

The Historical Ages Interpretation of the Churches of  
Revelation Two and Three

Thomas D. Ross

Numerous interpreters through the centuries have adopted the viewpoint that the seven churches of Revelation two and three represent seven distinct periods of church history. It is possible that the first one to endorse a version of this theory was Victorinus, Bishop of Pettau, who died in A. D. 303.<sup>1</sup> Andrew Miller's *Church History* actually uses Revelation two and three as an outline for his book on church history. The early anti-Trinitarian Seventh Day Adventists, such as Uriah Smith in his *Daniel and the Revelation*, endorsed this prophetic view of the chapters. Saved commentators from before the current so-called "Laodicean age," such as John Gill,<sup>2</sup> have approved of this view; more modern unopposed commentators include L. S. Harrison, Tatford, Walter Scott, Tenney, Morgan, Seiss, Newell, Ironside, Ottman, Kelly, Theissen, Stanton, Pember, Pentecost, Larkin, Gaebelein, Cohen, Hains, DeHann, N. Harrison, Blanchard, Talbot, Grant, Pettingill, Adams, Simpson, Walvoord, W. A. Spurgeon, Strauss, Scofield, Phillips, McGee, Willmington, David Cloud, and W. MacDonald.<sup>3</sup> It is consequently apparent that the viewpoint in question has a historical legacy and a large number of exponents.

C. I. Scofield in his influential reference Bible presents the standard historicist prophetic viewpoint of chapters two and three:

The messages to the seven churches have a fourfold application: 1.) Local, to the churches actually addressed; 2.) admonitory, to all churches in all time as tests by which they may discern their true spiritual state in the sight of God; 3.) personal, in the exhortations to him "that hath an ear," and in the promises "to him that overcometh," 4.) prophetic, as disclosing the seven phases of the *spiritual* history of the church, from, say, A.D. 96 to the end. It is incredible that in a prophecy covering the church period there should be no such foreview. These messages must contain that foreview if it is in the book at all, for the church does not appear after 3:22. Again, these messages by their very terms go beyond the local assemblies mentioned. Most conclusively of all, these messages do present an exact foreview of the *spiritual* history of the church, and in this precise order. Ephesus gives the general state at the date of writing; Smyrna, the period of the great persecutions; Pergamos, the church settled down in the world, "where Satan's throne is," after the conversion of Constantine, say, A. D. 316. Thyatira is the Papacy, developed out of the Pergamos state: Ballamism (worldliness) and Nicolaitanism

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<sup>1</sup> G. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, pg. 47.

<sup>2</sup> See *Dr. Gill's Commentary* on Revelation 2 and 3.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 49, Cohen, and the Bibliography.

(priestly assumption) having conquered. As Jezebel brought idolatry into Israel, so Romanism weds Christian doctrine to pagan ceremonies. Sardis is the Protestant Reformation, whose works were not “fulfilled.” Philadelphia is whatever bears clear testimony to the Word and the Name in the time of self-satisfied profession represented by Laodicia.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, in headings over the chapter divisions which deal with each church,

Scofield states:

- 1.) The message to Ephesus. The church at the end of the apostolic age; first love left.
- 2.) The message to Smyrna. Period of the great persecutions, to A. D. 316.
- 3.) The message to Pergamos. The church under imperial favor, settled in the world, A. D. 316 to the end.
- 4.) The message to Thyatira. A. D. 500-1500: the triumph of Balaamism and Nicolaitanism; a believing remnant.
- 5.) The message to Sardis. The period of the Reformations; a believing remnant.
- 6.) The message to Philadelphia. The true church in the professing church.
- 7.) The message to Laodicea. The final state of apostasy.

