



THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

"The Seven Wonders of the Word"

The Seven Churches

Why seven churches?

- being changed to bring change -

Ever since God established the seven-day week, seven has been understood as the number of completion. Early commentators on the Book of Revelation emphasized that since seven is the number of completion and fulfillment Jesus wrote to seven churches as an indication that He was in fact speaking to the complete church and not just these seven congregations. As one commentator puts it, "The churches of all time are comprehended in seven."

Why these seven churches? There were others in the region, e.g., Collossae.

If Jesus was speaking to the complete church of all time then these seven in succession would tell the story of the entire Church Age, from the Day of Pentecost right through until the rapture when Jesus

takes us home as He promised. So the first church addressed, at Ephesus, would be the church of the first century and so on down the centuries until the rapture.

It makes perfect sense when you read in the very next chapter that John is raptured to Heaven!

These letters have four levels of meaning:

1. First, they have a **provincial application**: These seven were actual churches existing in John's day which Jesus wrote to for correction and/or commendation.
2. Second, the letters have a **present application**: These seven were representative of characteristics in all churches in the first century and every subsequent century. At the end of each letter is the exhortation to hear what the Spirit says **to the churches** - notice the plural. Though each letter is written to a church, each is to all the churches.
3. Third, the letters have **personal application** to every Christian in every age. They each say, **he that hath an ear...**
4. And fourth, the letters do indeed have a **prophetic application**: These seven, taken in the order Jesus put them, are representative of successive periods of church history. They lay out the entire history of the church, from the first century until the Second Coming of Jesus.

Bear in mind that the prophetic application of these letters is their *secondary* significance. First and foremost the letters were written to real, existing first-century congregations and to **all** through the centuries **who have an ear to hear**.

We must also remember that every age has had *some* characteristics of *all* seven churches. Though certain historical periods are marked by the conditions spoken of in these letters, we could never say that "only one letter" applies to us or our age.

Let's look at the prophetic application. It's best to view these periods as broad, imprecise descriptions of the church through history, allowing for generous periods of overlap.

Jesus first addressed Ephesus. Ephesus means *darling* or *maiden of choice*. The believers in the church at Ephesus were Jesus Christ's darlings. They were - all of them, men and women - His maidens of choice.

That may sound strange until you remember that the Bible often speaks of your relationship to Jesus as being like that of the **engagement** of a **Bridegroom** and His **bride**.

Jesus warned His darlings at Ephesus that they had left their first love for Him.

Now think of all that prophetically. Ephesus would represent the first century church during the age of the apostles. As you read the New Testament letters you see that most of them were, in fact, corrective letters. By the end of the apostolic era the church as a whole was leaving its first love!

The next church Jesus addressed was Smyrna. It was the suffering church. Smyrna means *port of myrrh*. It was so named because of the export trade in myrrh - a gum resin product taken from a certain tree that was an important ingredient in several compounds.

The symbolism of myrrh is profound. The gum resin would be collected from the tree by making an incision in the outer bark. Then it would be allowed to harden. It released its fragrance only when crushed.

The Christians in Smyrna were being crushed by persecution. Jesus wrote to them saying, **I know your tribulation**. He spoke of worse persecutions they were **about to suffer**. They were releasing the sweet spiritual fragrance of those who share in the fellowship of the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

Now think of that prophetically. The second and third centuries, in general, were indeed the age of martyrdom when pagan Roman emperors attempted to destroy Christianity with the violence of the sword.

In fact Jesus told the Smyrnans that a tribulation of **ten days** was coming. Historians can list ten Roman rulers who viciously persecuted the church for two hundred fifty years from around 54-312AD. They were Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Septimus Severus, Maximinus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian.

The next church Jesus wrote to was at Pergamos. *Pergamos* is a compound word made up of the prefix *pergos* and the root *gamos*.

1. *Pergos* means *tower* or *elevation* or *height*.
2. *Gamos* is the root word for marriage; thus we have monogamy or polygamy which use the root *gamos*.

