

The Church of the Servant King

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Prophecy Series

(Proph21C_Revelation_chps2&3 – Part1)

The Seven Churches (Rev 2:1-3:22)

There are three prominent interpretative positions or views regarding these seven churches: 1) Prophetic view; 2) Historical-prophetic view; and 3) Historical view. I will briefly summarize each of the three views which is sufficient for our purposes.

- *Prophetic View* - The seven churches addressed were not in existence in the first century but will be in existence in the “day of the Lord,” i.e. the Tribulation period.
- *Historico-prophetic View* - The seven churches addressed were in existence in the first century, and what characterized each of them has marked other local churches in various locations throughout church history. In addition, the seven churches also reveal the history of the church from the time John wrote the *apokalupsis* (Gr. Αποκάλυψις) to the Rapture in seven successive periods.
- *Historical View* - The seven churches addressed existed in the first century, and what characterized each of them has marked other local churches in various locations throughout church history, however they are not prophetic in the sense of being identified with any particular era of church history as is the case with the historico-prophetic view.

Without presenting a detailed analysis of each of these views, I will simply summarize a few highlights from the arguments related to this subject. (Anyone interested in a more in-depth analysis of each of the views is welcome to consult any number of sources and I will be glad to provide a few references).

One of the common points of reference for each of these views is Revelation 1:19 –

“Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things.”¹

Notice that the resurrected Jesus is speaking. There are three divisions of the Revelation, the *apokalupsis* (Gr. Αποκάλυψις), that Jesus delineates in this verse.

- “*The things which you have seen*” – a reference to 1:10-18 – John’s vision of the resurrected, glorified Christ and Jesus’ voice that emanated from the vision with instructions to John (per the “**historical**” interpretation).
- “*The things which are*” – a reference to the status of the churches in Asia Minor (Rev 2 & 3) to whom John was directed to distribute the contents of the *apokalupsis* (Rev 1:11) – (per the “**historical**” interpretation).
- “*The things which shall take place after these things*” – a reference to the content of the *apokalupsis* contained in chapters 4-22 (per the “**historical**” interpretation).

A key to accepting any interpretation of Scripture is whether that interpretation is consistent with the literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutical method. Before accepting any view, my desire is to insure that it is not in violation of and does not compromise that method.

Adherents to the **prophetic view** of Revelation 2-3 contend that 1:19 should be interpreted to be a reference to the unity of the book, i.e. a revelation of things yet future in their entirety. In other words, Revelation 2&3 should be interpreted as essentially coterminous with chapters 4 and following. We will examine this view later. It has some merits that should be

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1977).

considered. Advocates of this position include such theologians as E.W. Bullinger and Charles Welch.

Adherents to the **historico-prophetic** view of Revelation 2-3 contend that 1:19 should be interpreted to be a reference to prophetic events as well. However, this view interprets Revelation 2-3 in such a way that the existence of these churches in Asia Minor at the end of the First Century A.D. is acknowledged, but this view also indicates that these churches represent trends that will exist in chronological sequence throughout church history until the culmination of church history. (An example of this correlation is found in the table in the Appendix to these notes). The major problem with this view in my opinion is the fact that the correspondence between the seven successive periods of church history and these seven messages is seemingly arbitrary and contrived. There is nothing in the context of the passage to indicate or justify the development of such a model. Also, one must ask how the Rapture of the church could be imminent until this prophecy is fulfilled?

Some of the advocates of the **historico-prophetic** view include such theologians as John Nelson Darby, C.I. Scofield, Harry Ironside, John Peter Lange, John Walvoord, J. Vernon McGee, Arno C. Gaebelin and William Kelly. J. Dwight Pentecost goes so far as to correlate the parables of Matthew 13 with the successive, yet overlapping, cycles of church history that adherents to this view believe are depicted in the seven churches of Revelation 2 & 3.² In my opinion, this interpretive intermingling of Jesus' kingdom oriented teaching (within the context of the Age of Israel) with the present age is clearly the result of the application of faulty hermeneutics. There is no doubt that the floodgates have been opened and have unleashed a torrent of confusion and further misinterpretation via this and other similar examples of a commingling of dispensationally disparate passages.

The bottom line is that I believe that it is very likely that Revelation 2 and 3 addresses historical churches that existed in the 1st and 2nd Centuries A.D. and that the observations noted in chapters 2 & 3 are references to historical conditions that existed at that point in time. This is consistent with the **historical** view of this passage. While some of these same conditions could and have existed within local churches throughout church history at various times, I do not believe that this passage contains a prophecy of any specific church or pattern throughout church history, i.e. the **historico-prophetic** view. I also believe that the **prophetic** view of Revelation 2 & 3 is possibly an acceptable alternative. We will take a look at this view in more detail later to include some reasons why it has been rejected by many dispensationalists.

