

## The Seven Church Ages In Revelation Reveal We Are Approaching The Rapture WHY I BELIEVE IN THE SEVEN CHURCH AGES

by Bob Millsaps

This is an introduction to the seven church ages, and not a complete biblical study. It should give the reader a sense of how the church ages has played out in church history and reveal just how close we are to the Rapture. This article is also a spiritual challenge to get one's life in order with God.

If you are a student of the book of Revelation, without a doubt you have heard that the seven letters to seven churches in chapters 2-3 can be looked at through the lens of church history. It is the outstanding convergence of these two concepts – the letters and church history itself – that cause me to believe that this is a valid interpretation of Revelation 2-3. It is from my personal study of the Word of God alongside an understanding of church history that the power of this prophecy written in 95 A.D really begins to show itself. Not only does Revelation 2-3 come alive, but also many other passages related to end time events.

You must study church history and the book of Revelation to understand the seven church ages.

This concept of seeing the seven churches as seven church ages was popularized by Clarence Larkin in his work *The Book of Revelation* that was published in 1919. It is my understanding that William Branham used much of Larkins book in his book entitled *The Seven Church Ages*. While I respect those authors for who they are, in particular Clarence Larkin, I believe the most authoritative work on the subject to be Tim LaHaye's book *Revelation Unveiled*. He has done an excellent job of showing that church history lines up with the seven church ages. I am indebted to his work and study of the scriptures.

Any discussion of the seven church ages must be prefaced with an understanding of 2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." It is obvious from this scripture that all the Word relates to all believers throughout all of church history. So, it is obvious that these letters apply to the following groups of people:

Seven actual physical churches that existed in the named cities when this was written Seven types of churches that have existed throughout all of church history including today Seven types of individuals that exist in churches. (for example there could be a lukewarm believer in a church that is characterized more closely with a church that is faithful and not denying his name.) Individual application of scripture to individual lives is what the Holy Spirit desires most of all. The word of God is profitable for "instruction in righteousness" for all who would engage it. It can also be viewed as loosely describing seven church ages. I believe in the seven church ages for the following reasons: It aligns with church history with an uncanny accuracy The definitions of the names of the cities of the seven churches alone adequately describe church history. This article is really an introduction to the seven church ages, so I will only describe the definitions of the names and relate them to their time period. When you add to the definitions of the names, the actual scriptural content from the letters (which I will do in later articles) the validity of viewing these letters as describing seven church ages is almost beyond belief in its accuracy. I will add just one scripture to each description of each church age just so you can taste the validity.

The churches and the meaning of their names and most pertinent scripture:

### **Ephesus - Desired One**

The Ephesian Church age was from 30 A.D to 100 A.D. It was characterized by fervent evangelism as

is seen by sacred writings of that time. During the 1st century the then known world was almost completely evangelized. Romans 16:26 “but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith” Colossians 1:6 says, “which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;” So we see that even though this church age eventually “lost their first love” they were a “desired” church age as far as spreading the gospel goes.

Revelation 2:3 adequately describes the heart felt labor of the early church: “and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary.”

### **Smyrna - Bitter - as myrrh**

The Smyrna church age was from approximately 54 A.D. (as Roman Emperors persecuted the church) to 312 A.D. (when Constantine declared the empire Christian).

One can hear the word myrrh even in the name Smyrna. Myrrh was often used in burial to cover up the smell of death. During this period of time 10 Roman Emperors persecuted the church. Many were fed to lions, burned at the stake. Many others lost valuable economic opportunity because of their faith. But all of these bitter sacrifices, in particular martyrdom becomes a sweet smell in the nostrils of God as He honors their love and sacrifice.

Revelation 2:10c “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

### **Pergamum - Elevated or Marriage**

The Pergamum church age began in 312 A.D. when Constantine declared the empire to be Christian. Satan realized that persecuting the church would not destroy it, so he changed his strategy. By “elevating” the church and “marrying” the church to the government, there were many who came into the church without having a born-again experience. During this period of time a great many pagan practices became mixed with Christianity.

