

A DVD of Church History (A Prophetic History in the Seven Churches)

By Pastor Kelly Sensenig

Have you ever bought a new set of DVD's of one of your old favorite TV shows? I bought the entire series of Daniel Boone and have been enjoying these DVD's. This series is placed in the historic setting of the frontier days when settlers were moving into the Midwest and Kentucky area. There were many problems that they faced such as Indians, starvation, and disease. The entire series on DVD portrays this historical era before our very eyes and gives us an idea of what it might have been like to live in those days.

In a similar way, when John was writing the seven churches of Asia Minor, he was presenting what we might call "A DVD of Church History." In these seven letters (Revelation 2-3) we see in picture format a prophetic course of Church history that would unfold throughout the Church Age. This is what we want to discuss throughout this study.

Over the years many worthy and well-known commentators and expositors of the Word have seen in the letters of the seven churches that Christ was presenting in a prophetic fashion the specific historical course and progression of the Church throughout its existence on earth from the Day of Pentecost until the Rapture. This interpretation is often added as a secondary understanding of what Christ was intending to portray in these seven letters to the local churches in Asia Minor. Expositors normally give the local interpretation and then stress the specific course and progression or phase of church history that is represented by each church. Over the years this approach to the churches has fallen on hard times but let's rethink this through and contemplate the significance of these seven churches in light of church history.

God has given to us a prophetic course of Church history.

This truth is brought out in two ways.

A. In the personal application of the seven letters.

How do these seven letters addressed to the churches in Revelation 2-3 apply to us today?

The seven letters have a threefold application to the Church.

1. They are written to contemporary churches (primary association).

This means that the churches were local churches that existed in John's day.

Revelation 1:11

"Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea."

These churches are part of those "things which are" (Rev. 1:19). This is what the word contemporary really means. They were existing churches in John's own day and time. John was writing to churches that he knew existed in his own day. We can't miss this point when beginning this study. Although there may be a panoramic picture and progression of church history witnessed in these letters, they were literal churches existing in John's day. In "The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia" Sir William Ramsay said, "The man who wrote these seven letters to the seven churches had been there, and he knew the local conditions."

2. They are written to the corporate Church today (practical application).

This means that in a general manner the seven letters are also addressed to all the local churches today, since every local church is part of the Church Age, the same time frame when John was writing to these local churches.

Revelation 1:19

"Write the things which thou hast seen (the vision of Christ – Rev. 1:10-18), and the things which are (local churches – Revelation 2-3),

and the things which shall be hereafter (the prophetic – Revelation 4-22).”

We are living in the “now” stage of Church history which is represented in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1:19). The vision of Christ is past and the future is still ahead but “now” (the Church Age) is where we fit into the Book of Revelation. In Revelation chapters 2-3 we are given a glimpse of what the professing and practicing church will be like throughout the present Church Age. In a general way, the seven churches represent the different kinds of churches that would exist in the world up to the time of the Rapture.

These letters are given so we can apply their problems and practices to all future church generations who would exist in the present stage of history (the “now” stage of church history – Rev. 2-3) before prophecy begins to be fulfilled (chapters 4-22).

This means the seven letters give general statements and descriptions that are applicable to all churches of all times. The seven letters have direct application for the Church today since the New Testament epistles are written as revelation and truth which is addressed to the Church. None of the epistles were written only for only the local churches in that day but were designed by God to have direct application for the saints today (1 Cor. 1:2; 7:17; 14:33-34). What is addressed to the local churches in John’s day is also addressed to our churches today since the letters are written for the Church Age (the time when God is working with His Church).

Although each letter is written to a specific church in John’s day, all the letters close with the words “let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (plural) - Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22. This would mean that each message is pertinent and intended for all the churches, not only of John’s day, but of ours as well. Like the epistles, these teachings are directed to us today. They are “church truth” and have direct application to the church because they are written for the Church. The New Testament epistles including the Book of Revelation are written and directed primarily to the Church.

In short, each of the seven churches have a general application to those saints living during the Dispensation of the Church (Eph. 3:1-10). Together they convey the troubles, struggles, triumphs, and victories of the Church throughout the entire Church Age. The conditions of each church should be expected to continue or exist throughout the succeeding generations of the Church Age since their problems and practices are directed to those living in the Church. These churches together form a combined picture and general explanation of what the churches would be like throughout the ongoing Church Age.

3. They are written as a chronology of the Church (prophetic anticipation).

This third application of the churches becomes more specific. Many over the years have suggested that the seven churches are a reflection of seven phases of Church history that the Church was going to pass through. Many authors and teachers have also seen in these seven letters a prophetic anticipation of the seven clearly defined phases of church history. They reveal a specific outlined course of church history as it would unfold in relationship to the Church.

