

Seven Church Eras?

Part 2

Author: Darryl Henson

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The first study on the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 concentrated on internal evidence that all seven must exist at the end of the age. Though the principles contained in the book of Revelation have applied to all ages, it is written primarily to those living at the end time, and thus its message is primarily for the last days.

However, Herbert W. Armstrong established in the church the doctrine of seven successive eras, making it a cornerstone of prophetic interpretation. Did the baton of Christianity pass from era to era down through history? Have we witnessed the fall of Philadelphia and the rise of Laodicea? Is this idea of church eras valid?

1. Do the fact that all seven churches existed in John's day and the internal evidence that all seven exist at the end time contradict the idea of historical succession?

Comment: Herbert Armstrong taught that the newly formed, apostolic church represented the Ephesian era and that Smyrna, Pergamos and Thyatira followed respectively from about ad 100 until modern times. He believed he became involved with the fifth era, Sardis, in the early 20th century, from which he broke off and presided over the Philadelphia era, now succeeded by Laodicea. Because this approach is difficult to prove by specific scriptures, we must examine other information.

2. Can we make a valid case for a nose-to-tail succession of seven eras from the original apostle's time to the present? Matthew 16:18.

Comment: Upon establishing His church, Christ affirms that it would not die out, but continue until His return. This means a body of true believers has continued from Pentecost A.D. 31 until today. Revelation 2-3 is written in such a way that any Christian in any century could examine it and conclude he had some characteristics of each era, just as we can today.

As described in Revelation 2:1-7, the record of the Ephesian church closely resembles what happened to the apostolic church. Research done in the early days of the Worldwide Church of God also showed a close parallel between Smyrna, Pergamos and Thyatira and the sketchy history of true believers until the modern age. This information indicates a possible succession of eras.

3. How does Sardis fit the picture? Revelation 3:1-6.

Comment: The body of Sabbath-keepers in Oregon with whom Herbert Armstrong became involved could trace their existence back to the earliest settlements in the United States. They had much of the truth, yet to him they seemed spiritually dead. They were

not growing in doctrine, devotion to God or reaching out to the world. When he compared them to the Sardis church of Revelation 3, the description fit very well. Only a "few names" from that church came with him when he broke off to start "a work" to the world.

4. Did the fruits of Herbert Armstrong's efforts fit the Philadelphia era description? Revelation 3:7-13.

Comment: Jesus Christ, who holds the key of David, opened the doors of true doctrine and evangelism to Herbert Armstrong's efforts. God called and made many disciples from many nations and peoples. It appears that Christ's return is near, and many called under Herbert Armstrong who remain faithful to God's Word and Christ's name will be protected from the end-time tribulation. His work seems to fit the description of Philadelphia.

5. How does Laodicea fit this successive eras idea? Revelation 3:14-22.

Comment: Following a faithful work with an open door is another described as lukewarm yet proud of their perceived spirituality. Christ tells them they have it figured wrong--they are really wretched, blind and naked, unaware of the shame of their spiritual poverty. Now that the church Herbert Armstrong raised has broken up, many claim spiritual fitness as "remnant Philadelphians" while they decry others as "Laodicean." Could many today have a skewed perception of themselves--blind to their real condition while they point the finger at others? Laodiceanism seems to be the prevailing attitude of today's church!

The record of history and modern experience suggests that one fulfillment of Revelation 2-3 is a succession of church eras through the centuries. Remember, God inspired the Bible to apply to every generation until the return of Christ. No matter where in history the reader lived, God's Word applies in most passages, though the final fulfillment of many scriptures concerns the latter days and Christ's return.

The seven churches of Revelation may include at least three fulfillments:

1. All seven existed as church congregations in physical cities in the first century.
2. The seven successively span the church's 2,000-year history, culminating with the last three eras extant in the last hundred years.
3. All seven churches--as groups or attitudes--exist concurrently just before Christ returns.