Let me share this scripture with you and then offer a brief explanation. Revelation 2:14 “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.” This requires some understanding of the Old Testament. It is evident that Balaam was influenced by the prestige and power of Balak. Balaam was a man who took money to give curses. While God restrained him from cursing Israel, he did tell Balak how to put a stumbling block in Israel’s way. He told Balak to invite Israel to pagan times of idol worship where sexual immorality was involved.

It was during the Pergamum church age that the church began to have teachings that caused people to continue in sin. The worship of saints and angels was introduced in 375 A.D. causing people to fall into idolatry. Purgatory was introduced in 593 A.D. (there is no such bible doctrine) allowing people to believe that they could continue in sin (including sexual immorality) and that they would eventually make heaven after suffering awhile in purgatory. Extreme unction (last rites) was introduced in 526 A.D. and led people to have false hope because such rites did not require faith or repentance.

This church age of elevation in society and marriage to governmental authority was not good for the church. The church declined in spiritual power and authority

### **Thyatira - Continual Sacrifice**

The Thyatira church age began in 607 A.D. (when Boniface III was made the first pope) and will continue on into the Tribulation period. This was a period of time known even in secular history as the

dark ages. The light of the gospel of Jesus Christ grew extremely dim during this period. The church grew more in likeness of Babylonian Mysticism than it did in Christlikeness. False religion (Jezebel) became prevalent, was taught and seduced the church into sin.

Revelation 2:20 "Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow[c] that woman[d] Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce[e] My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols."

Take for example the sale of indulgences that began in 1190 A.D. The idea was to raise money so individuals could give about one third of a years' income and purchase a piece of paper that said all their sins past, present, and future were forgiven. This caused many to live their lives following the desires of their sinful nature in total abandon to sin, sexual immorality and whatever else the flesh desired. Yet God in his mercy gave the church time to repent, almost 1000 years to come back, yet the church refused. It is sad to say but many under the influence of Roman Catholicism are still living under some of these pagan ideas that have no base in the inspired Word of God

### **Sardis -Escaping Ones or Coming out**

The Sardis church age begins in 1520 A.D. and will continue on to the Tribulation. The word Sardis means "escaping ones" or those who "come out". These words adequately describe the Reformation churches. Martin Luther led the way by nailing his 95 thesis to the church door. He had gained insight from the study of the word of God that "the righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:17) The doctrine of justification by faith alone by scripture alone came to the front. However, these churches although they had the reputation of being alive were actually spoken of by Christ as "dead".

This simple verse lets us in on some of what happened during this church age. Revelation 2:2 "Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent." The error of the church during the Sardis church age was that they also became state churches. Luther, for example, sought the approval of political leaders, and eventually the Lutheran church became the state church of Germany. They also failed in remembering how they "received and heard". They should have continued their study of the Word and continued reforming the church.

### **Philadelphia - Brotherly Love**

The Philadelphia church is a breath of fresh air after the last three church ages. This church age begins in 1750 A.D and continues to the Rapture. It is characterized by brotherly love. What began as revivals in Europe and the British Isles continued to spread to America and even sparked the modern missionary movement. What more love could someone have than risking all to share the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world? Revelation 3:8 "I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name."

Since the days of William Carey who was so burdened in 1793 for the lost in India that he became the first foreign missionary. Countless thousands have answered the call to walk through the open door. This church keeps His word and does not deny His name. They will be spared from the hour of trial that will come upon the earth.

### **Laodicea - People's opinions**

The final church age is the Laodicean church age that began around 1900 A.D and will continue into the Tribulation. The word Laodicea is made up of two words. These words are laos, which means "people", and dikazo, which can mean either a personal opinion or a decree, i.e. a sentence, given by a judge. Therefore, we find that the word "Laodicea" can mean both "people's opinions" or "people judged". This church is the most apostate church of any of the seven church ages. They are lukewarm. They do not realize the spiritual state they are in. Revelation 3:17 says, "Because you say,

'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—“

The Laodicean church has fabulous architecture, million dollar buildings and depend upon human efforts and strength to succeed. Many of these churches are compromising the Word of God by their politically correct stances on sinful issues. Most are part of the ecumenical movement that will morph into the false religious system ran by the false prophet in Revelation. Instead of preaching the gospel, they have devolved into motivational speaking, making prosperity the main goal of the believer.