Such men as Tatford, Scott, Tenney, Morgan, Seiss, Newell, Ironside, Ottman, Kelly, Theissen, Stanton, Pentecost, Scofield, Larkin, Gabeleien, DeHann, Talbot, Grant, Pettingill, Strauss, Stedman, and Walvoord espoused this view of the churches. There have been many worthy commentators who have seen a panoramic chronological history of the Church given in these seven letters - from Pentecost to the Rapture.

In other words, many expositors have suggested over the years that there is a panoramic picture being given, a providential arrangement of the seven churches that corresponds to the chronological developments of the stages of church history which began on the Day of Pentecost up to the time of the Rapture. The number "seven" indicates completeness and therefore Christ was giving the entire course of church history which was represented in these seven churches.

These letters unveil to us seven phases of church history. The seven churches match what has happened throughout the history of the church while it has been on earth – from the apostolic period to the end of the Church Age.

Ray Stedman comments in this way:

“But beyond that, as many commentators have pointed out, these letters are a kind of preview of the entire history of the church from its beginning to its consummation. In other words they represent even stages or periods of church history. The key that suggests this is the word (in 1:3) that calls this whole book a ‘prophecy.’ This prophecy includes Chapters 2 and 3, as well as the rest of the book. Seven, as we have already seen in Chapter 1, is the number of completeness. These letters, then, is our Lord's preview of the entire church throughout its history as it moves through various stages of development.”

Perhaps there is something to Stedman’s analogy. Even though John was writing to contemporary churches in his day and in a general way these letters are addressed to the Church today (Rev. 1:19 – “now), they also in some unique way prophetically reveal the seven stages of church history that would unfold throughout the course of the Church Age. This is what we want to address in this study.

Although the primary interpretation and application of these letters is intended to convey truth that was intended to be directed for local churches today the letters may in some secondary fashion and unique way portray the seven phases of Church history.

B. In the prophetic significance of the seven letters.

1. Seven is the number of completeness (a completed picture of Church history)

In this study, we want to convey that there are seven ages and stages of church history being portrayed which paint a prophetic picture of the Church’s progression from Pentecost (Acts 2) to the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:16-17). In other words, Jesus was teaching a prophetic foreview of the entire Church Dispensation in seven stages. From our perspective, vantage point, and understanding, we can look

back and see there were seven chronological periods of church history that Jesus was prophetically representing in these local churches.

God has always chosen to work in a series of sevens throughout the Book of Revelation which seems to indicate completeness in reference to the plan and working of God.

There are seven churches, Spirits, candlesticks, stars, horns, eyes, seals, trumpets, thunders, angels, plagues, vials, heads, kings, mountains). The number seven is significant and indicates completeness. Therefore, it would not be unlike God to give a special emphasis on the entire (complete) outlined course and condition of the Church throughout its entire existence on earth from Pentecost until the Rapture.

It's interesting that later on in the Book of Revelation John outlines the course of seven world empires (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, Revived Roman Empire) which are seen to be representative in seven mountains and kings (Rev. 17:9-10). Therefore, it's not unlike the pattern of the Book of Revelation to outline an entire course of history in a series of seven.

Of course, we must conclude that there is nothing in the text itself (Revelation 2-3) that would indicate that these churches are symbolic of church history. We can't prove this from what the text actually says or tells us. So we would never want to make this the primary interpretation (purpose or design) of these churches. The primary intention is to show in a general way what the Church (locally and universally) would be like throughout the future Church Age. In a general way, it would experience many of the challenges and take on many of the similarities that these seven churches passed through. What was reflected in these seven churches would also be a reflection of many churches throughout the passing Church Age. This is the basic understanding, interpretation, and teaching of these seven churches.

However, this being said, I must agree with many expositors who espouse the view that there are parallels which can be drawn from the prophetic history of the church as well. There seems to be some

kind of REFLECTION in these churches which represent the historical progression of the church throughout the passing ages. It's been hard for me to dismiss this analogy and pay no attention to it as many contemporary expositors are doing today. The history of past worthy expositors who have espoused this view has caused me to rethink this historical approach to the seven churches and understand that Christ was in a secondary fashion portraying a specific course of the Church Age as He writes these seven letters to the churches.

It's likely that Christ did choose seven churches in order to give a prophetic anticipation of what the phases of the church would be like throughout its existence on earth. Behind the primary interpretation and meaning of the churches, which are descriptive of the Church Age, there may also be a *secondary hidden purpose* which Christ intended to portray or convey regarding the historical phases of the church. It's rather interesting to notice some of the parallels and parallels which should not go unnoticed.

