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ARE THE SEVEN LETTERS OF REVELATION 2-3 PROPHETIC?

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The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 outline the course of Church History from the first advent of Christ to his second advent. This interpretation does not compromise the doctrine of imminence since the prophecy is implicit and thus not discernible until its fulfillment has been accomplished. Some have failed to see the correspondence between the characteristics of the seven churches and the history of the church because they have failed to recognize that the seven churches are true churches (λυχνία, 'lampstands').

* * *

INTRODUCTION

TRADITIONALLY, dispensational premillennialists often have seen in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 three interpretations which, taken together, comprise the meaning of the passage. The three interpretations may be called the historical interpretation, the typical or representative interpretation, and the prophetic interpretation.

The historical interpretation understands the seven churches to be seven actual historical churches in provincial Asia in the first century. Some of them are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture (Ephesus and Laodicea) while others are known from church history. There seems to be almost total agreement on this interpretation; the only view known to the present writer that would deny it holds that the seven churches are seven Jewish congregations in the future Tribulation period.¹

The usual interpretation sees these churches as seven types of churches in any age. That is, these churches exhibit characteristics which may be found in any church of any time or place. This interpretation is also nearly universally held by all dispensational

¹E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse: The Day of the Lord* (3rd ed., rev.; London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1935) 68-71.

premillennialists and does not in any sense replace or contradict the historical interpretation.

Third is the prophetic interpretation which additionally sees a prophetic or predictive element in these seven letters. Each church in Revelation 2-3 exhibits qualities and conditions which become predominant in a certain period of church history from the first advent of Christ to his second advent.² Thus, just as there are types of churches, there are types of church periods.³

These three interpretations are not antithetical; not many interpreters teach the historical *only*, or typical *only*, or prophetic *only*. The question addressed here is whether the prophetic interpretation is part of the meaning of Revelation 2-3. This has been denied by some dispensationalists.⁴

SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

It may be desirable at the outset to dismiss a few minor arguments to clear the way for the more important considerations. I believe that some well-meaning but over-zealous expounders of the prophetic view have claimed too much or have sought to pile up evidence by using weak arguments. This has actually hurt the credibility of the prophetic interpretation more than it has helped because it gives opponents something to refute, thus making the whole position look weak.

One such argument is that the book of Revelation is a prophetic book; hence it would be appropriate to find a prophetic aspect here.⁵ This of course is true, as everyone will agree. But it proves nothing.

It might be claimed that since the prophecies of the tribulation period come after chaps. 2 and 3 (cf. 4:1, "after this"), then chaps. 2

²This approach is commonly taken in dispensational commentaries; see e.g., Herman A. Hoyt, *The Revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1966) 17, 25-29, and John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 52, who holds the view cautiously. See also Menno J. Brunk, "The Seven Churches in Revelation 2-3," *BSac* 126 (1969) 240-46, and Gary G. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation* (Collingswood, NJ: Christian Beacon, 1968) 44-65, who presents a more impressive argument. Of course, a prophetic view is held by non-dispensationalists as well (e.g., J. P. Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures—Revelation* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.] 139). See also the survey of R. C. Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia* (6th ed., rev.; reprint; Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1978) 237-45.

³Hoyt, *Revelation*, 28; and Walvoord, *Revelation*, 52.

⁴E.g., Robert L. Thomas, "The Chronological Interpretation of Revelation 2-3," *BSac* 124 (1967) 321-31. George Ladd's equation of dispensationalism with the prophetic view is thus an overgeneralization. See Ladd's *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 12.

⁵E.g., Brunk, "The Seven Churches," 244; and Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, 63.

and 3 must cover the church age—otherwise there would be a gap in the succession of events. But again this proves nothing; “after this” would be just as true even if there were a gap, and the occurrence of a gap is certainly not unusual in prophetic literature.

