

The Ages of the Church Revelation 2-3

The Seven Letters of Revelation 2-3 have 4 Levels of application

#1 – Historically

A)These churches were real literal churches in Asia minor - which is modern day Turkey - They were dealing with real problems that Jesus addresses

#1 – Historically

#2 – Collectively

B)These letters were not just written to real churches with real problems Jesus wanted to really address in their lives -

1)These letters also have a message every church can benefit from

C)Each letter ends with the exhortation, “He who has an ear to hear let him hear, what the Spirit says to the churches.”

➤ **The things that these real individual churches struggled with are things that we as a church can struggle with and fall into as well**

4 levels of application

#1 – Historically

#2 – Collectively

#3 – Personally

Each letter not only ends with the statement, “hear what the Spirit says to the churches, It also says , “He who has an ear to hear”

A)And what that tells me is - If you have an ear, and it looks that all of you do,

B)then these letters and the things they teach apply not just to the historical literal churches and not just to the church as a whole

C)But these messages also apply to you personally

4 levels of application

#1 – Historically

#2 – Collectively

#3 – Personally

#4 – Prophetically

I mentioned Sunday that I think the reason Jesus picked these 7 churches is significant

A)These seven, except for Ephesus, were not major churches.

B)Why did Jesus not write to Antioch, or Jerusalem, or Philippi or even Rome?

C)Well I think the reason is NOT only because these seven churches were on an Asia Minor Postal route,

1)I think the significance is much greater than a convenient postal route

I Think that Jesus knew that these 7 churches would paint a prophetic picture of the different ages in church history -

A)Early church to this present day

B)John obviously wouldn’t see that from his vantage point - but we can see if from ours as we look back on church history

C)Much the same Way - Ezekiel in Ezekiel 37

1)Rebirth of the nation of Israel

The ages of Church History

#1 The Early Church – 33AD – 64AD

A)Church history begins with ascension of Jesus where He tells His follows to wait in Jerusalem until He endues them with power from on high

B)So that they could be witnesses of Him in Jerusalem, Judea and to the ends of the earth

1)The Church was birthed on the day of Pentecost

C)And the book of Acts follows this pattern by starting in Jerusalem and Judea under the care of the apostles Peter and James

1)but eventually the church spreads out by three missionary journeys into the Gentile World by a man by the name of the apostle Paul

Remember how we noted that the first church that Jesus wrote to what the church of Ephesus

A)Ephesus became a launching pad for the gospel to spread all over Asia Minor

B) Believed that most of these other churches in the book of Revelation were birthed out of the church of Ephesus

C) Recall in our study of the book of Acts that the book of Acts records the first 30 yrs of the early church

1) Obviously, there was much activity – churches were being planted in major cities and then spreading out from those cities to the smaller communities

D) But one issue that arises in so much of the writings of the early church is the need to remind the early church in the midst of all of their doing good,

1) was a reminder to love one another

Paul reminded the Corinthians...

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” – I Corinthians 13:1-3

And then also in verse 13 of the same chapter...

“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.” – I Corinthians 13:13

James, the half-brother of Jesus writes...

“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” – James 2:8

The apostle Peter said in his writings...

“Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart,” – I Peter 1:22

And again in chapter 4:8

“And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins” – I Peter 4:8

And the apostle John wrote in his epistle

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” – I John 4:10-11

And church history also records that the apostle John would travel to churches as the last living apostle

A) And people would walk for miles to come hear him and what it was like to walk physically with Jesus

B) And when he would get up before the people he would tell them, “my little children love God and love one another.” - And then he would sit down

1) And people would say – give us the meat, tell us more

C) And John would get back up and say, “That is the meat, there is no more – Love God and love one another.”

D) A lack of love and a need to be reminded marked the early church

Remember the problem Jesus addressed with the church of Ephesus – They left their first love

A) Think about what marked the early church – they were busy, they stood against false teaching,

B) but they were needing to be constantly reminded to love God and love people – as was the church in Ephesus

C) when the church entered a second stage of its history- it came under Heavy persecution

#1 – The Early Church – 33AD – 64AD

#2 – The Persecuted Church – 64AD– 312AD

A) You might be thinking didn’t we see a lot of persecution in the book of Acts - yes

B) But what you need to understand that up until 64 AD the church was persecuted by the Jews who saw Christianity as a misrepresentation of Judaism

C) But although the Jews persecuted the Christians the Gentiles really left them alone in general

1)The Roman Empire saw Christianity as a sect of Judaism which was an accepted religion under Roman law

D)But that all changed in 64 AD

In 64 AD much of Rome burned to the ground

A)And even though Nero was away at the time, and rushed back to the city and even let people stay in his gardens,

B)the people blamed Nero for setting the fire

1)Nero needed a scapegoat and he blamed the Christians

C)They were already misunderstood talking about eating the body and blood of their Lord - Cannibalism

D)and they were already talking about the world ending with a great fire – and so for most, the idea that Christians started the fire seemed reasonable

So for the first time in mass, Gentiles turned on Christians and the empire began to hunt them down and kill them.