Others who accept the fundamental premises of this prophetic church interpretation hold a generally similar scheme, although they may differ somewhat on the details. Gill stated that Ephesus represented the apostolic age, Smyrna, the state of the church under the persecutions of the Roman emperors, Pergamos “the church from the time of Constantine, and onward, rising up to, and enjoying great power, riches, and honour.” Thyatira is “the darkest and most superstitious times of Popery, until the Reformation.” Sardis is the church in that present time, Philadelphia the spiritual reign of Christ, and Laodicia, “the state of the church, from the end of the spiritual reign of Christ, till the time of his personal appearing and kingdom, to judge the quick and dead; for after the spiritual reign is over, professors of religion will sink into a formality... this church-state, and the end of it, will bring on the general judgment...” (Commentary on Rev 3:14). Of course, he did not have the greater light of events from his day until now, by which he could add to the faith once delivered to the saints the hidden, spiritual meaning of the churches of chapter three, now revealed, like golden tablets lit with angelic glow unearthed by new prophets with a new gospel, and marketed for the acceptance of the

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<sup>4</sup> Scofield Reference Bible, 1917 edition; a note on Revelation 1-3.

great unwashed everywhere. As in modern times we have discovered that Mary Baker Eddy is not the woman of Revelation chapter twelve, so modern supporters of the prophetic interpretation of the “things which are” have adopted alternative views of the later churches, while they have largely left the eisegesis of chapter two alone. Cohen makes Sardis symbolize the “Reformed [i.e., reformation] Church,” from A. D. 1517-1790, Philadelphia the “Missionary Church” of A. D. 1730-1900, and Laodicea the “Apostate Church” of A. D. 1900 on.<sup>5</sup> Wilmington generally share this view,<sup>6</sup> as do notes in the *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, although these do not share the period of overlap between Sardis and Philadelphia. Walvoord makes Ephesus the apostolic age, Smyrna, persecutions to Constantine, Pergamos the paganization of the “church” when favored by Constantine, Thyatira, the Middle Ages, Sardis, the “church” at the time of the Protestant Reformation, Philadelphia “all churches bearing a true witness for Christ even down to the present day,” and Laodicia “the church of the last days” (p. 97).<sup>7</sup> McGee agrees. M. R. DeHann chimes in as well, stating that “each of them describes in unmistakable detail and clearness a certain period of Church history.”<sup>8</sup> G. Campbell Morgan generally concurs, but adds as a distinctive that the “church at Philadelphia covers the great period of evangelization which, ushered in by the Puritan movement, broke into its full power in the Evangelical Revival. In this time the Church is seen following her Lord *as never before* [italics added] and cooperating with Him in His purposes.”<sup>9</sup> It seems that despite infant sprinkling, baptismal regeneration, Calvinism, rejection of eternal security, covenant theology, universal ecclesiology, state-churches, and post-millennial eschatology, and hordes of other errors, Morgan affirms that the “Church” of that day was purer than that of apostolic times.

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<sup>5</sup> Cohen, p. 48

<sup>6</sup> *Wilmington’s Guide to the Bible*, Wilmington, p. 541

<sup>7</sup> See *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, J. F. Walvoord, pgs. 50-100.

<sup>8</sup> *Revelation*, DeHann, p. 21

<sup>9</sup> *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, G. Campbell Morgan, p. 533-534

Despite the “unmistakable detail and clearness” DeHann discovers in chapters two and three, Pentecost states that the first three churches represent historical periods in line with those stated above, but the last four churches overlap and go to the end of the church age.<sup>10</sup> He also draws a parallel with Matthew chapter 13, which Lehman Strauss discusses in depth in his book *Prophetic Mysteries Revealed*. John Phillips states that the first four churches overlap but represent historical periods, while the last three are continuous to the Rapture.<sup>11</sup> Newell fits in here somewhere as well.<sup>12</sup> Since the text must be spiritualized to make it represent historical ages, it is impossible, apart from Papal decree, warm fuzzy feelings, later apostles or prophets, or other methods of adding to Scripture, to determine what the best view among these is.

Numerous reasons exist to reject the testimony of these commentators in favor of the views of those who, like John R. Rice, John MacArthur, Albert Barnes, and Matthew Henry, take the churches as literal entities which, while certainly chosen by God for a purpose and representative of the various sorts of the Lord’s assemblies, do not fit the mold of a seven-fold division of the history of the so-called universal “church.” The supposed prophecy does not actually fit the history of Christendom. Furthermore, the history of the professing multitude and of the Lord’s true churches are entirely distinct—the prophetic theory presupposes an unscriptural Protestant ecclesiology and historiography. Finally, the prophetic theory is contrary to the literal hermeneutical principles the truth of inspiration demands.