I personally do not put great significance in the argument based upon the etymologies of the names of the seven churches⁶ for two reasons. First, the proposed etymologies are very uncertain and hypothetical. Second, the argument is based on a very questionable method of exegesis. While it is true that names may have meanings (as Miller and Smith and Fisher have in English) and sometimes were given with deliberate reference to that meaning (as Benjamin and Joshua-Jesus in Scripture), this was not normally the case. The ministry of Paul is not explained by studying the etymology of his name.

EXPLICIT VERSUS IMPLICIT PROPHECY

One of the objections given against the prophetic view is that the passage does not explicitly claim to be prophetic.⁷ It is readily admitted that this is true. Nowhere in Revelation 2-3 does it say that these letters are dealing with seven long periods of time which must transpire before the second advent. Indeed if it had said that, it would have effectively denied the plain teaching of Scripture elsewhere that the Lord's coming is imminent, to be constantly expected and watched for.

But the fact that it is not explicitly prophetic does not at all mean that it is not prophetic. Bible prophecy elsewhere is often implicit rather than explicit. It is the character of Bible prophecy to unfold as it is fulfilled. OT messianic prophecy is an example. The OT did not say explicitly that there would be two comings separated by a long period of time. That time element was the specific aspect which the prophets themselves could not understand (1 Pet 1:11). Nor did OT prophecy make it clear that the offer of the Kingdom would be rejected and postponed to that later coming. But as the fulfillment unfolded, the two comings (which were implicit in the OT prophecy) could be understood (Luke 24:25-27).

Here is also the answer to that most serious of all objections to the prophetic understanding of Revelation 2-3, namely, that it denies the doctrine of imminence.⁸ It indeed would, if it stated explicitly that there would be a period of at least two thousand years before the second advent, or even if it had stated explicitly that there would be

⁶E.g., Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, 62-63; and H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1920) 37-38.

⁷Thomas, “Chronological Interpretation,” 329-30.

⁸Ibid., 328-29.

"seven periods of church history." But the implicit prophecy could not be understood until it was made clear by fulfillment, and by that time it could no longer be said, "My Lord delays His coming" (Matt 24:48). So the charge that the prophetic view destroys the doctrine of imminence is answered.

A significant argument for the prophetic view may be seen in the number of churches listed in these chapters. Although the symbolism of numbers has been grossly abused by many in their treatment of the book of Revelation, few will deny that in this book the number seven occupies a place of importance and must be recognized as significant. And most would see that significance as representing completeness, fullness, the "whole" of something.⁹ Applying this symbolic significance to the seven churches of Revelation points to this sevenfold picture as presenting in some way the whole of the church. Now if the meaning is limited to the historical view, the question may be asked why only these seven churches were addressed. Certainly they were not the complete list of historical churches of John's day, not even all the churches of Asia; Colosse is right in the midst of them (in fact, within sight of one of them). Nor can importance be the deciding factor, as Colosse again shows.

One might add the typical interpretation to the picture and say that the seven represent the seven types of churches. But again one faces the question, why these seven? Certainly these seven are not the only seven types of churches. The NT itself furnishes many examples of church types not included in these seven, such as the Galatian and the Corinthian types. When one tries to label every church with which he is acquainted by assigning it to one of these seven, he has difficulty. These seven cannot represent a total list of church types.

However, when the prophetic view of the seven churches is recognized, the number seven becomes meaningful. The seven do not represent all churches or all types of churches but all the periods in the progressive historical development of the church in this age.

FULFILLMENT IN FACT

What is it that prompts expositors to see implicit prophecy in these letters? It is the remarkable correspondence in fact with the course of history and the realization that the characteristics of these seven churches have appeared in succession in the historical developments of the church age. It is not within the purpose of this paper to

⁹For a careful study of numbers in the Bible and a cautious approval of the symbolic significance of the number seven, see John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 115-19.

expound or to defend this claim; it has been presented in the literature of those who hold it.¹⁰ Perhaps sufficient for the present purpose is the observation that this is especially clear of the first two and the last two periods, the ones with which modern Christians are most familiar. The apostolic age, which began with the zeal of "first love," showed a diminishing of that ardor (as in the letter to the church in Ephesus). The second clearly discernible period was one of persecution and martyrdom, when the Roman Empire tried to destroy the Christian faith (as in the letter to the church in Smyrna). The "open door" of the letter to the church in Philadelphia corresponds closely with the evangelistic and missionary movements of the nineteenth century. And the lukewarmness and materialistic self-sufficiency of the church in Laodicea describes well the present situation. It should be remembered that all types of churches are present in all periods, but one type is predominant and characterizes each period.

