

PROPHETIC TRUTHS FOR TODAY

Unveiling the End-Time Events

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

PROPHETIC HISTORY OF THE CHURCH FROM PENTECOST TO THE RAPTURE

“Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”
(Matthew 16:18).

THE BIBLE teaches clearly that the Church is a New Testament institution. Paul speaks of it as a mystery, or a truth unknown in the previous ages. A mystery in the Scriptures is not something incomprehensible; *it simply means a truth which once was veiled has become revealed in a subsequent dispensation.*

While it may be popular in certain religious circles to link the Church with the Old Testament, yet nothing could be farther from scriptural reality. In the Old Testament, there was, of course, the Jewish assembly or congregation. It conformed to certain arrangements under the law economy. But no careful student of the Scriptures would associate the Church with the Old Testament period. It is *only through types, figures, and symbols that we may do so*, but that is as far as we should go in that regard. There is no direct reference to the Church in the Old Testament.

The first clear reference to the Church in the New Testament is found in Matthew 16:18, where the Lord speaks of the Church in the future.

If it had existed in the Old Testament, Christ could not possibly have spoken of it as an institution which He would build in the future. His prediction (that He would build the Church) had a preliminary fulfillment after the resurrection, especially at the occasion, when **“he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost”** (John 20:22).

Here, we see, the Holy Ghost established a new relationship with the believers. The little nucleus was brought together in a new way. Then, on Pentecost, we have the birthday of the Church, that is, officially. It was on Pentecost that the great truth became a blessed reality as stated by Paul, **“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body . . .”** (I Corinthians 12:13).

The Church became a living body or organism in which the Holy Spirit indwelt. Christ assumed the headship of the body, which is the Church.

In contrast with this New Testament experience, we find in the Old Testament that the Holy Spirit came upon certain individuals in order to energize them, and to equip them for some particular mission, but there was no indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Since Pentecost every born-again believer has been baptized by the Spirit into the body of which Christ is the head. This has been ongoing since Pentecost, and it will be completed, **“when the fulness of the Gentiles has come”** (Romans 11:25). With this fulness, the earthly history of the Church ends.

It should be pointed out that every *true* believer (Jew or Gentile) from Pentecost to the *“Parousia”* (Rapture) is a member of this mystical body, which is the Church. The matter was clarified at the First Council of the Jerusalem church of which gathering we have the record in Acts, chapter 15. James, who served as the moderator or spokes man for the Council, uttered these significant words,

“Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name, and to this agree the words of the prophets, as it is written, After this I will return and will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down, and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up” (Acts 15:13-16).

Here, then, we see that in this age God is taking out a people, the *“Ecclesia,”* or *the called out ones*. These are called out from darkness into His marvelous light. James, the moderator of the Jerusalem church, knew clearly God’s purpose in this age.

GOD’S PURPOSE FOR THE CHURCH

First, let us be clear concerning what the Lord’s purpose is not with reference to the Church.

Christ did not commission His Church to reform the world, and to intervene in international politics, nor to change the present social order. Primarily, the Church is not here to enlarge massive cultural activities, stimulating ever bigger educational programs, or clearing the slums and blighted areas of our communities, and to beat down prices on gasoline and milk.

All of these things have only a relative value, but they are not primarily responsibilities of the church.

On the other hand, it is stated clearly, I think, that the Church is here to witness for Christ. Scripturally it is stated in these words, **“Ye shall be witnesses unto me . . .”** (Acts 1:8).

A witness is one who declares what he knows to be true. As members of the living Church, we are commissioned to tell forth the good news that Christ died for sinners, that His grace is sufficient and available to each one. We are here as His ambassadors, and in His stead we are to deliver the message, **“Be ye reconciled to God”** (II Corinthians 5:20).

Christ's marching orders to His witnesses were for them to begin at Jerusalem, and proceed into Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth (See Acts 1:8). This was a big order indeed. Our Lord said He would build His Church; yes, despite the opposition of world rulers and the emissaries of Satan.

This seemed to be a very risky program for Christ who had at the time only a handful of disciples. These were thrust out into a pagan world as sheep among wolves. Yet within half a century these witnesses had penetrated nearly all the areas of the Roman Empire.

History reveals that there were several hundred thousand Christians at the close of the first century. The apostle Paul conveys greetings from "**the saints in the household of Caesar**," the very headquarters of the imperial domain. Christ's predictions obviously spelled out right, for He was divine and knew the future and could read it as an open book. Every continent, island, and geographical subdivision of this earth's territory has come within range of hearing of the Gospel. In fact, the Gospel sun has traveled around the world during this dispensation of grace.

PERIODICAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

In order for us to appreciate the remarkable march of the Church throughout history, it is necessary to turn to the Book of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3. In this prophetic book you find, I believe, a history of the Church from the first century to the final period of the Church on earth.

