



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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Do the Seven Churches Have a Historical Application?

Revelation 2-3

IN OUR LAST ISSUE, WE BEGAN WHAT MUST be a *very* brief look at the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. (I hope to publish a complete exposition of these chapters in a future book, *The Seven Churches of the 21st Century*.) Last time we examined the first of four applications that these churches provide, the first of which, the *contemporary* application, includes a “tough text,” namely who are the “angels” of these churches. In this conclusion, we will mention the other three applications, the last of which, the *chronological*, is our second “tough text.”

II. The Collective Application

By this we mean that these letters are an admonition to all churches of all time. In other words, by extension, not only did they apply to the seven specific churches in Asia Minor, they apply to all churches everywhere both then and in the future. These messages provide us with the seven possible appearances of any church. Every individual local church throughout this age fits into one of seven types.

It is interesting to observe that except for Smyrna and Philadelphia, our Lord rebuked all the churches for some sin that existed within them. How many churches is that true of today? Further, the specific evils in those five churches varied in seriousness from a lack of love at Ephesus that progressively grew in severity until it reached the total apostasy at Laodicea. Further still, and even worse, a church can be plagued by more than just one of these problems. Let us briefly overview the seven possible types of local church.

First, there was Ephesus, which had no love for the Lord (2:1-7). They hadn’t “*lost*” their first love,” as some incorrectly quote verse 4, rather they had “*left*” their love for the Lord behind. While they were busy and free of heresy, it was all mechanical and lacked a genuine love for the Lord.

Second, there was Smyrna, which was willing to suffer tremendous persecution for the Lord (2:8-11). No sin is mentioned for this church, which shows us that suffering for Christ keeps us pure, faithful, and humble and makes us gloriously triumphant.

Third, there was Pergamum, a church that was tolerant of the world (2:12-17), tolerant of false teaching and had compromised key principles of God’s Truth.

Fourth, Thyatira was clinging to paganism (2:18-29). While Pergamum was *entangled with* the world, Thyatira was *absorbed into* the world. Pagan teachings had actually been embraced.

Fifth, there was Sardis, the church that was dead and buried (3:1-6). The inevitable result of Pergamum and Thyatira was dead orthodoxy, a church where there was *liturgy* but no *life*.

Sixth, the church at Philadelphia is a breath of fresh air in the progression, for here we see a church that is faithful in all things (3:7-13). Here is a church with great works, a consistent witness, and a guarding of God’s Truth.

Seventh, after a moment of respite in Philadelphia, the church at Laodicea was overtaken by apostasy (3:14-22). Here the church was people-centered and had become the authority in place of God’s Word.

III. The *Characteristic* Application

Each of these messages also carries with it a personal application to every individual believer. After all, a church is comprised of people who will make that body what it is. As each of these churches, therefore, applies collectively to other churches, the lessons of each likewise apply to every individual Christian. Note Revelation 2:7, for example: “He that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” This admonition is used, in fact, at the close of each letter showing that every Christian is responsible for the message he has heard. Each letter, then, is a challenge to believers to ascertain what “characteristics” are true in their lives.

IV. The *Chronological* Application

Here is truly one of the most fascinating things in all the Word of God. These seven churches also present the entire history of the Church (Christ’s body) from its beginning in the first century right to the time of Christ’s return for His Church at the Rapture. I spent countless hours studying Church History in light of these seven letters and saw this fact unfold before me. The Church has gone through seven distinct periods in her long history. The number “7” is “the number of perfection” in Scripture, and Revelation 2 and 3 are, indeed, the “perfect historical record” of Christ’s Church.

It should be said at this point that there are, of course, Bible teachers who do not agree that the seven churches picture Church History. There are various reasons for this skepticism, but one of the main ones is that some feel the parallels are not close enough to prove this idea. I think, however, that as our study unfolds the reader will see that just the opposite is true.

Others do not agree with this historical presentation because they are not ready to face the conclusion that we find in the letter to the church at Laodicea. Many simply do not want to face the sad condition of the Church today. While many people in Christianity today think the Church has never been in better shape, the very opposite is true. The Church as a whole has never been further away from *the absolutes of Scripture* since before the Reformation.

While it has been observed that only Dispensationalists hold this view, that seems quite irrelevant in the final analysis. From Pentecost until now, Church History is Church History. The more one studies these letters and Church History, in fact, the more glaringly obvious it becomes that these letters anticipate that history. I for one simply do not understand how someone can miss this application or why they would want to argue against it. Having said that, however, some interpreters, such as Postmillennialists and others, miss this simply because they do not take a literal view of the Book of Revelation. And, in point of fact, if we reject the literalness of Reve-

lation, as well as *all* Bible prophecy, the Bible becomes virtually incomprehensible. In such a case, we cannot know what is literal, allegorical, mystical, real, false, or much of anything else.