The prophetic interpretation fits neither a Popish nor Protestant view of church history. Papists would hardly consent to view their system as equivalent to Baalism, or the cursed doctrine of the Nicolaitans, as seen in the Pergamos church. They would not see their domination of Europe and the rise of Mariolatry as Jezebelism (2:20). Nor would the church of the Beast view the Philadelphia period, which coincided with the

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<sup>10</sup> *Things to Come*, J. Dwight Pentecost, p. 152

<sup>11</sup> *Exploring Revelation*, Phillips, p. 39-41

<sup>12</sup> *The book of the Revelation*, Newell, p. 36-83

retreat of Popery worldwide and the advancement of the true gospel, as a time of revival. Finally, the ecumenicalism which is said to exist in the Laodicean age is a matter smiled upon by Rome, but apparently condemned when imposed upon the text. Non-Romish Catholicism, such as that of the Eastern Orthodox, has even less to do with the prophetic theory; the events that are said to be represented generally happened in the West and had little effect on its sphere of dominance. No claim for representation of important turns of events in Eastern Catholicism, such as suppression under Communism and modern resurgence in post-cold war Russia, appears.

Furthermore, the theory is inconsistent with the Protestant “professing Christendom” historiographical view. Judaizing heresies were most prominent in the “Ephesian period,” the first century, as seen in the epistle to the Galatians and the book of Acts, but they receive no mention in the letter to that church. Furthermore, the Nicolaitans, which are associated with those that rule over the people, are condemned here and throughout— but all the mainline Protestant denominations except the Congregationalists maintain a hierarchical system of church government. If Christ hates this, then Scofield and his non-Congregationalist brethren have all de-churched themselves.

The alleged Smyrna period, from around A. D. 100 to the conversion of Constantine, was a period of great controversy and schism among those professing Christianity. Gnostics, Manicheans, Elkesaites, and Ebionites, Baptist groups such as the Montanists, Novatians, and the beginnings of the Donatists, theological heresies such as Modalism, Monarchianism, and Subordinationism fought for the hearts of those professing Christ within the developing Catholic system, which in Protestant perspective was still the “true church” of the day. Certainly Judaizing sects existed, despite the very rapid Gentilization of Christendom, which might appropriately be termed “them which say they are Jews, and are not,” along with those who openly rejected the Messianic mission of Christ and continued in Pharisaic traditions; but can one label those who

followed Marcion's heresies, for example, as "them which say they are Jews"? The Smyrna church simply does not represent the totality of professing Christendom before Constantine's day.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the "ten days," which it is asserted represent ten periods of persecution, do not fit well within the framework of A. D. 100-313. McGee associates the "ten days" with persecutions under Nero (64-68), Domitian (95-96), Trajan (104-117), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Severus (200-211), Maximinius, (235-237), Decius (250-253), Valerian (257-260), Aurelian (270-275), and Diocletian (303-313). But if this is the case, the first two persecutions belong to the Ephesus age (in which Christians suffered awful persecution, although such is not mentioned in the message to the Ephesians), not to Smyrna. John Gill offers several other alternatives in the note from his commentary on Revelation 2:10, as does Cohen, who recognizes the problem with locating ten distinct persecutions in the postulated correct time period.<sup>14</sup> He states that when "one also considers that there were persecutions from the Arian emperors against the orthodox, he discovers with Augustine that, '... it does not seem to me that the number of persecutions with which the church is to be tried can be definitely stated.' Schaff adds, 'But the number [ten] is too great for the general persecutions, and too small for the provincial and local.'"<sup>15</sup> While from a distance the prophetic interpretation looks reasonable, closer examination demonstrates countless pock-marks and irregularities.

