

The Letters To The Seven Churches: Attitudes, Eras Or Both?

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There is little doubt that the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation near the close of the first century. It is also clear the entire book concerns itself with revealing conditions and events leading to Christ's return. So sharp is the focus that beginning with the fifth seal in Revelation 6:9 and ending in chapter 19, most of the prophetic events occur in the final three and one-half years!

Of what interest would the condition of seven first-century congregations in Asia Minor be to Christians living almost 1,900 years later? When considering the context of the book, only one solid answer to that question remains: any time in the history of the church, some members would have "Ephesian" attitudes, some "Sardis" attitudes, some "Laodicean" attitudes and so on.

Others, though, would contend, "Yes, that is true, but the book was not written just for the benefit of the end-time church. Revelation was written to show the church where it stands in relation to Christ's return. Thus, the churches represent stages in the life of the church." Some see this evidence compelling enough to persuade them. However, Christ nowhere says, "These churches represent eras." No, the evidence is more subtle and must be more carefully analyzed.

First, one must consider that Revelation does not stand by itself, but completes what precedes it. It concludes hundreds of Old and New Testament prophecies. Daniel complements it especially well. Revelation often gives in detail what Daniel gives only in overview; it finishes what Daniel begins. Also linked closely with Revelation is Jesus' Olivet prophecy in Matthew 24.

Next, one must remember that Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church . . . and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Was not Jesus prophesying here? Clearly, Jesus intends His church to continue until His return, but He does not say it will always express the same personality. Isn't a purpose of prophecy to provide the church with signs along the way to prepare for His coming? The letters in chapters 2 and 3 provide some of these signs.

Are prophecies fulfilled in one grand, smashing climax? Rarely. Aren't the prophecies of Daniel, Matthew 24 and Revelation chronologically progressive? Don't they start at point "A" and through a series of events arrive at their conclusion?

Virtually every chapter in Revelation is a prophecy. Although the chapters are parts of a larger movement of prophecy marching toward a climax, each chapter has a series of events progressing toward its own conclusion. Christ designed the book this way. Like a good novel, a major plot and subplots entwine within it.

Revelation 1:1 says, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants . . . things which must shortly take place." This states the book's specific purpose. After laying this foundation by identifying the Revelator's relationship to the church, the prophecies begin.

Notice the progression of time. Were the seven seals broken all at once? Do the seven trumpets sound at once? Do the seven thunders peal at once? If so, how did John count them? Are the vials of God's wrath poured out at once? Even the inset chapters show time progression. Doesn't chapter twelve

move from ancient Israel to a time yet future? Doesn't chapter eleven progress through the preaching of the two witnesses? Revelation 2 and 3 fit this pattern perfectly, progressing from the beginning of the prophecies until Christ's return.

From other scriptures we know the church is one body. Why then does Christ stand among seven candlesticks (Revelation 1:12-20)? Why not just one? He could just as easily have said that one candlestick has seven attitudes. Clearly, He is showing not just attitudes, but also that He is in the midst of one church during seven stages as events progress to the end. These seven represent the entire church for the period covered by the prophecies.

Why not choose Corinth, Rome, Philippi, Antioch, Pella, Derbe and Jerusalem, or any other seven churches? Is it merely coincidence that Ephesus to Laodicea is clearly established by history as seven stages on a first-century mail route? Could a postman deliver his mail to all seven at once? Also, groups of seven are characteristic of Christ's writing style. In each case, the seven are sequential, not simultaneous. Why should chapters 2 and 3 break the pattern? Christ chose those cities because the patterns suited His purpose perfectly.

The chapters themselves imply the movement of time. The last four messages mention Christ's return, the first three not at all. To Thyatira: "Hold fast till I come" (Revelation 2:25). To Sardis: "You will not know what hour I will come" (3:3). To Philadelphia: "Behold, I come quickly!" (3:11). To Laodicea: "Behold, I stand at the door . . ." (3:20). Isn't it interesting that the last four churches, not the first four, receive this end-time language?

These comments show there will be either remnants of, or sizable portions of, four eras existing at Christ's return. What is wrong about this? Nothing! Think about this. Revelation deals with global events. The church of God is not just an American and Canadian institution raised in the last two generations. Members of the true church live all over the world. Were there not people who believe similarly to us recently found in Ukraine? They were not called through the work of Mr. Herbert Armstrong. Aren't there remnants of the Church of God, Seventh Day in South America and the Philippines? Why, then, can't there be remnants of Thyatira somewhere on this globe? I am confident there are.

God understands humanity to a depth we can only begin to imagine. Along with listing the stages of the church's growth until Christ's return, Revelation 2 and 3 describe the attitudes many Christians go through during their converted lives. Do we go through them all at once or in stages? The chapters also describe the personality changes most congregations experience over time. Nobody has to be any one of these attitudes simply as a random matter of calling.

Revelation 2 and 3 reflect both eras and attitudes. Christ simply asks us to use this to identify where we stand as individuals, a congregation or a church.