2. Sovereignty of God indicates His control (over Church history)

If Christ also intended to portray a history of the church's existence on earth (seven ages of church history) it gives us great hope by knowing that God in His sovereignty is in control of the events of history (His-story) in regards to both the blessings and departures of the Church. God has uniquely outlined in His Word, through the information given in these seven churches, what is going to happen to His Church. God in His sovereignty has ordained the beginning from the end (Rev. 21:6). Therefore, we can have hope and rest in the unfailing plan and purpose of God (Eph. 1:11). In short, we know what is going to happen as the period of the Church Age winds down. It should be no surprise to us as we view the beginning and ending of the Church era, not only in the seven churches but also throughout the other epistles (2 Tim. 3:1-7).

3. Some arguments to counter this view (the course of Church history)

Several arguments have been given throughout the years which have been used to dismiss the entire idea of a prophetic overview of church history as seen in the seven letters.

The arguments are twofold.

1. Localizing church history

Some have argued that this approach to the seven churches is too “westernized” and does not take into account the church abroad, throughout the world. In other words, this pattern of church history rests on a selective reading of history from a western perspective but not a worldwide perspective. These prophetic parallels hold true only for western Christianity

However, this is not the case since the Church began in Europe and what took place in Europe spread to this country (the United States). In fact, the failings of the church historically began in the East (not the West). However, the entire course of church history would necessarily include the westernized church. We must also remember that western Christianity has been the major leading branch of the church throughout history and therefore it cannot be excluded from this panoramic preview of church history.

2. Losing the truth of the imminent return of Christ

Pastor Bob Shelton shared with me that many years ago in Pontiac Michigan he preached the letters to the seven churches to his congregation. He said that he also applied them to the historical phases of church history. However, as he looks back he was not sure that he was correct in presenting this prophetic history of the churches. I reassured him that he was correct in his presentation and reminding the people about the prophetic course of church history. One reason for Dr. Shelton’s response toward preaching the prophetic history of the Church was because Mid-tribulationists, post-tribulationists, and pre-wrathers, who reject the imminent return of Christ in the Rapture. To embrace a prophetic course of Church history would add fuel to their argument that Christ could NOT return at any moment during the history of the Church if it needed to be fulfilled according to Christ’s outline in Revelation 2-3.

The argument goes something like this: “If Christ’s coming is imminent (it could occur at any moment) then why would Christ anticipate seven ages or stages of church history occurring BEFORE He could return.” The Rapture could not be imminent if chapters 2 and 3 reveal the history of the church from the first century to the twentieth or beyond.” In other words, if Christ anticipated the fulfillment of the historical ages of the Church, which was designed to transpire on earth for several thousand years, then Christ could not return during any phase of church history, if all these events needed to be fulfilled before He could return.

On the surface this sounds like a convincing argument. However, this argument has a hole in its bucket. In fact, it has several holes.

“There’s a hole in your bucket dear Liza, dear Liza!
There’s a hole in your bucket dear Liza, a hole.”

There are two thoughts of reflection in this matter.

a. The Rapture and God’s perspective

From God’s perspective His coming is NEVER imminent since He knows everything (every detail) that must take place before He returns. However, from man’s perspective His coming is ALWAYS imminent. There is no Scripture that states certain events must occur before Jesus Christ can return! We are to look for His imminent return (Phil. 3:20). This is the way Christ wants man to anticipate His coming! Christ makes the promise that He can return at any moment to encourage His people (Rev. 1:3; 22:7, 12) while at the same time only Christ knows the exact time when He will return and what He wants to transpire before He does return.

It’s worth repeating: From man’s perspective the Rapture and return of Christ is imminent but from God’s perspective it is already decreed and set to take place according to His perfect timetable. For this reason nothing needs to happen in order to initiate Christ’s return in the Rapture.

Yes, specific events will occur that God has planned to occur before the Rapture happens but this is only known by God and not revealed

to man in the Scripture. For instance, we don't know how bad things will get on earth before the Rapture and everything that will transpire to set up the end times (Tribulation Period). However, we can look for the Savior without knowing God's exact timetable for His coming! This is the way God wants it to be. He wants us to be looking for His arrival. This is the blessed hope given to us (Titus 2:13).

b. The Rapture and God's plans

God can at times alter His plans. Sometimes God can declare that something will take place but at the same time interrupt those plans by other overriding circumstances and events. Such was the case with Jonah and Nineveh (Jonah 3).

God said that He would destroy Nineveh but God altered His plans in accordance with the repentant hearts of the people and did not destroy the city until some 100 years later. God allowed the human element to enter into the picture. The same is true in the case with King Ahaz. God had declared that Ahaz was going to die but at the same time He allowed the human element of prayer to enter into the picture and alter His previous plans for Ahaz (2 Kings 20:1-8).

