if they aren't. And if God wanted us to have such a historical sketch, why didn't He plainly tell us what He wanted us to know? I believe that God has always wanted the Christian to have the imminent return of Christ as His ever present hope. If He had told the early church what was to follow, they would have known that His coming would not be in their day, and they would have lost that purifying hope. On the other hand, as that hope draws nearer, this historical sketch becomes all the more clear, and those of us in the last days find our immediate hope of His coming reinforced. And finally, God has always wanted the faithful to dig for their blessings in the Word of God. Blessed truths so earned become all the more precious to the faithful.

As we finish our meditations on this historic sketch of the church, it is well to remind ourselves again that at every point the Lord says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." We see elements of all the churches around us today, even in our own hearts. Five out of seven of the churches were admonished to repent. It is obvious that the last four churches continue to the coming of Christ. The development of one stage into the next was not a sudden change. The lines of demarcation between them are not always sharp. We are all in danger of forgetting what has been learned. God deliver us from the falsehood of Thyatira, the deadness of Smyrna, and the luke-warmness of Laodicea. We need to be in constant study of the Word of God to help us hold fast what we have, and rise above our prevailing spiritual ignorance until He comes.