The messages to the seven local churches in Asia Minor reflect a great deal more than the internal spiritual characteristics of each of these. Rather, I think, they reflect periodical characteristics of Christendom in all of history. If we follow the sequence, or order, in which these churches are listed, and the message directed to each one, we have an amazing prophetic verification of the actual history of the church on earth during these nearly two millennia.

The Ephesus Church

This church, and the message directed to it, represents, I am sure, *the apostolic period, or the first century church*. It held firmly to the scriptural truth, and it tolerated no false doctrine. Despite its absolute orthodoxy, and its committal to the Scriptures, it had this one fault which was stated by the Lord, "**Thou hast left thy first love**" (Revelation 2:4). Its original fervor, which characterized the Church in the days of the apostles, commenced to taper off as the end of the first century was reached. This condition is verified in Church history.

The Church in Smyrna

Smyrna means "*myrrh*," a substance which was used in the embalming of the dead. The second and third centuries were characterized by frightful persecutions, at least we may identify ten waves of such, the climax of which was reached in the reign of Emperor Diocletian. Often the believers were thrown to the wild beasts. Some others hid in catacombs during these fiery times of persecution. But *the afflictions blew away the chaff*. The Church shined the brightest in the days of unprecedented persecutions.

The Lord had no rebuke to the Church in Smyrna. He said, **“Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life”** (Revelation 2:10).

In church history we see this kind of heroism clearly exemplified by the Church in Smyrna, which represents *the period of the martyrs*. We do not wish to imply that these prophetic characteristics are the exclusive matters with which we are to reckon in regard to the churches of Asia Minor, but they constitute an important thread in prophecy relative to the periodical history of the Church.

The Church at Pergamos

After Diocletian, the persecutions ended for the most part. In the year 312 A.D. Constantine the Great announced that he had seen a great sign blazoned in the sky, in the figure of a cross, with the words, “In this sign you shall conquer.”

Constantine fused the Church with the State, the result of which was that the Church lost its pilgrimage character. In other words, it became a great external institution enjoying the support of the empire. Pergamos means “*married*.” At least it implies being united to, or attached, and in the case of Pergamos, it was attached to the world. In this period Christianity was popularized throughout the empire. Sunday was given a status of universal recognition. In the prophetic history of the Church, the church at Pergamos fits precisely into the periodical sequence.

The Church at Thyatira

While Pergamos represents external or outward corruption, Thyatira points to *an inner corruption*.

The church, I believe, represents *the long Roman Catholic period from the 5th century to the Protestant Reformation*. The rise of Jezebel is mentioned.

The original Queen Jezebel introduced fornication and idolatrous practices. Here, then, in church history you find correspondingly the rise of the papacy and the hierarchy. For a thousand years the one Church ruled supreme over western Christendom. It is the time of the ecclesiastical expansion, when the Church ceased to be the Bride of Christ. Instead it became a dunghill of vileness and corruption. It sought to regiment all of mankind in a vast ecclesiastical system headed by the pope in Rome.

Of course during the dark ages, or in medieval history, you have some true light-bearers, or dissenters, but they are relatively few in number. The massive Latin Church with its creeds and spurious dogmas held sway throughout western Christendom. The Lord’s specific message directed to that church was for it to repent. This it did not do. Historically the Roman Church has been inflexible. It *consists of a blending of Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity*. The church of Thyatira fits the period of the long Roman Catholic supremacy, which remained intact until the great Reformers emerged.

The Church at Sardis

Sardis means “*those who escaped*.” The Lord’s message is distinct in this regard. “**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**” (Revelation 3:4). Here, then, we see an element historically which escaped out of Roman Catholicism.

When Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the old castle church at Wittenburg, it brought, as it were, all Europe to its feet.

Justification by faith was a truth rediscovered and reemphasized. Unfortunately, however, the Reformation Church got bogged down in creeds, dogmas, and confessions. It failed to become missionary-minded, and hence the Lord was compelled to make this pungent statement, “**Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead**” (Revelation 3:2).

In the historical sequence, or the periodical development of the Church, you find the Reformation Church settled mainly for:

- Ceremonies,
- Formalism,
- Sacraments,
- Creeds,
- Confessions.

This brought spiritual paralysis to the program of evangelism. The history of the State church in each of the Protestant countries of Europe is one of dead orthodoxy. The Sardis period therefore fits the time of the Reformation, and particularly the subsequent generations when Protestantism became thoroughly organized.