In a similar way, Christ could have outlined the future history of the Church and be willing to interrupt these plans and return if He chose to do so. *God can interrupt His original decree by establishing another decree.* This means that all of God's plans for the Church Age and last days are contingent (dependent) on imminence (that Christ could interrupt those plans and return at any moment). We must never forget this! John certainly viewed Christ's return as imminent (Rev. 22:20) and we should as well, even though God has many purposes which He is fulfilling which only He knows about.

God can do whatever He wants to do, whenever He wants to do it! The sovereign God may choose to interrupt His initial plans and alter His original plans based upon man and other events. With this in mind, Christ could have outlined the progressive stages of church history (His decreed program) in Revelation 2-3 and still give the promise in Scripture of His imminent coming throughout the course of this specific time.

Christ could have outlined the future Church history in the seven churches knowing that He has the right or authority to change history, as He sees fit, and interrupt His original plans based upon another decree (the Rapture). The same would be true regarding Christ's prophecy of Peter's death and its relationship to the imminent return of Christ.

John 21:18

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not."

Of course, the early church was not going around and asking, "Is Peter dead so Jesus can return?" They were not waiting for Peter to die before they could be certain that Jesus would return in the Rapture. Let us remember that God can interrupt His program in any way He sees fit to bring to pass His greater purpose.

There is one other note to consider. It's interesting that Chapters 2 and 3 do NOT predict that the church would pass through these stages before the Rapture. It is only by looking back that we can see they were prophetic. We must remember that the early church did not have the ability to look back over the history of the Church and see what unfolded as we do (1 Cor. 13:10-12). Therefore, at the end of the Church Age, we can truly see what has transpired and note a historical progression of the Church in the seven churches that are mentioned in Revelation 2-3.

These letters have proved to be prophetic of the history of Christianity following their writing. Most Christians in the first century may not have seen this, but one can hardly deny it now. It has become increasingly obvious as church history has unfolded. Chapters 2 and 3 are therefore in some manner prophetic as are the rest of the chapters of Revelation. In saying this I am expressing the "historical-prophetic" interpretation of chapters 2 and 3.

Different views teach that these chapters are only prophetic of conditions in the future or they are only historical and deal with first century situations exclusively. None of these views are satisfactory.

It's better to see these seven letters addressed directed to historical churches in John's day, representative of churches today, and ultimately of the prophetic course of the Church.

God has not left us in the dark concerning the direction and course of the Church throughout the ages. He has given us the special privilege today to look back and see what has transpired since we have the complete picture of God's mind outlined in great detail (1 Cor. 13:8-10).

C. In the personal understanding of the seven letters.

The Prophetic History of the Church in Revelation 2 and 3

2:1-7	* Ephesus	Apostolic Era	A.D. 33-64 <i>(loyalty to truth)</i>
2:8-11	* Smyrna	Period of Persecution	A.D. 64-313 <i>(wicked emperors)</i>
2:12-17	* Pergamos	Era of State Religion	A.D. 313-606 <i>(Constantine)</i>
2:18-29	* Thyatira	Middle Ages (Dark)	A.D. 606-1520 <i>(popes/inquisition)</i>
3:1-6	* Sardis	Protestant Reformation	A.D. 1520-1750 <i>(Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Bibles)</i>
3:7-13	* Philadelphia	Missionary Era	A.D. 1750-1900 <i>(missions/revival)</i>
3:14-22	* Laodicea	Modern Period	A.D. 1900- Rapture <i>(apostasy/decline)</i>

Red = God's Favor Black = God's disfavor

In the remainder of this study, I want to in a brief way mention the key historical parallels to the seven churches. When we view the historical parallels and links to the seven churches we can only speak in generalities and not specifics. What was happening on a local church level during John's day anticipated what would occur on a

universal level throughout the course of Church history. A chart is provided at the beginning to help us visualize the prophetic progression of what Jesus was teaching when giving these letters to the seven churches.

1. Ephesus – Apostolic church (A.D. 33-64) = Revelation 2:1-7

This church is a portrait of the apostolic church and apostolic era. This was the spiritual state of the Church during its infancy stage. It represents the specific era of first century New Testament Christianity and the development of the original church that was loyal to doctrine.

Revelation 2:2

“I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.”

Since these believers actually lived during the apostolic era of the Church, or the infant and foundational days of the Church (Eph. 2:20), they were seen combating false apostles of this period of history. These Christians were deeply loyal to truth and would not neglect the apostle’s doctrine (Acts 2:42).