The churches which follow Smyrna similarly lack correspondence with Protestant perspectives on church history. Pergamos is to represent the developing hierarchicalism and apostasy from Constantine's "conversion" until Gregory the first. If they are supposed to be falling away to "Satan's seat," it is unusual that it is stated that they have

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<sup>13</sup> See *Landmarks of Church History, Book 1*, Pastor Robert Sargent, pgs. 1-84. This is a good general resource for church history, and pages iii and iv of this text have other historical resources for further study. Since the historical material mentioned in this paper may be derived from numerous places, I will not exhaustively footnote my historical references.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, p. 53. He also notes that the ten periods of persecution view dates to the fifth century. However, this does not mean that it was associated with the prophetic theory of chapters two and three at that time.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 53

not “denied my faith,” although early Mariolatry, among other heresies, were officially recognized in ecumenical councils. Baptismal regeneration, needless to say, had already been taught for centuries, but this heresy is downplayed by infant-sprinkling, sacramentarian Protestantism. Thyatira is supposed to signify the height of Papist power, with the debaucheries of the Inquisition, the Bible banned to the common people, and the grossest forms of Catholic tyranny, but Christ stated of this church that “I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first” (2:19). This increase in faithful works, just like the fact that only “a few things” (2:20) are against this church, is utterly incompatible with the traditional Protestant view that Rome is the Whore of Babylon. The letter to Sardis is equally incompatible with Protestant history; if Thyatira is the height of Popery, and Sardis the church of the Reformation, then all the reform was a mistake and Rome’s daughters should have stayed under their mother’s polluted skirts. There is practically nothing in the letter to Sardis that, to an open minded individual, bears any resemblance to the Protestant view of the triumphs and glories of the Reformation, when the Bible was again delivered to the hands of the people and the scourge of Romanism left numerous nations. Cohen recognizes the problem and offers an alternative reconstruction which places the Sardis period from 1750 to 1790.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the churches can so easily be shifted around to represent entirely different periods of time, alongside the problematic matter of one church representing a period from A. D. 590-1750 while the next one signifies forty years, itself presents a most telling argument against the prophetic hypothesis. Philadelphia, by contrast, at least bears a superficial resemblance to the time period of Revival in America and England, although the reason that these two countries are to represent the state of worldwide Christianity is unclear. The problem that a Rapture promise (3:10) is given to this church leads many historical interpreters to place this period of history alongside that of Laodicea. Here, at least once, the prophetic

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 58

scheme is altered somewhat because of Scriptural statements which are otherwise glossed over.

A severe problem with the prophetic interpretation is that God's view of church history is neither Papist nor Protestant, but Baptist. The Bible defines the church as a local and visible assembly of baptized believers.<sup>17</sup> God has promised perpetuity to His churches in verses such as Matthew 16:18, 28:20, 1 Corinthians 11:26, and Ephesians 3:21.<sup>18</sup> God's true churches never joined the Romish hierarchy, and consequently never needed to separate from it. The Protestant concepts of a worldwide "professing Church," a "true, universal, invisible Church," and so on, are unscriptural— indeed, a local assembly and a worldwide bunch of people are entirely contrary concepts. A recognition of the true nature of the church makes the prophetic theory of as great dissimilitude to the order of the letters as the Protestant view of the Reformation is to the description of the church at Sardis. For example, the Smyrna church is represented in a good way, while the true Baptist assemblies separated from the developing hierarchy in A. D. 251 with the Novatians, if not even earlier with the Montanists, and administered Scriptural baptism to those who came to them from the developing Catholic apostasy. Furthermore, baptismal regeneration appeared as early as Justin Martyr (A. D. 100-165) and Hermas (A. D. 115-140)<sup>19</sup>— while the later ecumenical councils did affirm Baptist doctrine on the Trinity, the Theanthropic Person of Christ, and the canon of Scripture, the participants were already part of an apostate hierarchicalism with a sacramental false gospel cursed by the Lord whose Person they defined. And, obviously, a letter which is prophetically to the true stream of churches and believers in the Dark Ages, such as those among the Waldenses and the Welsh, requires entirely different content from one which allegedly represents the "Church universal," including Rome. The prophetic supposition postulates

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<sup>17</sup> See *Ecclesia*, B. H. Carroll.

<sup>18</sup> For further Biblical support for this doctrine, see *Landmarks of Church History*, Sargent, p. 7-8. An interesting historical study of the fight for this truth and its inevitable consequences is found in *Old Landmarkism*, J. R. Graves.

<sup>19</sup> Sargent, p. 34

a false ecclesiology which involves a repudiation of the true churches of Christ and consequently serves the cause of the father of lies and of all doctrinal confusion.