When “people’s opinions” become more important than Christ or the Word, then the people will be judged. This is by far the worst of the seven church ages.

Another reason I believe in the seven church ages is

It brings forth the major truth of scripture That major truth is that each person needs to be right with God. The major teaching of the bible from Genesis to Revelation is how mankind can make peace with God and be spiritually saved and set free from their sin. A study of the seven church ages challenges every believer with the following thoughts -all of these thoughts challenge us in our personal relationship with God:

Ephesus – Have I lost my first love for Christ?

Smyrna – Am I fully consecrated and even willing to die for what I believe?

Pergamum – Am I willing to suffer the reproach of Christ or do I seek an elevated status that is married to the world? Am I living a separated life free from idolatry and sexual immorality?

Thyatira – Am I fully trusting in the finished work of Christ or am I trying to add works to earn my salvation?

Sardis – Does my spiritual walk have the life of Christ or am I spiritually dead?

Philadelphia – Am I walking through the open doors that have been set before me?

Laodicea – Am I red hot for Christ or content to live in a lukewarm state?

It aligns with other major areas of prophecy To study the book of Revelation alone without understanding the other parts of the Word of God is to fall into great error. As the final book in the bible, this book refers back to many concepts, verses and teachings that can only be understood by looking at the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

Two of the major prophetic areas that are taught by a study of the seven church ages are:

The Rapture While the word rapture is not in the Bible, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 speaks of a time when all those who believe will be caught up to meet with the Lord. “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” This will happen right before the Tribulation period.

Since the Bible teaches that Christians are not appointed to wrath, and that God will be pouring his wrath on the earth during the Tribulation, Christians will miss that time of sorrow and suffering. And that is exactly what he promises to the church of Philadelphia.

Revelation 3:10-11 "Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly!"

When we understand other prophetic passages and interpret the Word using your knowledge of eschatology, we find that the Bible becomes alive. Beyond that, we discover a great hope for those who are made up that faithful church.

**The Tribulation** The book of Revelation gives startling detail to a period of seven years. This period is known as The Tribulation Period. It will be a time when Antichrist comes to power, the mark of the beast is instituted, and the Antichrist will both sign and break a covenant with Israel. The Bible teaches that all Christians will disappear in the Rapture of the church before this happens.

Amazingly, a study of the seven churches brings out the fact that not everyone who names the name of Jesus will go in the rapture. Three types of churches in fact, are warned by Christ of the necessity of getting right or they will definitely miss the rapture and go into the Tribulation.

Those three churches are Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea

Thyatira is warned in Revelation 2:22-23 "Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts." This is more than a subtle warning! This is saying that without repentance, the children of the church of Thyatira does not have spiritual life. The reference to great tribulation is an obvious reference to the seven year period of time spoken of in Daniel and by Jesus himself.

Sardis is also warned in Revelation 3:3b "Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you." Paul had warned the Thessalonians that Jesus return would be as a thief in the night. (1 Thessalonians 5:2) Obviously the church of Sardis is not watching. They are spiritually dead. They will not know the hour that he comes. Like the five foolish virgins that Jesus spoke of, they will not be ready and will miss the rapture.

Laodicea is also not ready for the rapture. It is obvious from the words that Jesus spoke of in Revelation 3:18 "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see."

Obviously, one cannot go into heaven if they do not have the robes of righteousness that cover the shame of sin. How can one be "vomited out of his mouth" and "caught up to be with the Lord" at the same time. You can't be lukewarm and ready. Lukewarm means that you are wretched, poor, blind, and naked. Many will miss the Rapture and go into The Tribulation period because they are not in right relationship with God.

I believe that the power of studying the seven church ages is seen when individuals wrestle with the truth that is taught. The rapture is coming and after that the Tribulation period will ensue.

The question becomes...of what church do you wish to be counted a part of?

God grant us the ability to be the church of Philadelphia on that day. In Jesus name, Amen.

The final analysis of an in depth study of the seven church ages reveals that we are definitely approaching the Rapture. Even so, Lord Jesus Come!

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