The commitment of the early days of apostolic Christianity is reminiscent in the commitment of these saints at Ephesus. Revelation 2:3 reminds us that they possessed “patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.” This is the true picture of the early church. Although the apostolic church had its share of problems it was primarily loyal to doctrine and truth as Christianity launched and initially began to spread across the known world.

2. Smyrna – Persecuted Church (A.D. 64-313) = Revelation 2:8-11

This church represents the historical portrait of the persecuted church, the era of Roman persecution and martyrdom under wicked emperors. It’s a preview in picture format of the great persecution that the church would face in the future. During this age of Church history God’s people were severely persecuted as is depicted in the letter directed to this local church.

Revelation 2:10

“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

This suffering becomes a portrait of the Church under persecution during the days of Roman emperors who hated Christians. Genuine Christians were put on poles and used as human torches to light the idolatrous pagan feasts held by Rome. Polycarp was martyred and Justin was martyred among many others. The cruelty of Nero and Domitian can never be forgotten.

The catacombs reveal the terrible martyrdom of this past era of the Church. These catacombs occupy an area of 90 acres, with a network of galleries about 12 miles long, in four levels, more than twenty meters deep. The Catacombs are the historical proof that the Church in its origin was a Church of Martyrs and a Church of true Christians who testified, in everyday life, of their faith and love for Christ.

Historically we know that the Church experienced intense persecution during the post-apostolic era until Constantine elevated Christianity to the official religion of the Roman Empire.

3. Pergamos – State Church (A.D. 313-606) = Revelation 2:12-17

This is a portrait of the Church being accepted by the world. The Pergamum stage foreshadowed that period of time between the ascension of Constantine the Great in A.D. 324 up to the sixth century, when the era of the reigning popes began.

This was also the time of the official "marriage" between church and state, when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. It was a legal sanctioning of Christianity. Many writers have noted that "Pergamum" comes from the Greek word "gamos" that means marriage. This letter pictures a church married to the world rather than to Christ. Yes, the name Pergamum means "marriage" and comes from the same root word from which we get such words as monogamy and bigamy.

The emperor Constantine accepted the Church on an official scale and the Church became attached to the world in many compromising ways through its compromise with false teachings and acceptance of pagan ways.

Revelation 2:14-15

“But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate.”

During this time the Church was gradually corrupted by its marriage to the state. It wrecked its testimony through the acceptance of pagan practices that ran contrary to Biblical truth.

Once again, the historical parallel to the church in Pergamum is the period following Constantine’s legalization of Christianity in A.D. 313 that lasted for about 300 years. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, paganism overwhelmed it. It became hard to distinguish true Christians because people claiming to be Christians were everywhere.

Matthew 13:25 gives us the best analogy of these times:

“But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.”

Many of these so-called Christians of this era were nothing more than practicing pagans who indulged in immoral festivals and all kinds of behavior inconsistent with the teachings of Christianity.

This era began the rise or early stages of the Roman Catholic Church and its false teachings. The “Nicolaitans” (Rev. 2:15) were a priestly order that arose to conquer the people who would eventually lead them into false teaching. Many believe this was the historical origins of Roman Catholicism who began to wield great power and influence among the churches.

The introduction of false doctrines around this era of time seems to substantiate this argument.

- Prayers for the dead300 AD
- Making the sign of the cross300 AD
 - Veneration of angels & dead saints375 A.D
- Use of images in worship375 A D.
- The Mass as a daily celebration394 AD
- Beginning of the exaltation of Mary; the term, "Mother of God" applied at Council of Ephesus431 AD.
- Extreme Unction (Last Rites)526 AD

Despite the seemingly desirable goal of fostering the rise of Christianity by making it the state religion, Constantine was not an orthodox Christian. In fact, he adopted many pagan practices and brought them into the church where they became accepted. By this time in its history the church was enjoying

considerable popularity. It had come to be viewed not so much as a family of faith, but as a formal, institutional, worldly kingdom, much like any other kingdom. As the church's political influence grew throughout the Pergamum period of history, its spiritual influence waned.

3. Thyatira – Papal or Roman Catholic State Church (A.D. 606 – 1520) = Revelation 2:18-29

This is the era when Roman Catholicism became dominant as a state power with its reigning popes, pageantry, and pomp and glory. During this time in Europe the popes exercised complete religious and political power. It was the time Church historians call the “Middle Ages.” This is when Romanism flourished which became a picture of the professing church. It was a time when the church followed paganism. It embraced many false teachings and immoral practices.

Revelation 2:20

“Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.”

Jezebel was a pagan woman married to one of Israel’s worst kings. In this local church a woman who was evidently nicknamed Jezebel was

infiltrating the local church with false doctrine and pagan ideas. This local practice of paganism serves as a picture of a large scale practice that would eventually overtake the Church.