But it is at this point that opponents of this view voice one of their major objections. They claim that there is no such correspondence in fact between the letters and church history. They add that the view is highly subjective with wide difference of opinion between proponents.¹¹ They label the view as simply another "continuous-historical" interpretation—an approach to Revelation which views the book as a whole to be "a symbolic presentation of the entire course of the history of the church from the close of the first century to the end of time."¹²

First, to label the prophetic view as another continuous-historical interpretation demonstrates a serious misunderstanding of the prophetic view. The continuous-historical method of interpreting the book of Revelation attempts to see fulfillment of specific passages in Revelation in specific events of history, such as the conversion of the Roman Empire, the invasion of the Turks, or the First World War. The prophetic view propounded here does absolutely none of this. It is in no sense a prediction of events or persons or organizations of which it could be said, "This is the fulfillment of that." Rather it is a recognition that the Lord foreknew and foretold the trends and movements throughout the church age. These are not immediately and definitely discernible but may be discerned by hindsight.

¹⁰E.g., Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, 48-49; and J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, n.d.) 76-86.

¹¹E.g., Thomas, "Chronological Interpretation," 325-27, and Trench, *Epistles to the Seven Churches*, 247-50.

¹²Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 137. See also Tenney's entire discussion of this view (137-39).

The claim that the prophetic view is subjective and differs widely from person to person¹³ is also based on the same misunderstanding. When the many continuous-historical writers are included, it is of course true that there are wide divergencies. Such subjectivity is a legitimate argument against that interpretation. But those who actually hold the prophetic view of these passages repudiate the spiritualizing and allegorizing of that method, holding instead to a literal or natural interpretation, and there is remarkable agreement in the identification of the seven periods.

Second, it is claimed that the view of church history used by the advocates of the prophetic view is faulty, taking into consideration only "Western Christianity," hence the correspondence in fact is not true. The answer to this objection is very simple, but very important and often neglected even by the proponents of the view.

Such a claim involves a faulty understanding of the nature of the churches in Revelation 2-3. The seven periods of church history are wrongly conceived as embracing *all* churches, all Christendom. The churches of Revelation 2-3 are symbolized as "candle-sticks" (*KJV*) or "lampstands" (*NASV, NIV*). The Greek word used is *λυχνία* and refers to the pedestal or stand upon which the lamp was placed or hung; the lamp itself is *λύχνος* or *λαμπάς*.¹⁴ The churches are not lamps or the light; they are the holders of the lamps. They hold up the light of the gospel so it may be seen by the world. When Revelation describes these churches as "light-holders," it is labeling them as holders of the true gospel. They represent the place where men may find the gospel. They are true churches. In Rev 2:5 the Lord threatens to remove their lampstand out of its place if they do not repent. In other words they will cease to be light-holders; they will cease to be true churches. Therefore, those churches represented in Revelation 2-3 are not false, apostate, or heretical—otherwise, they would not be lampstands. Western Christianity has been the major center for world evangelism and thus fits the description here.

The implications of this insight are crucial. It cancels the objection that the prophetic view fails to take into account the whole of church history. Revelation 2-3 provides a picture of trends and movements within true churches, not within Christendom. All through the years there have always been churches where the light of the gospel was being held up to view, even in the darkest days of the age. Such churches may have reflected some of the spirit of their false contemporaries, but they did not lose their light. Dead and apostate "churches" are not the addressees of these letters.

¹³E.g., Thomas, "Chronological Interpretation," 326.

¹⁴BAGD, 483.

CONCLUSION

This insight also forces a reevaluation of the whole approach to understanding these letters. 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).