The letter described the church as elevated and becoming married to the world.

The prophetic significance is not hard to see. After the age of martyrdom the church *was* elevated and *did* become married to the world. We can thank Emperor Constantine.

Here is what happened. By 312AD the last of the ten Roman emperors who had persecuted the church was dead. There was a struggle for power in the Roman Empire. A young man named Constantine prepared to engage in battle. According to legend, he saw a cross in the heavens and heard a voice say, "In this sign conquer." Thus you have the so-called conversion of Constantine to Christianity.

What really happened was this: Substantially outnumbered, Constantine noticed that a large segment of the population was not enlisting in either army. They were the Christians. His so-called conversion provided him with an infusion of new troops. He went on to conquer Maxentius in the pivotal battle, and when he marched into Rome he was hailed as the undisputed Emperor.¹

As it turned out, Constantine conquered more than an opposing army. In a sense, he conquered the church - not permanently, for

¹ Courson, *Revelation*, Volume 1.

Jesus has told us that **the gates of hell** cannot prevail against the church. Nevertheless his so-called conversion led to certain reforms in the Roman Empire that had disastrous consequences for Christians. Pagan priests and practices were integrated into the worship of the Christian church. The church was free from persecution from the outside, but faced a far more devastating enemy now from the inside that was leading Christians to compromise with the world.

When Jesus next wrote to Thyatira He described a seduction using words like **beguile**, sexual immorality, and adultery. He spoke of the believers being in bed with a false prophetess named **Jezebel**.

The believers at Thyatira were being seduced into committing spiritual adultery. They were spiritually espoused to Jesus. He was their heavenly Bridegroom, they were His bride. But **Jezebel** was seducing them away from Jesus and into spiritual adultery.

It corresponds prophetically to the corrupt political church of the Middle Ages, from roughly 538AD until 1520. An awful lot happened during those centuries... And it was awful! It was during this dark time that the church established the office of the Pope. The church declined into gross doctrinal error as it was seduced just as Jesus said it would be.

- being changed to bring change -
Three of the seven churches remain: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. We are familiar enough with more recent church history to easily identify these three in prophecy.

Sardis was a church that Jesus said had a name they were alive but were dead. It speaks of a revival, but one that fell short. It speaks of what we call the Reformation.

In the year 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony, a baby boy was born to a poor coal miner. As he grew up and observed the poverty of his father, this boy, named Martin, chose to pursue a different vocation. He decided to become a lawyer and, in 1501, entered the University of Erfurt, where he excelled in his studies.

As he came to the end of his schooling in 1504 an event took place which changed his life. While he was walking the campus grounds, a storm broke so forcefully that Martin fell on his face in fear. The thunder was deafening and lightning struck all around him, including a tree next to him. Instinctively, he cried out to the patron saint of coal miners, whose name he had heard invoked during his childhood, "Saint Anne! Save me from the lightning. If you save me I will become a monk." Shortly thereafter the storm stopped.

Being a man of his word, Martin withdrew from Law school and entered an Augustinian monastery where he applied himself so diligently that he obtained a Doctorate of Theology within a few years. But the more he studied, the more troubled his heart became; for although he was becoming an expert in theology, he lacked peace personally. The question he repeatedly wrote in his diary was: "How can a man find favor with God?"

Disillusioned by a visit to Rome, Habbakuk 2:4 become his life text: [the just shall live by faith](#). On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed 95 theses to the door at Wittenburg College. On December 10, 1520, a document was issued that excommunicated Luther saying in part, "retract within 60 days or death." Luther burned it publicly and the Reformation was born.

The Reformation was an amazing revival but the reformers still followed much of the theology developed by the Roman church during the previous centuries. It didn't go far enough.

In His letter to Philadelphia Jesus said He had set before them an [open door](#) of ministry. Philadelphia was in a geographic location from which they might send out evangelists and missionaries to reach the surrounding areas. If our prophetic approach is correct you would suppose the recent centuries just after the Reformation to be a time of evangelism and missions.