Roman Catholicism which rejects justification by faith alone in Christ and which promotes the worship of Mary and popes that replace Christ is a Jezebel system that has opposed the true message of Christianity and imbibed pagan doctrines. In fact, some have compared the leadership of the Virgin Mary in the Roman Catholic Church to Jezebel's leadership in Thyatira.

Again, it's noteworthy to point out that spiritual conditions during the Middle Ages in the West (A.D. 606-1520) were similar to those that existed in this local church. There were faithful believers but there was also a very strong pull coming from those who claimed higher authority and who wanted to do things contrary to the teachings of Scripture. This came primarily from the Roman Catholic Church.

The word "seduce" (Rev. 2:20) means a fundamental departure from the truth, according to Vincent. Jezebel stands in sharp contrast to Lydia, who came from Thyatira. Many more false teachings were introduced in this era.

- Prayers to Mary & dead saints600 AD
- Worship of cross, images & relics786 AD
 - Canonization of dead saints995 AD
 - Celibacy of priesthood1079 AD
 - The Rosary1090 AD
 - Indulgences1190 AD
- Transubstantiation-Innocent III1215 AD
 - Confession of sins to a priest1215 AD
 - Adoration of the wafer (Host)1220 AD
- Purgatory proclaimed as a dogma1439 AD
- The doctrine of the Seven Sacraments confirmed1439 AD

Not long after the reign of Constantine's (when the church was married to the state), Rome and Roman Catholicism became the effective center of church affairs. What was known as the "Dark Ages" of Church history began. Great corruption and wickedness set into the church. The church became the home to heathenism.

The historian Gibbons wrote of this era:
"The history of the church is the annals of hell."

During this time pagan gods became Christian saints that were worshipped and pagan priests and nuns became the ordained servants of the church. In short, paganism was incorporated into Christianity.

It was during these times that the inquisitions of Roman Catholicism began where many true Christians were martyred for not following the dogmas of Roman Catholicism.

It was during this era of Church history that the so-called holy Crusades took place. They were a series of military campaigns waged by Western European Christian (so-called) nations from 1095-1291. These crusades were designed to kill people and were usually sanctioned by the Pope in the name of Christendom with the goal of recapturing Jerusalem and the sacred Holy land from Muslim rule. It's no wonder why the Muslims hate anything that is related to the Church today! They still think they are in a holy war with the invaders from the West which today they identify as American Christians.

During the historical period of the Dark Ages, which the church of Thyatira represents, pagan practices and idolatry were mingled with Christian works and worship. The papacy was elevated to a place of secular power under Gregory I (A.D. 590), and later by Gregory VII, better known as Hildebrand, (A.D. 1073–1085).

The introduction of rituals and church doctrine supplanted personal faith in Jesus Christ. Worship of the Virgin and Child and the Mass were made a definite part of the church service. Purgatory became a positive doctrine and Mass was said for the dead.

We know that the Thyatiran church was the most corrupt of the seven churches. Accordingly, this church clearly symbolizes the darkest and most corrupt period of Christian history when Romanism ruled religiously and politically throughout Europe. This church foreshadows the time from the sixth century to the sixteenth century-- a thousand-year period that has been variously called "The Dark Ages" and even "The Devil's Millennium."

It was a time when the institutional church had become very powerful and very corrupt. It defiled itself by combining pagan rites and magical practices with watered-down Christian teaching.

Believers were taught to venerate and pray to images. The church was organized into a massive, intricate multi-level structure which more closely resembled worldly government than the simple servant-leadership we see exercised in the New Testament. The elite hierarchy of the church introduced practices which were unknown in Scripture or the early church. Religious authorities sought to dominate the political sphere of power.

During the sixth century the Bishop of Rome became accepted as the dominant figure in the church and the office of pope came into being. For centuries the pope was more powerful than emperors and kings. On one occasion the pope summoned a German emperor to Rome and then forced him to stand barefoot in the snow for several hours before he would receive him. When the king was finally permitted to enter the presence of the pope, he was required to crawl on his hands and knees. Such was the power, arrogance, and corruption of the church during "The Devil's Millennium."

Someday on a worldwide scale we will see this type of power-hungry religion dominant the entire world. In Revelation 17 we will discover about the great harlot who rides the beast and who has assumed dominion over the kings of the earth."

Revelation 17:3

"So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns."

Revelation 17:5 adds this description:

"And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH."

Religious and political power will once again be held by the end-time apostate church which will likely be headed up by Roman Catholicism.

Nevertheless, just as there were many within the corrupt church at Thyatira who loved God, who served His people, who had faith in His word, and who persevered, there were many Christians during "The Devil's Millennium" of church history (The Middle Ages) who were equally faithful.