The **historical** interpretation of Revelation 2 and 3 has probably been the more predominant interpretation of these chapters; although, as noted, there have been many dispensational scholars who have extended the interpretation to embrace trends in the Church Age Body of Christ (i.e. the **historico-prophetic** view). The **prophetic** view is probably the minority view among dispensational theologians and scholars. Ultimately, any of these three views do not (or should not) affect or distort the proper interpretation of chapters 4 thru 22 which contain the bulk of prophetic material in this book and about which there is widespread agreement among dispensationalists in regard to the periods of human history that is the subject of these chapters.

EPHESUS (2:1-7)

Historical Facts

In 334 B.C. Alexander the Great captured Ephesus and from his death to 133 B.C. it was ruled by the kings of Pergamum, the most dynamic and powerful of the lesser rulers of

² J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come – A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books/Zondervan Press, 1958), 150-153.

Alexander's divided empire.³ Attalus III, the last of the kings of Pergamum, willed the city to Rome at his death, and Ephesus was made the capital of the newly formed Roman province of Asia. However, by Paul's day and certainly at the end of the 1st Century A.D. when John wrote the Revelation, Ephesus, had passed its zenith due largely to the ravages of nature and was in a state of decline economically. (The situation is much like modern-day New Orleans with the exception that the Ephesians did not have the modern technology available today to delay the effect of geological and climatologically driven forces).

Ephesus relied upon two important assets for its wealth and vitality. The first was its position as a center of trade, linking the Greco-Roman world with the rich hinterland of western Asia Minor. But because of excessive lumbering, charcoal burning, and overgrazing the land, topsoils slipped into streams, streams were turned into marshes, and storm waters raced to the sea laden with silt that choked the river's mouth. The Pergamum kings promoted the maintenance of the harbor facilities at Ephesus, and Rome followed suit. But it was a losing battle against the unchecked erosion of the hinterland. In Paul's day, the zenith of Ephesus's commercial power was long since past. Deepening economic decline had cast a shadow over the city. Efforts were repeatedly made to improve the harbor (in A.D. 65 a large-scale attempt was undertaken), but they either failed or provided only temporary relief. Domitian at the end of the first century A.D. was the last ruler to attempt to repair the harbor's facilities and enlarge its dwindling capacities. Today the mouth of the Cayster River is so choked with silt that the ancient harbor works of Ephesus sit back behind a swamp, some seven miles from the sea.⁴

In spite of its decline as an economic and commercial center, Ephesus remained a popular destination for other reasons. It continued to draw revelers and "worshipers" to the temple Artemis (Greek) or Diana (Roman). The temple was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and was about four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. One is also reminded of modern day New Orleans with its Mardi Gras festival that has provided tourism revenue to offset an economy that is otherwise in decline.

King Croesus of nearby Lydia (reigned 564-546 B.C.) built the first temple to Artemis one and a half miles northeast of Ephesus. It was rebuilt on the same site in the fourth century B.C. after having been set on fire in 356 B.C. This temple was almost four times the size of the Parthenon at Athens and stood till the Goths sacked Ephesus in A.D. 263. With the decline of its commerce, the prosperity of Ephesus became more and more dependent on the tourist and pilgrim trade associated with the temple and cult of Artemis. At the time of Paul's arrival, the people of Ephesus, while surrounded by signs of past wealth and still enjoying many of its fruits, were becoming conscious of the precariousness of

³ Pergamum or Pergamos was the capital city of the province of Asia. Pergamum for a while paid the Gauls tribute in the third century BC, but she retained her general independence. Attalus I, king of Pergamum, defeated the Gauls in two decisive victories and refused her tribute. She remained free for almost a century after that and was perhaps the most highly civilized state in the world. Pergamum shone with the great altar and costly buildings raised by the Attalid kings out of a treasury fattened by the labor of slaves in state forests, fields, mines, and factories. Under the auspices of the Pergamum princes, Greek art flourished. Pergamum remained the capital until the last of the Pergamian kings, Attalus III, acquiescing to his sense of unavoidable destiny, made the Roman Republic the heir to his kingdom in 133 BC. Pergamum then became the Roman province of Asia. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pergamon>

⁴ Frank E. Gaebelin, gen editor, *Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989-1998), electronic edition.

their position as a commercial and political center of Asia and were turning more toward the temple of Artemis in support of their economy.⁵

It was 425 feet long by 220 feet wide by 60 feet high. There were 127 pillars, each of them the gift of a king. They were all of glittering Parian marble and 36 of them were marvelously gilt and inlaid. The great altar had been carved by Praxiteles, the greatest of all Greek sculptors. The image of Artemis was not beautiful. It was a black, squat, many breasted figure, to signify fertility; it was so old that no one knew where it had come from or even of what material it was made. The story was that it had fallen from heaven. The greatest glory of Ephesus was that she was the guardian of the most famous pagan temple in the world.⁶

So, it is easy to understand how the type of social-economic-religious-political dynamic that was present in Ephesus could be and was a direct threat to the nescient church there. Satan provided direct opposition to the Christian community through false religions. Some of these religions were intertwined with the commercial activities of the city. As Christianity grew in the city, the religious/commercial livelihood of many suffered.

