

MISTAKES 19 AND 20

THE SEVEN CHURCHES THAT JESUS ADDRESSED IN REVELATION 2-3 ARE NOT PREDICTIVE OF SEVEN PERIODS OF CHURCH HISTORY. ATTEMPTING TO CLAIM THIS, SAYS MORE THAN THE SCRIPTURE SAY

There have been a number of Bible commentators who have believed and taught that the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 outline the course of church history from the First Coming of Jesus Christ to His Second Coming. In other words, these seven specific churches with all their problems and virtues were predictive of the seven stages that the church would endure throughout their history.

THE TWO COMMON MISTAKES

We will find two common mistakes that are made by those who promote this. First, there is nothing explicitly stated in the text that would cause us to see Jesus' words as prophetic of the future course of the church. Add to this, commentators are divided about when these periods start, when they end, as well as how to characterize them.

Second, and even more damaging, we should NEVER attempt to form any conclusions about any biblical teaching, including future events, from something that is supposedly implicit in the text. This is a dangerous way of interpreting Scripture.

WHAT IS BEING TAUGHT?

In viewing these churches as prophetic of what will take place in the future, we will give an example of one way of looking at it.

Ephesus would be indicative of the apostolic church. Next comes Smyrna, which would represent the period of the persecuted church. Pergamum characterized the church merging with the state and thus becoming secularized. The period of Thyatira was predictive of the church of the Middle Ages characterized by non-biblical teachings and practices. Sardis, on the other hand, was foretelling the future of the church at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Philadelphia was predictive of the missionary expansion of the church.

Finally, Laodicea is supposedly representative of the church in the last days, the apostate church. From this perspective many conclude that the coming of the Lord must be near at hand since the organized church is supposedly now in the age of Laodicea.

This is just representative of what has been taught. Not every commentator sees the divisions in this way.

THERE IS NO BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR THIS VIEW

While many well-meaning and respected interpreters have held this perspective there is no evidence for it. We can state the following reasons as to why this is so:

REASON 1 THERE IS NOTHING IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION THAT SUGGESTS THIS

To begin with, there is nothing in the context of these letters of Revelation 2 and 3 that remotely suggest that they had any other meaning than what is explicitly stated. In other words, a normal look at these two chapters will reveal that they are specific letters written to churches to deal with the actual problems that they faced. Nothing more.

REASON 2 THERE IS NEVER EXACT AGREEMENT AMONG INTERPRETERS ABOUT THESE AGES

We have another problem. There is a lack of agreement among interpreters as to when one era began and the previous one ended, as well as how to best describe the era. When one compares how the various interpreters explain what each era meant, we find there are many differences of opinion. If so, then who has it right? Which interpreter is correctly explaining it? Who are we to believe?

REASON 3 THERE ARE SPECIFIC PROBLEMS WITH HOLDING THIS VIEW

There are also a number of specific problems with this view.

For example, Ephesus is supposed to represent the apostolic church that was faithful in their doctrine but had lost their fervent love for Jesus. However, as we discover, a number of the other six churches addressed, who were operating at the same time in history, had not been faithful to the Lord's doctrine but rather had allowed false teaching in their midst.

So we may wonder how Ephesus could be a picture of the apostolic era when we find some of the churches in the same geographical area, and existing at the same time, portraying an entirely different picture. Indeed we could merely cite the New Testament and the problems found in the churches Paul addressed, such as Galatia and Corinth. It is clear from these letters that they were anything but pristine.

Again we ask, how could Ephesus accurately represent the apostolic era?

Robert Thomas provides another example of the lack of correspondence between what is taught about these churches and the reality of them:

There is also the idea of the progressive development of evil portrayed in these messages is indicative of their prophetic character. Yet one cannot fully agree with this trend when he finds for example, in Sardis one of the two worst spiritual states and in Philadelphia, one of the two best spiritual states. To describe accurately the growing failure of the church, Philadelphia should have been placed early in chapter 2, certainly before Sardis and not vice versa, if declining spiritual states were of mark of these two chapters (Robert Thomas, *Revelation*, Moody Press, Volume 1, 1-7, pp. 508,509).

Again, we see that theory has many problems.

REASON 4 THE FULFILLMENT WOULD NOT BECOME EVIDENT UNTIL THE TIME OF THE END

One of the biggest problems with holding such a view is that it would be basically meaningless until the time of the end. In other words, since this understanding of Jesus' words is implicit, not explicit, nobody would know that these chapters were meant to be prophetic of the history of the church. It is only by looking in the past that we discover this hidden truth.

REASON 5 THERE COULD BE NO IMMINENT RETURN OF CHRIST

If one accepts that these churches represent seven different periods of the church on earth, then it would not be possible for the Lord to return until the last historical period, Laodicea, had arrived. This causes a number of huge problems.

Not only would there not be a "blessed hope" of the return of the Lord while waiting for this final period, there would be no way of knowing which of the seven periods the church was presently in!

To illustrate, where would the information come from that the worldwide church has moved from the sixth historical period, Philadelphia, to the seventh Laodicea? There are no indications whatsoever as to how anyone could know this.