Revelation 2:24-25

"But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come."

There were devoted Christians during these times who were compassionate, faithful people. They were like islands of light in a sea of religious darkness. The "Thyatira stage" of church history could only be characterized as a period of incalculable oppression, corruption, and depravity. Historically we know that "the rest" (Rev. 2:24) who did hold fast and separated from the Roman system, such as the Albigenses, Waldenses, Anabaptists, etc, are given the promise of great ruling privileges (Rev. 2:26-27).

Revelation 2:21

"And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not."

Romanism is an apostate system that needs to repent. Other faithful men who lived during this time ("the rest" - Rev. 2:24) such as John Wycliffe (1380) and John Huss (1415) and Savonarola (1490) stood their ground during this age or time period called upon the Church of Rome to repent

2 Corinthians 6:17 gives us this command:

"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

God has called us to separate from all apostasy today and have no participation with a system that is damming people to hell.

4. **Sardis – Reformation Church (A.D. 1520-1750) = Revelation 3:1-6**

This is the portrait of the Reformation Church and era (Protestant Church). These are the days when the Church began to reform her ways by seeking to separate from Roman Catholicism which had corrupted the true way of salvation. The institutional church was “dead” at the beginning of this time period.

Revelation 3:1

“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.”

Romanism is a dead religion. Its pagan doctrines and teachings bring death to this church. Its people are dead, its pagan doctrines are dead, and its popes are dead. Death is written all over this Jezebel system. This is true today as it was historically when all the pagan teachings and practices were introduced into this apostate church. However, in the midst of this era of deadness and spiritual apostasy, a light dawned. Men during the time began to stand against Romanism in official way.

This was the era of change and the time when Bibles would be printed and begin to spread across the world.

Revelation 3:4

“Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”

Those “few names” in the Reformation era such as Martin Luther (the morning star of the Reformation), John Calvin, Wycliffe, Hus, Zwingli, and Knox went against the wicked and corrupt system of Roman Catholicism of their day and taught justification by faith alone. These men were willing to stand against some of the major false teachings regarding salvation that the Roman Church had taught for centuries.

Martin Luther said:

“Cursed be that love and unity for whose sake the Word of God must be put at stake.”

Martin Luther refused to renounce his writings and was willing to take a stand against the religious opposition of his day. He said: "Here I stand, I can do no other."

During the period of the Protestant Reformation the Protestant church had a reputation for being sound. The reformers affected a return to the doctrines of salvation by grace and the priesthood of all believers. However, many of their disciples could not agree on certain doctrines. This resulted in denominationalism. Nevertheless, the faithful few of this period were those who held to the truths of Scripture. We must be grateful for their willingness to go against the strong tide of apostasy of that day and time.

6. Philadelphia – Revival and Missionary Church (A.D. 1750 – 1900) = Revelation 3:7-13

This is the portrait of the great missionary outreach of the Church as it took the Gospel into the all the world. The figure of "an open door" accurately represents this era. The Church of Philadelphia is a foreshadowing of the great revivals and missionary outreach that occurred throughout the continents.

Revelation 3:8 declares:

"I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name."

This was an era of intense missionary activity and outreach that the world has never known. The mighty missionaries of the past who changed whole continents were used greatly by God. The William Cary's (1761-1834 - English Baptist missionary to India) and the Hudson Taylor's (1832-1905 – English missionary to China and Founder, China Inland Mission) represent the great missionary outreach of this era.

We also have Spurgeon ("Prince of Preachers") and other preachers who brought revival overseas and the Moody's, Wesley's, Whitefield's, and Jonathan Edward's type of preachers who brought revival to our own land and country.

This era seems to have an official ending around 1900 since some of the greatest missionary activity, mass conversions, and revivals have ended. Some find a continuous fulfillment of this time in our present day as people come to faith in Christ. In other words, every true church that is still presenting the true message of the Gospel is part of this continuing era in the annals of church history. However, it seems better to see this particular phase of God's providential working come to a close around the turn of the 20th century.

As previously stated, students of church history have seen the era during which the modern foreign missionary movement flourished, especially the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as similar to the Philadelphia church. During those years there were several revivals of return to God's Word. In our own country, these revivals took place under the leadership of the Puritans, the Wesleys, the Plymouth Brethren, and others.

Like the local church at Philadelphia, these groups of believers living during this specific era were not flashy, but they were faithful ("thou hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name" – Rev. 3:8).

During this same era we began to witness the birth of fundamentalist movement which arose because of the corruption of liberalism within the denominational structures and learning centers of our country. Fundamentalism arose out of the doctrinal controversy, which drifted into the churches in America at the turn of the 20th century came to a close. The great prophetic conferences also got underway and the truth about the Rapture and the literal fulfillment of prophecy was underway! This was a wonderful era that saw great movement of God sweeping across the continents and unnumbered souls come to Christ.