Through Satan's false religion, the temptation existed to be lured into the compromising religion of the Nicolaitans. These false teachers attempted to slither their way into the Christian fellowship; however, the leadership resisted. The early Church fathers (Tertullian, Hippolytus, Dorotheus of Tyre, Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius, and others) believed that the Nicolaitans were composed of followers of Nicolaus of Antioch who was one of the seven men selected to serve the church in Acts 6:5, but who later became a heretical teacher.⁷ There is a widely held belief that has survived throughout the centuries that the religion of the Nicolaitans involved licentious practices and a possible relationship to the Gnosticism of the heretic Cerinthus because of the comparison in Revelation 2:15 to the teaching of Balaam.⁸ As such, the Nicolaitans possibly represented a syncretistic compromise between the world (commercial activities), the flesh (sexual perversion), Satan (religion) and the spiritual life God desires of His own.

New Testament Background Involving Ephesus

Paul paid a visit to Ephesus as he returned from Corinth to Jerusalem at the end of his second missionary journey around AD 52 and he left Priscilla and Aquila there (Acts 18:19-21, 26). Their stay coincided with the ministry of Apollos (Acts 18:25). Paul returned to the city on his third missionary journey and spent three years there (Acts 19:1ff and 20:31). Paul must have had a close relationship to this church because he spent more time there than anywhere else during his missionary campaigns. Timothy was apparently left in charge of the church after Paul's departure (1 Tim. 1:3) and a few years later (circa AD 66), John the apostle arrived in the city and began a ministry there.⁹ The prominence of this church is reflected in the fact that it may

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles, Daily Bible Study Series*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1962), 153 cited in Thomas Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts," www.soniclight.com

⁷ Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 64.

⁸ Robert L. Thomas, "The Chronological Interpretation of Revelation 2 – 3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:496 (October, 1967), 148-149 and Gregg, *Four Views*, 64-65.

⁹ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 130.

have been the recipient of as many as eight New Testament books: the gospel of John, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation. In addition, Paul was ministering in Ephesus at the time he wrote 1 Corinthians.¹⁰

We may look upon Ephesus as the Church above all others that enjoyed the Apostle's [Paul's] highest confidence ... we may regard the Ephesians as more highly instructed in the truths of Christianity than any other Church, as there are revelations of sublime mysteries communicated to them, which other churches could not have understood, unless they had undergone a thorough training in the doctrines of the Christian faith. The Epistle, which he wrote during his first imprisonment at Rome, contains no censure, nor does it allude to any declension of the Ephesians from their first love.¹¹

The Relationship Between the Historical and New Testament Background and Revelation 2:1-7

Evidently, the church at Ephesus had received as much or more instruction in the mystery doctrines of the Church Age Body of Christ than any other church of the first century. Early in the experience of these new believers, the truth they received was accompanied by a fervor which was only matched by the fervor of those who depended upon the worship of Artemis for a living (Acts 19). Miraculous events at the hands of Paul resulted in the conversion of many from the practice of magic to Christianity. The Ephesian's conversion to Christianity was followed with teaching from such early pillars as Paul, Apollos, Timothy, and John. However, as time began to wane and the temporary miraculous gifts began to cease, the pressures of the world, flesh, and the devil began to take its toll upon the spiritual life of the believers there.¹²

While these believers had enough Truth to recognize error and resist it, they were losing the love that characterizes one who is continually advancing in becoming like Christ. "To hate what Christ hates cannot replace works that are prompted by the love of God that has been poured out in believers' hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5)."¹³

The Ephesian believers were well acquainted with love as a fruit of the Spirit when one considers Paul's writing on the subject in 1 Corinthians 13 and John's prevalence of writing about love that characterizes fellowship among believers in his epistles. So the exhortation to the Ephesian believers in Revelation 2 would have gained their attention. And it must have, for Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote an epistle to the Ephesian church early in the second century AD that referred to the Ephesian believers with the highest regard.¹⁴ However, by the Middle Ages, the Christian testimony of the church at Ephesus had been obliterated.¹⁵

2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Andrew Tait, *The Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor: An Exposition of the First Three Chapters of the Book of the Revelation* (London, England: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884), 123-124.