The prophetic hypothesis also involves a spiritualizing hermeneutic which is not consonant with the verbal, plenary inspiration's orthopraxy, grammatical-historical interpretation.<sup>20</sup> Anyone who comes to the Bible to build doctrine exegetically, not to eisegetically impose a pre-determined history upon God's revelation, will never consider the prophetic church theory even to reject it, because it is not even hinted at in the Scriptures. Before Cohen begins his historical analysis which he then relates to the letters to the churches, he states in a footnote that the "reader is asked to keep in mind that in the following discussion on the letters to the seven churches no attempt is being made to completely exposit or exegete the passages. They are treated only in so far as is germane to the prophetic view at hand."<sup>21</sup> The truth of the interpretation is assumed as a first principle, and then parts of the text that look like a match are quoted without regard to context, exposition, or exegesis to support them. Matters that are not "germane" to the prophetic view are discarded. This is a very convenient way to come to whatever conclusion desired, but it sinfully mishandles the Word of God.

An attempt to find support for the prophetic view in the text comes from the name meanings of the churches, but a simple statement of what they appear to be (some are disputed) is a self-evident refutation of this argument.<sup>22</sup> It is also argued that Revelation is a book of symbols, so chapters two and three can hide secrets of church history within them. However, the Bible interprets its own symbols (cf. Rev 1:12, 20);<sup>23</sup> God gives us

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<sup>20</sup> For valuable expositions of the necessity of grammatical-historical interpretation, including in the area of prophecy, see *A Case for Premillennialism*, Campbell & Townsend, p. 15-34, and Sargent's *Landmarks of Bible Prophecy* pgs. 1-96, and *Landmarks of Expository Bible Teaching*, pgs 1-175.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, p. 52

<sup>22</sup> Cohen (p. 62) states that Ephesus means "let go" or "allow," Smyrna "bitter," Pergamos is from "a tower" and "marriage," Thyatira from "sacrifice" and "unweary," Sardis probably from a Hebrew word which signifies "the rest" or "remnant," Philadelphia "brotherly love," and Laodicea from "people" and "judgment." A Christian who saw those words and was unaware that such a prophetic interpretation existed would never derive seven periods of church history from these names— such a notion would, at best, come from a lively imagination.

<sup>23</sup> For a full treatment of this principle of interpretation, see note #20.

information within His Word to rightly divide the symbols He places therein. Furthermore, many of God's Words and phrases in Revelation two and three discredit the prophetic interpretation of the passage— some of these are stated below, and the honest reader can multiply them through simple examination of the text. Revelation 1:20 states that the messages are to the churches. This means that the messages are to the churches, not to “Christendom,” or “the professing Church,” and so on. Christ is also speaking to His assemblies in 2:1, while 3:1 declares that He “hath” the seven stars— this demonstrates, as does the fact that the “Spirit saith (present tense)” to the churches, and that Christ walks in the midst of them, that all seven assemblies, with their messengers or pastors, were in existence at the time of the inspiration of Revelation. This does not suit historical periods well at all, unless the pastors were exceedingly long-lived men. Furthermore, God describes these chapters as “the things which are” (1:19, cf. 4:1). Matters which transpire two millennia later, a time period many years longer than the entire history of Israel from her founding to the time of Christ, are not appropriately designated thus. In addition, were these prophetic periods actually there, and immanency is maintained, believers must have thought themselves continuously over the course of two thousand years in the Laodicean age, while they were truly in completely different period of church history; this would mean that the prophetic ages were actually unidentifiable to those within them, and would remain so to this day. Nothing within the pages of the Bible supports the prophetic church speculation.

While the prophetic theory is popular among numerous commentators, although the lack of actual textual basis for their views leads them to differ in the specifics, it is unquestionably unscriptural. It does not fit either Romanist or Protestant church history, and for those who accept Biblical Baptist ecclesiology hardly any reasonable comparisons exist. Furthermore, it requires grossly anti-literal hermeneutics. It must be rejected. The seven churches are seven actual churches, and all of each message to them

is profitable to us today (2 Tim 3:16-17), but they do not represent periods of church history.

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