7. Laodicea – Declining and Apostate Church (A.D. 1900 – to the Rapture) = Revelation 3:14-22

This is a portrait of the Church that declined in its acceptance of truth and holiness and in many cases eventually apostatized from the truth.

Revelation 3:16

“So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”

God is sorely displeased with the church in its present condition. During this era accommodation and leniency were embraced and as a result the church allowed apostasy to officially set into its ranks. Being “lukewarm” means to compromise and not condemn what is wrong! This church era can be seen to take shape with the introduction of rationalism and modernistic teaching in the church. In the early 1900’s the denominations were overtaken with modernism and they became corrupted. This was all because the church was lukewarm and did not take the proper stand against apostasy.

This era or age of the Church is also being witnessed in the worldly pragmatic and compromising age in which we live today with its devilish music, marketing, and materialism (“I have need of nothing” – Rev. 3:17). We live in the day of the declining Church!

Many students of Revelation have compared the Laodicean church to the church as it exists in the world today. Christendom (all professing Christians) appears wealthy and powerful, but this form of the church lacks life and love for Jesus Christ.

Overall, the church at the present filled with compromise, carnality, and the cults. It’s filled with pragmatism, ritualism, modernism, ecumenicalism, materialism (money is the solution to every problem), and occultism. All of these things have filtered into the Church because of a “lukewarm” position toward doctrine and truth which eventually resulted in the Church’s decline and apostasy.

Let’s face the facts, most of the major Christian denominations in some form and branches have apostatized from the truth of the Bible regarding the true Gospel, salvation by grace alone, the deity of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection of Christ. Apostate Protestantism and liberal churches which refuse to embrace the truth of the Bible and the way of salvation by grace alone are everywhere.

These apostate systems are ignoring and blaspheming the truth. They are ordaining homosexuals as pastors. They are making a

mockery out of Christ and Christianity. They are attacking the Bible (the Genesis record) and everything that Christianity stands for today. They want other gospels and false gospels. They want Davinci codes instead of the codes of God's laws!

Sadly, we live in an era of the declining Church. We live in a day of apostasy. The age of Laodicea is upon us. Compromise and apostasy is everywhere and this is why I steer clear of apostate denominationalism and ecumenicalism which seeks to link together Christians with false religion and the enemy. I for one will have no part of this Laodicean spirit. I will not help to build the emerging apostate church that will one day enter the Tribulation Period and become the Great Harlot (apostate church) portrayed in Revelation (Rev. 17:4-5).

Jesus predicted this coming age in the parables of Matthew 13 which are in some ways interrelated to the historical phases of the Church, as seen in the seven churches. In Matthew 13:32, when speaking of the abnormal growth of a mustard seed, Jesus taught: "Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof."

Jesus spoke of the abnormal growth of religiosity and apostasy during the course of the age and identifies the "birds," as in the previous parable, with Satan and his followers. Mark this down for the record; I will not roost with the birds in the branches of ecumenical folly! I must separate from anyone that *is* the enemy and everyone who *represents* the enemy and anybody that *mixes* with the enemy (2 Cor. 6:14-17). I'll have no part of the Laodicea age of compromise! Count me out!

This Laodicean age will continue to exist right up to the Rapture of the Church and after the church is raptured the apostate church will overtake the world (Revelation 17). Jesus prophesied of this time.

Matthew 13:33

"Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened."

Once again, the parables of Matthew 13 supplement and coincide with the prophetic course of church history found in the letters to the seven churches. We see an interrelationship between both of them in respect to course of the age, last days, and end times. Jesus envisioned a time when all would be corrupt (leavened) and this would occur immediately after the Church is taken away in the Rapture, resulting in a total apostate church.

We have now previewed the DVD of Church history. In these seven letters we can't help but see some specific parallels between the events and conditions taking place in these local church settings with the periods or eras of church history that they chronologically represent. These similarities and progression cannot be easily dismissed. For this reason, we need to revisit and rethink this whole matter of the prophetic progression of the history of the Church as found in the seven letters.

Although the primary application of these messages is to all churches of all ages there is a prophetic significance attached to them which was intended to convey the course of the Church's history. If we see this message being taught in synopsis form in these letters to the seven churches, it will aid us in our understanding of history and remind us that God knows the beginning from the end. This is because history is really His story. Jesus told the history of the Church from its inception to its end since He knows the end from the beginning (Rev. 22:13). This once again should cause us to rejoice in the sovereignty of God and rest in His plan and purpose in the final hour before He returns for His Church. "Even so come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).