So, as one commentator writes:

Obviously these churches were specially selected and providentially arranged to provide characteristic situations which the church has faced throughout its history. . . . There are some remarkable similarities in comparing these letters to the seven churches to the movement of church history since the beginning of the apostolic church.¹

Another writes: “It can be no mere coincidence that these Epistles do set out the salient characteristics of the Church through the centuries, and no one can deny that they are presented in historic sequence.”² Commentator William MacDonald also observes the obvious: “The letters give a *consecutive preview* of the history of Christendom, each church representing a distinct period. The general trend of conditions is downward.”³ And even a cursory viewing of Church History proves that statement to be absolutely correct.

First, the church at Ephesus pictures the history of the Church from Pentecost to A.D. 100, a time of great growth, great labor, and purity of doctrine, but also a time when it all eventually became mechanical.

Second, the church at Smyrna pictures the Church from A.D. 100 to 313. The “Ephesian Period” was characterized by a waning love for the Lord, so God allowed great persecution to come on the Church to bring it back to Him. It was during this time that the Church experienced its greatest suffering—Satan tried to destroy Christianity from *without* using a series of ten periods of persecution under ten Roman emperors—but we also see some of the greatest growth the Church has ever known.

Third, the church at Pergamum is vivid indeed, as it pictures the period of Church History when the Church and the state were united under the Roman emperor Constantine and his successors (313-590). While Satan tried to destroy the Church from without in the “Smyrnan Period,” here he tried to do it from *within*. A. C. Gaebelein puts it well: “When the devil found that the ‘blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’ he stopped his work as the roaring lion and took on the form of an angel of light.”⁴

One of Satan’s great attempts came in 313 when the Roman emperor Constantine succeeded Diocletian (the worst of the Roman persecutors). Constantine supposedly had a vision of a fiery cross in the sky and a voice saying, “In this sign conquer.” He wondered what this meant and was told that this was the sign of the Christian religion. He took this to mean that God was calling him to be the champion of this religion, and that if he obeyed, he would become emperor of the world. Though

we cannot view Constantine as being a true believer, since he was never weaned from the cult of Apollo and at times consulted the pagan sooth-sayers (fortune tellers), he did, in fact, become emperor of the “world” (i.e. the known world of his day). He liberated all Christians and stopped all persecution, although Christianity merely became one more of the many religions of the empire.

As time went on, however, Constantine discovered that Christians were more trustworthy than his pagan subjects and were not causing him constant problems as were the pagans. In 324 he ordered Christianity to be the one and only religion of the empire. He threw all the pagans out of the government, and filled every post with a Christian. Our first reaction to that might be, “Oh, how wonderful!” But in reality, this was the worst event to occur in Church History, for in this way the Church was “married” to the world; it was here that the Church stopped looking for the Second Coming of Christ; it said, “Constantine’s empire must be Christ’s kingdom.” Moreover, Christians had to tolerate many pagan superstitions and customs to get along with priests who had become “Christian,” literally, at the point of the sword. The effects of that unholy alliance continued right up to the Reformation and, may we point out, still continue today in many respects.

Fourth, the church at Thyatira is extremely significant in viewing Church History, for it pictures “The Middle Ages” (590-1517), the latter of which was “The Dark Ages.” The church at Thyatira is, without any shadow of a doubt, a picture of the rise of “Romanism,” Papal Rome (Roman Catholicism). Catholics quite boldly say: “The first and *only* church was the Roman Catholic Church.” All the different branches of the Protestant Church, they argue, have simply broken away from Rome, the true Church. It is insisted that there was no Protestant Church until Martin Luther. That is a lie that is easily proven to be a lie! Historically, there was no Roman Church (or Papacy) until the seventh century. For six centuries before that the one true Church, the body of Christ, was continually growing more corrupt as it drifted away from the Word of God. Between 313 and 590, the bishop at Rome was considered “first among equals,” but in 590 the Roman bishop was given supremacy over all other bishops. In the strict sense of the word, this bishop (who in 590 was Gregory I) became the first “Pope.” The Papacy then had to go back through history and arbitrarily choose certain men through whom they could trace “apostolic succession” back to Peter.