It was and it is! Philadelphia represents the church from about the 1700's up through the present. Looking back upon history you see the great revivals in the 1700's, 1800's, and 1900's as God raised-up men like George Whitfield, John Wesley, D.L. Moody, and Billy

Graham. Doors remain open all over the world – especially in the huge population centers of India, Asia, and China.

We also saw Jesus encourage the church at Philadelphia that His coming was near. He said,

Revelation 3:10 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.

Revelation 3:11 Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

We take His words to mean that He will spare the church from the coming Great Tribulation. He will rapture His church from off the earth before the Tribulation ever begins.

How interesting that it was during these last few centuries that believers have returned to an understanding of taking Bible prophecy literally. The pretribulation rapture theory became prominent again around the early 1800's. Scholars point to either Emmanuel Lacunza (Ben Ezra, 1812), Edward Irving (1830), or Margaret Macdonald (1830), and finally to John Darby (1830).

A quick note: You are going to hear people say that the early church never believed in the imminent return of Jesus to rapture His church prior to the Tribulation. You are going to hear people say that it was the invention of these folks in the 1800's.

Not true! The early Christian writer and poet, Ephraem the Syrian, (who lived from 306AD to 373AD) was a major theologian of the early Byzantine Eastern Church. He was born near Nisbis, in the Roman province of Syria, near present day Edessa, Turkey. To this day, his hymns and homilies are used in the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox and Middle Eastern Nestorian Church.

Here is an example of what he wrote,

For all the saints and Elect of God are gathered, prior to the Tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm

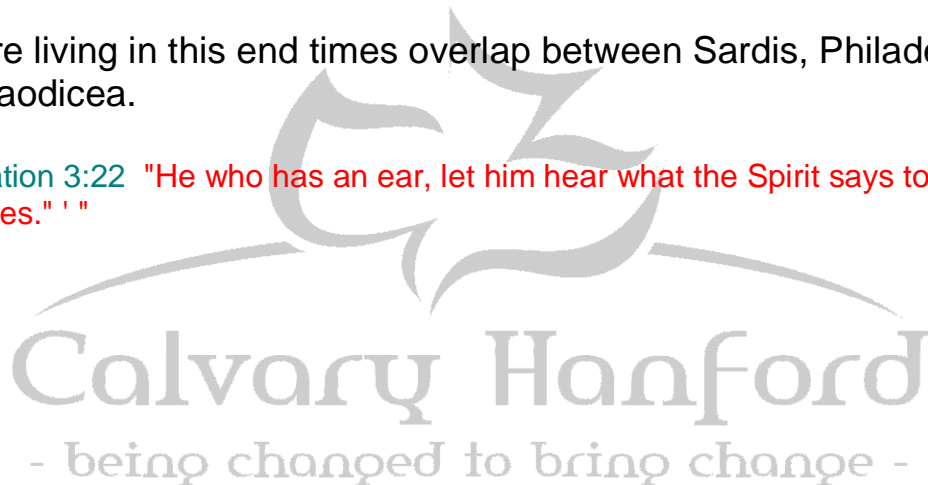
the world because of our sins (*On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*, by Ephraem the Syrian, A.D. 373).²

The teaching on the pretrib rapture has been around a long time. It was 'lost' just as you'd expect during the centuries. The Reformation failed to bring it back because the reformers adhered to the Roman Catholic doctrines of the end times. The rapture wasn't invented in the 1800's but was rediscovered – just as you'd suppose from a prophetic reading of the seven letters.

Laodicea was the final church on Jesus' list. It was a lukewarm, backslidden church. It represents what we would call liberal churches. They have abandoned the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

We are living in this end times overlap between Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Revelation 3:22 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." ' '



² <http://www.pawcreek.org/articles/endtimes/EarlyTeachingOnPreTrib.htm> Grant Jeffries