REASON 6 THE EVALUATION OF THE CHURCH ON EARTH CAN NEVER BE UNIVERSAL

One of the criticisms of this theory concerns the lack of global understanding of where the church was at during any time in its history. For example, there are many churches today in western countries which have little or no influence. Nobody doubts this

On the other hand, the church in Iran is presently the fastest growing church in the world. The church in China has an estimated 100 million members despite the constant persecution. It has been claimed that as many as 38% of the people in North Korea have a faith in Christ. Other countries also have churches that are thriving. Therefore, to claim that the last days church is like the one in Laodicea whom Jesus addressed, is simply not relevant to a good part of our world.

Interestingly, James Boyer, who holds to the prophetic view, made the following comments about the church of Laodicea and how it relates to the present day:

For example, the Laodicean church is not the theologically liberal church down the street, nor the apostate church of the end times. It is the Bible-believing evangelical church which possesses and upholds the light of the gospel, but which is conforming to the values of the world and refusing to get overly involved in the Lord's work. It is materially rich and increased with goods, needing nothing, but it is unaware that it is spiritually wretched and poor and miserable and blind and naked (3:17). It is lukewarm—not cold and unresponsive to the things of God, but not hot and “on fire” for the Lord who bought it. Rather it is somewhere in between. It is trying to enjoy the good things and to avoid the unpleasant things of both worlds. Is this the case with us and with the people in our churches? Then ours is a Laodicean church. And to the degree that Laodicea characterizes the churches—the true gospel churches—of our time, may we hear what the Spirit says to the churches: “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten; be zealous, therefore, and repent” (Rev 3:19) (James Boyer, *Are the Seven Letters of Revelation 2-3 prophetic?* Grace Theological Journal, Fall 1985).

His example actually proves the point as to why the prophetic view does not work.

Can we apply the rebukes to the Laodicean church to the millions of Christians who today live in these non-Western persecuted countries? In so many instances, these believers in Christ are living in poverty, barely having enough to survive, as well as being constantly persecuted. Yet they keep the faith.

Therefore, in what sense are they the “apostate church” of the last days? Obviously they are not!

THE SECOND HUGE MISTAKE: ASSUMING SOMETHING IS TAUGHT IMPLICITLY IN SCRIPTURE

The real problem with this point of view is that there is nothing explicitly taught in the Bible about these churches being prophetic. Those who hold this position must admit this. This means that it must be believed that this truth is implicitly taught. But herein lies the problem!

We are to study the Bible for what it specifically teaches, not what we think that it may imply. God has clearly spoken to us in His Word about Who He is, why we are here upon the earth, and what He expects from each person. All of these truths are explicitly taught, there is no doubt about this. Furthermore, we are told to study them, to search the Scriptures:

The Seven Churches Of Revelation Are Not Predictive Of Seven Periods Of Church History

Make every effort to present yourself before God as a proven worker who does not need to be ashamed, teaching the message of truth accurately (2 Timothy 2:15 NET)

Teaching the truth accurately means carefully looking at what the Lord has revealed in His Word. However, once we start finding things that we may think are “implicitly” taught in the Bible, then we have a huge problem.

Indeed, where do we stop? By affirming that we can discover a number of implicit truths in Scripture there is seemingly no yardstick for one to know whether the newfound implicit truth is actually there!

The Apostle Paul made this clear as to how we are to approach the Scripture:

I have applied these things to myself and Apollos because of you, brothers and sisters, so that through us you may learn “not to go beyond what is written,” so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of the one against the other (1 Corinthians 4:6 NET).

We should never go “beyond what is written.” Indeed, we read the text for what it says, not what we may think it is possibly saying, or may be implicitly teaching.

Therefore, the idea that we can find some important biblical teaching about the last days, by assuming it is implicitly taught, is not the correct way of handling God’s Word.

WHY WERE THESE SEVEN CHURCHES CHOSEN?

Of course there is the question as to why these specific churches were addressed. There were other churches in the vicinity of these seven churches in Asia Minor such as Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13) and Colosse.

Speculations abound as to why the Lord Jesus would address these seven churches and no others. The simple answer is that we are not told. What we do know is that there is nothing that indicates that we should see them as progressively revealing the history of the church.

THE VALUE OF THESE CHAPTERS

Instead of arbitrarily looking at each of these churches and trying to place them in some sort of historical time slot, we should closely examine these chapters for their practical value. What we find in these two chapters is that people and churches remain the same throughout history, the same good qualities as well as the same problems.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes said so long ago:

History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, “Here is something new!” But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new (Ecclesiastes 1:9,10 NLT).

Indeed, nothing is really new. As fallen human beings, we all face the same problems as our ancestors. Fortunately we have a guidebook, an instruction manual, that tells us how we should live.

Therefore, these two chapters in the Book of Revelation should be thoroughly studied so that we can understand some of the issues that churches have historically faced in the world and will continue to face until the Lord returns. In doing so, we should do our best to avoid these problems by following the exhortations found in the New Testament.

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In sum, we should learn a valuable lesson from all of this. The Scriptures are given to us as our guidebook for living. Therefore, we must pay attention to what it says. However, none of us have any right to find more in the Bible than what the Lord has revealed.

This is especially true when we wish to learn as much as we can about what the Lord predicts will happen in the last days. Too many people are finding “truths” in Scripture that just aren’t there. Let us be careful not to make this mistake!