One of the greatest tragedies of our day—and I can’t emphasize this strongly enough—is the continued tolerance of Catholicism by evangelicals. When one honestly and biblically analyzes Catholicism, he finds that virtually every doctrine, holy day, rite, dogma, ceremony, vestment, and title in the Roman Church has its roots in

ancient pagan religion; it is the ultimate perversion of “Christianity,” the “continual sacrifice” of the “mass” being perhaps the greatest of all. During *every* mass Christ is again offered up in sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead. The priest supposedly calls Christ down from Heaven and sacrifices Him again, a “power,” that is supposedly given to the priest at his ordination. This parallels the pagans as they made “continual sacrifice” to their gods. Such teaching is unimaginable, and it is equally appalling that any true Christian today can tolerate such teaching and even encourage “unity” of any kind with the Romanism. The Word of God clearly declares that Christ’s sacrifice was *once-for-all* (Heb. 9:28; 10:10-14), never to be repeated. To do so is to “crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame” (6:6). Think of it! Tens of millions of times our Lord has been blasphemed by the Roman mass.

Fifth, the church at Sardis clearly pictures the period of Church History called “dead Protestantism,” the time of the great state churches of the Reformation (1517-1790). *The importance of the Reformation should never be discounted or understated.* While men in southern Europe wallowed in the Humanism of the Renaissance, another movement was arising in the north. The men there struggled with the same questions of morals and life, but they came to a *conclusion*, and therefore *results*, that were the polar opposite of Renaissance man. The reformers recognized the biblical teaching of man’s totally fallen and perverse nature, that his entire being—intellect, emotions, and will—is hopelessly depraved. The reformers also considered the Bible as the Word of God and the only authority over men’s lives. By removing Humanism from their thought, the reformers rediscovered the Truth of the Gospel.

As one writer words it, however, “The Reformation was not a golden age. It was far from perfect.”⁵ That is an understatement. While the Reformers tried hard to make Scripture their only standard, there were inconsistencies that seriously marred the movement. Space does not permit the many details, but the bottom line is that *the Reformers came out, but they didn’t come out far enough.* Gaebelien says it well:

The reformation itself was of God and the great men of God who were used were the most mighty instruments of the Holy Spirit. It was the greatest work, up to that time, since the days of the apostles. But out of it came the human systems which go by the name Protestantism. The reformation began well, but soon developed in the different Protestant systems into a dead, lifeless thing.⁶

Indeed, the Reformation *was* of God and had a glorious beginning, but its leaders fell short by failing to return to the principles of Church government and ministry that were evident in the first century and which are re-

corded in the Word of God. The majority of what we see in much of Christianity today was originally founded, not upon Biblical authority, but upon human reasoning and human ideas. We still suffer today because of the Reformers not coming out far enough.

Sixth, the church at Philadelphia pictures the time of great revival and great preaching that took place in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and may we add, the *very* early twentieth century. Think of some of the great preachers and theologians of those days: Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Robert Murray McCheyne, Matthew Henry, Andrew Bonar, Thomas Chalmers, Charles Hodge, Robert Haldane, Richard Fuller, John Henry Jowett, Andrew Murray, C. H. Mackintosh, Alexander Maclaren, and others. Though there were still a few problems that remained from Reformation thought, men like this nonetheless stood on the Word of God more firmly than anyone had in some 1800 years of Church History. Some folks would ask here, "But isn't this true today?" To that we must answer, *absolutely not!* Sad to say, the Word of God and the strong preaching of doctrine and practice are not the emphasis today. How churches today need the depth of the Word and strong doctrinal preaching!

Seventh, the church at Laodicea, the "lukewarm," apostate church, pictures the period of Church History in which we are right now. This period began in the early twentieth century and will continue until Jesus comes. As John R. W. Stott wrote in 1980:

Perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to the twentieth-century church than this. It describes vividly the respectable, sentimental, nominal, skin-deep religiosity which is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity is flabby and anaemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion.⁷

Even the word *Laodicea* demonstrates the lukewarmness of this church and our own age. The Greek *Laodikeus* is comprised of two words: *laos*, meaning "people," and *dikē*, meaning (depending upon the context) "law, right, custom, and even prescribed punishment." The idea in this word, then, is "the law of the people" or "the people ruling." The society of that day (and today) was *people centered*. People had become the authority instead of the Word of God being the authority. The modern term for this is "Humanism," which says, "Man is the center of all things."