The Church at Philadelphia

As most of us know Philadelphia means “*brotherly love*.” To this church the Lord had no rebuke. Rather He says, “**Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it**” (Revelation 3:8). This church represents, I think, *the great missionary period in history*. It is the time of the rise of Pietism on the continent, and the great awakening under Wesley. This spirit swept through nearly all Protestant Europe. It had its counter-activity in America during the 19th century revivals of Finney and Moody. This is also the period of the birth of modern missions. William Carey went to India in 1795, and in 1809 Robert Morrison entered China. Subsequently we find Moffat and Livingston departing for the dark continent of Africa. Judson reached Burma, and John Paton went to the islands in the Pacific. Hudson Taylor reached inland China in the middle of the century. And many of the leading evangelical denominations originated during the period of the great awakening. The Church realized that the world was its field. Here, then, *is the time of the breakthrough of the Gospel into long neglected areas*. The 19th century was one of the brightest missionary and evangelistic periods in the whole history of the Church. As we match the Philadelphian period in the historical sequence of history, there is a remarkable correlation.

The Church of the Laodiceans

This is the last portrait we have in the Book of Revelation concerning “**the things that are,**” or the Church in history. Laodicea means “*the rights of the people*” or “masses.” In looking at the message of our Lord as it was directed to this church, we see an example of its empty boasting (had need of nothing) about its achievements. It was thoroughly organized and was humming with activity, but Christ was not in it. He had been crowded out.

Listen to our Lord speak: “**Behold, I stand at the door and knock.**” It seems to me we have depicted here prophetically the 20th Century Church. It is permeated with *liberalism*.

The ecumenical movement has gone into high gear. An institutionalized Church is being promoted by many of the religious leaders of our time. This must lead to the super-church which is described in Revelation, chapters 17 and 18. In this passage it is referred to as a politico-religious system achieving a massiveness that is phenomenal during the time of Antichrist. In our time numbers are becoming all-important. Religious leaders in America boast over their 124 million church members. Every Tom, Dick and Harry is welcomed into the average local church of today.

Despite all these current external activities of modern Churchianity, we find that prayer meetings are dying out all across America. Sunday evening services have been terminated by an ever-increasing number of religious groups. Billy Sunday felt the preliminary impact of the modern Laodicean church before he departed this life. He said, “Churches are getting to be so cold that icicles are freezing on the chandeliers, and people are skating down the aisles.”

Indeed the Laodicean church is a prophetic portrait of twentieth century Churchianity. The Lord said, “**Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth**” (Revelation 3:16).

This is the only time our Lord is described as being *literally disgusted with a situation*. Despite all of its assets, its empty boastings, the Lord said to the church of the Laodiceans, “**Thou art wretched and miserable and poor, and blind and naked . . .**” (Revelation 3:17).

The church didn’t realize its poverty; it had goods, means, and stood in need of nothing—so it thought. Leaders of churches today which cost over a million dollars talk about their efficient plants, as if these were in some kind of mass-production. **The whole ecumenical movement is geared to massiveness, and it is unknowingly promoting the spurious developments which are pointed out in the Book of Revelation.**

Should this prophetic history of the Church seem too far-fetched for the readers of this volume to assimilate, then I urge upon you to read the Seven Parables of the King, which are recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 13. In this series of parables the Lord sought to give a prophetic picture of Christendom following the period of His rejection. In other words, He unveiled the kingdom at the time when it would take on a mystical form; that is, during the period of His absence from the earth.

I am fully convinced that these parables stand in parallel with the Seven Churches and serve to unveil prophetically Christendom from the first century to the time of our Lord's return.

Truly, the parable of the sower depicts the apostolic age in the same manner as the church of Ephesus does.

The parable of the mustard seed points to the period of Constantine, when the church-state fusion took place, but it turned out to be a monstrosity. Its abnormal growth caused it to become a tree with the birds of the air finding lodging places in its branches. A bird comes to a tree to build its nest and prey on the fruit. The bird never becomes a part of the tree. Jesus said, "**I am the vine, ye are the branches.**" In the second parable the Lord identifies the birds as emissaries of Satan.

It is needless to go through each of the seven parables in detail, but the amazing thing is that each one fits a distinct period in the long course of church history, or Christendom, during the centuries. Christ gives the interpretation of the last parable in these key words, "**So shall it be at the end of the age**" (Matthew 13:19). The dragnet gathered in all sorts of fish, a kind of conglomeration of varieties. Isn't this a picture of modern Churchianity and its composite activity?

At least we are positive that the dual picture of the Seven Churches and the Seven Parables consistently verifies the periodical characteristics of Christendom during these 1900 years.

If my evaluation is correct, as I am positive that it is, then truly we have reached the end-time. No other church is listed in Revelation beyond Laodicea; no parable in the series goes beyond the dragnet. *Seven is the number of fulness*. In Scripture it consistently has significance with regard to completion, or a totality.

As we follow the record of Christendom we find a striking parallelism in a periodical study of the centuries. It is logical therefore to believe that the Church Age is drawing to its close, and that the company of believers (the true Church) will be raptured when the last saved person is incorporated into the body of which Christ is the Head. Christendom has reached the final period when measured by Biblical predictions.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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