¹² Ibid., 149.

¹³ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 143.

¹⁴ Tait, 177.

¹⁵ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1990), 27.

says this: 2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them *to be false*; 3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. 4 'But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. 5 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. 6 'Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.' (Rev 2:1-7)

The “angel of the church in Ephesus” is probably a reference to a human messenger to that local church – perhaps the pastor. It would seem strange that Jesus would have instructed John to give the letter to a spirit being, but a human messenger is most likely. The word “angel” usually describes a spirit being in the New Testament, but there are occasions when it does refer to spirit beings (e.g. Matt 11:10; Mk 1:2; Lu 7:24, 27; 9:52).

This passage depicts Jesus as very aware of and concerned with the spiritual status of a local church. He had situational awareness. He was watching over them with concern.

Commendation – This church had remained faithful to Jesus Christ for over 40 years. He approved of the good works of these believers of Ephesus — their toil in His service, patient endurance of circumstances (Gr. *hupomone*) under affliction, and discipline of evil men and false teachers. The false teachers undoubtedly claimed to be apostles and tried to bolster their authority thereby (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13; Acts 1:15-26).

Rebuke – Jesus rebukes them for allowing their love for Him to cool. How? They had allowed their knowledge of Truth in the face of obvious error to focus their attention solely upon maintaining orthodox beliefs to the point that tradition vs. a vibrant fellowship with the Lord was governing their conduct and actions. This is a formula for disaster in the believer's life for eventually a cool, detached intellectualism replaces an involved and vibrant faith.

Exhortation – Jesus indicates that these believers needed to “repent,” i.e. change their way of thinking. They needed to turn from this tradition-bound religious approach to their walk and turn to a walk based upon daily fellowship with the living Lord – a demonstration of eternal life in time. Their way was a path to spiritual defeat and a life of no fellowship – effectively a dead relationship, albeit still a relationship. They were to remember their “first works.” This is probably a reference to the acts of service toward one another and toward the non-believing community that will characterize a local church that has a vibrant walk of faith and trust vs. a tradition-bound, ritualistic walk that borders on or is legalistic. There is a relationship between love and good works (1 Jn 5:2).

The Nicolaitans – We know little of the Nicolaitans who were evidently followers of someone named Nicolas (cf. Acts 6:5). Irenaeus, who lived in the late second century, wrote that they were without restraint in their indulgence of the flesh and practiced fornication and the eating of foods sacrificed to idols.

The word "Nicolaitans" is a transliteration of two Greek words that mean "to conqueror" and "people." The result is that Nicolaitanism has come down through to typify any system that seeks to dominate rather than serve people. Evidently, the teaching of the Nicolaitans was an exaggeration of the doctrine of Christian liberty which attempted an ethical compromise with heathenism – something very prevalent in the city of Ephesus.

The Promise - In addition to the implied promise of the whole church's continuance if obedient (v. 5), Jesus gave a promise to the individuals in the church. "Him who overcomes" seems to refer to all Christians at times (cf. vv. 2-3, 10c, 13, 19, 25; 3:3, 8, 10; 1 John 5:4-5). Yet, on other occasions, the term "overcomer" can be interpreted more restrictively. For instance, in 1 John 2:13 and 4:4, John said his readers had overcome the world, not that all Christians are overcomers. In 1 John 5:4-5 he wrote that only believers in Christ *can* overcome the world, not that every believer in Christ *does* overcome the world.

There is a connection between the tree of life and man's rule over the earth. Adam in his unfallen state had access to this tree, but when he fell God kept him from it (Gen. 1:26- 28; 3:22). In the future believers will have access to it again (cf. 22:14). The tree of life in Eden and the tree of life in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:2, 14, 19) appear to be literal trees.

APPENDIX

One Example of the Correlation Between the Seven Churches of Revelation 2 & 3 and Church History According to the Historico-Prophetic View

THE PROPHETIC HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN REVELATION 2 AND 3¹⁶			
2:1-7	Ephesus	Apostolic Era	ca. A.D. 33-64
2:8-11	Smyrna	Period of Persecution	ca. A.D. 64-313
2:12-17	Pergamum	Era of Official Patronage	ca. A.D. 313-606
2:18-29	Thyatira	Middle Ages	ca. A.D. 606-1520
3:1-6	Sardis	Protestant Reformation	ca. A.D. 1520-1750
3:7-13	Philadelphia	Missionary Era	ca. A.D. 1750-1900
3:14-22	Laodicea	Modern Period	ca. A.D. 1900-????

¹⁶ Taken from Thomas Constable's "Notes on the Book of Revelation" at www.soniclight.com.