Dear Christian, is there any doubt that we are right now living in the "Laodicean Age" of Church History. We are living in the age of Humanism, in which man has set himself up as the final authority on every subject and every question. This is the age of "people ruling." Sadly, this is true even in the Church. Never before in Church History has the Church been as "people centered" as today. We build entire churches and ministries based upon

what people want, not upon the sole authority and sufficiency of Scripture. We are more concerned about "felt needs" and appealing to the "unchurched" than with proclaiming Truth.

Finally, we must accept these churches as a picture of Church History because of Christ's words to John, "Write the things which are in this age." These words indicate that our Lord is speaking of the *entire age*, not just a limited geographical area. We submit that our Savior was being much more farsighted than to be looking only at Asia Minor. Are we to think that while the great prophets of the Old Testament looked centuries into the future, our Lord was looking only at the contemporary scene or at only the first century, as some argue? Surely not! He was concerned about His Church, His Body, throughout the centuries to come. As one commentator observes, while there were hundreds of churches in existence at that time, only seven letters were sent. Our Lord

knew the entire history of the Church from the beginning. . . . He saw in seven of them conditions which were in embryo, the condition through which the whole church on earth would pass, so that we have in these seven messages, which uncover the state of the different churches, the spiritual and religious history of Christendom.⁸

Why would anyone want to ignore the obvious? Why would we wish to close our eyes to the deep significance of this "Prophetic History?" *We do so, in fact, at our peril.* As the notable quote goes, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."⁹ We have had to be brief, but even our brief look at this "Prophetic History" explains much of the error that has existed in the Church through the centuries and explains where the Church is today and why it is there.

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NOTES

- ¹ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1984).
- ² R. H. Clayton. Cited in Lehman Strauss, *The Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1964), p. 33.
- ³ *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 2355.
- ⁴ A. C. Gaebelien., *The Revelation* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1961),
- ⁵ Francis Scheaffer, *How Should We Then Live* (Old Tappan: NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976), p. 84.
- ⁶ Gaebelien, p. 40.
- ⁷ John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 116.
- ⁸ Gaebelien, p. 33-34.
- ⁹ George Santayana, *Life of Reason*, Ch. 12, "Reason in Common Sense" (Scribner's, 1905), p. 284.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Brother Watson,

[Your position on the angels of the seven churches] is the first disagreement I have with you which I consider important. . . . This view held by lesser men than yourself leads to primus among peers and then up the ecclesiastical stairway to the papacy. I think this is the pathway Ignatius of Antioch [took]—perhaps you can re-search his teaching. . . .

I prefer the angels being literal messengers/servants of the Lord Jesus. Michael and his angels were responsible for Israel (Dan. 12:1), and angels in heaven care for the children/church (Matt. 18:10), and Michael and his angels protect and nourish the woman (Israel?) in Revelation 12:7. The literal angels of the churches can easily fit into this scenario and be pictured as responsible, although in the physical/spiritual realm the elders of each church are responsible (Prov. 11:14). The angels picture

the Lord Jesus' direct contact with each local church. They are in His right hand of sovereignty, as are we (Jn. 10:28) individually.

Sincerely, your Christian brother (RG in Colorado)

Dear Brother G,

I truly appreciate your comments and well-presented arguments. I did weigh them as other expositors made similar points, but I do believe that "pastors" better fits the context, as I shared. I assure you from the bottom of my heart that I make no complicity with the papacy; no one hates Catholicism more than I, as this month's article demonstrates. I don't feel, however, that this view builds an "ecclesiastical stairway" anymore than does I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 in showing the uniqueness of and qualifications for that very office. At any rate, we can certainly agree to disagree agreeably.

The condition of the Church in the Middle Ages was pitiful. The masses of the people had a blind faith in the doctrines and tradition of the Church and never inquired whether they were in harmony with the Scriptures. Few could read, books were scarce; it was a rare thing for a man to have any real acquaintance with the Word of God. . . .

Occasionally feeble attempts were made to introduce reform, but such movements were soon checked. . . .

While the demand for a drastic reformation of the Church became stronger as the years passed, every attempt to bring it about failed, mainly because it proceeded from a wrong principle. External abuses were to be corrected, but corrupt doctrine was to remain untouched. There was no appeal to the Word of God, no turning to the old paths, no repentance from dead works, and no belief in the basic doctrine of justification by faith. Dark was the night, and more than human power was needed to drive away the thick clouds. But . . . in God's time dawn came. (S. M. Houghton, *Sketches From Church History* [Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980], pp. 59-61)

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. Periodically, we will also include book reviews of popular books, for much that is published today demands discerning reading. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed.

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