A)it was during this time that Nero had both the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter arrested

B)Paul was beheaded and Peter was crucified upside down saying he was not worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus

C)The persecution would continue for 10 Roman Casers, where 100's of thousands of Christians, our brothers and sisters in Christ were killed

That is what we saw when we looked at the church of Smyrna - the persecuted church

A)Smyrna - hang on during a time of great persecution

B)Jesus told the church in Smyrna they would endure 10 days of persecution

1)and we noted that could have referred to those 10 waves of persecution - By those ten Roman emperors

C)Jesus commended the church in Smyrna for standing strong

The interesting thing that happened in church history during that time of persecution is that rather than destroying the church,

A)That time of persecution, purified the church, made us stronger – The church multiplied during its time of persecution,

B)I was reading this in my Devos this morning: John 15 - Jesus is talking to his disciples about the coming persecution

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word I spoke to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they don’t know the one who sent me. ²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³ The one who hates me also hates my Father. ²⁴ If I had not done the works among them that no one else has done, they would not be guilty of sin. Now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. ²⁵ But this happened so that the statement written in their law might be fulfilled: **They hated me for no reason. John 15:18-25 CSB**

C)I think one of the biggest problems with the church especially here in the West is we are so concerned with being liked.

D)In the name of evangelism - we try so hard to appeal to the world - that at times our message and witness gets tainted.

But Jesus says-don’t be surprised when the world hates you - they hated me

A)Early in John’s gospel Jesus tells us why that is:

¹⁹ This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God.” John 3:19-21 CSB

B)Our world is getting darker by the day - I keep telling you the lines are being set - Darkness is getting darker

C)That which is of the light and truth of God is going stand out more and more as being the opposite of the darkness

D)If we are standing in the light and for the light - Persecution is inevitable - Promise: Those who desire to live godly for Jesus WILL suffer persecution

1)Count on it - don't be surprised by it

But Satan loves to keep us in the gray area - living in between - Because he has seen when the church is persecuted it grows

A)Which is exactly what happened in Smyrna and during the age of the persecuted church -

B)And we see it happening today in countries where the church is being persecuted it is growing FAST - VIBRANT

C)So after seeing that in the age of the persecuted church -the Devil changed his tactics -

D)Instead of trying to attack the church from without - he tried to attack it from within

1)by implementing false teachings and ideas from within

E)The Greek and Roman world dominated culture and thought - as the church moved into the second and third centuries,

1)During that time the Heresy of Gnosticism grew incredibly and infiltrated the church

#1 – The Early Church – 33AD – 64AD

#2 – The Persecuted Church – 64AD– 312AD

#3 – The Age of Gnosticism – 140AD – 325AD

A)The Gnostics believed all material and everything physical was evil

B)So they taught that Jesus Christ did not have a physical body, and the God of the OT was not “God the Father” Jesus spoke of

1)because He created matter- Matter was evil

C)They also taught that what you did in your body was evil, but it really didn't matter because it was only the spiritual God was interested in

The result of this false teaching took the church into an age where there was rampant sin and carnality

A)Because you could do whatever you wanted in your bodies, God only cared about the Spiritual

B)You recall in our study of the letter to the church in Pergamos - the problem was compromise - Compromised Doctrinally

1)Mixing the teachings of the Bible with the ideas of culture

C)Pergamos – warning against mixing with the world

1)they were compromising, they were mixing with the teachings of the world

D)And the result was idolatry and sexual sin just as in the church of Pergamos

This time in church history resulted in 3 things that still exist in the church today

A)The first one is why certain parts of Christianity have something like a pope or a Bishop as an overseer

B)Gnostics claimed authority on par with the Apostles

C)So because of Gnosticism, the church appointed city overseers – one man who was given authority for the believers of one city or region –

D)And as the church grew and their power grew and it gave way to Popes and Cardinals – overseers of movements and regions

Another thing that had its origin in this time in Christianity is why certain catholic priests are celibate, when the Apostles were not

A)the Gnostics lifted up the idea that someone who could live without physical pleasures like intimacy in their lives was super Spiritual

B)and even though the church condemned the teachings of the Gnostics –

1)it stuck in the minds of the people that the super spiritual folks could live without physical pleasure of any kind –

C)so priest were encouraged to be celibate

The third thing to come out of the time of Gnostic Christianity was why we have the 27 books of the New Testament that we do

A)Because the Gnostics were saying – my word is just as authoritative as someone who wrote 60 years ago

B)and so the church came together to pray through the process of Canonizing the scriptures

1)or picking which books were really inspired and which were in question

C)A detailed process was put together that we don't have the time to go into tonight

1)But that is why the books we have today in our NT are considered inspired by God

D)Where as the Gnostic gospels and books like that were not accepted as being inspired by God

Now part of why that season ended in the church is because the church instead of being persecuted by Rome eventually became the official Roman religion

#1 – The Early Church – 33AD – 64AD

#2 – The Persecuted Church – 64AD– 312AD

#3 – The Age of Gnosticism – 140AD – 325AD

#4 – Roman Catholic Christianity – 312 AD – Modern Day

A)in 312 Constantine became emperor over the Roman empire,

B)Saying he saw the sign of the cross and God told him in this sign conquer and from his accounts he became a Christian

C)Now whether or not that was true (who knows) what we do know is how with the Edict of Milan,

1)Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire

D)Church attendance went from a few hundred in major cities, to 30,000 people attending the church in Rome

But With people entering the church who were fresh out of paganism (or still in it, in some cases), this led to more false teaching

A)The church, became one of the most powerful entities in the world at the time,

B)the offices of the church went to men with influence and money, not those who were spiritually called

C)And with this excess of power the church suddenly experienced many church practices that left the foundation of the Word of God completely

1)including indulgences (or paying the church in order to commit sin and get a get forgiven pass for what you were about to do) and many other false ideas

D)The leaders of the church became so powerful that they were able to threaten excommunication from the church - and heaven

1)If you were found to violate the man made rules laws and practices of the church

Now not all people in the church at that time were evil -

A)Some saw the new found power of the church as something to be avoided and so they decided to leave it all and become either Monks or nuns

B)both words mean “alone” – and they would leave the cities to be alone with God

C)But then they realizing rather quickly being alone was neither safe nor enjoyable –

1)so they eventually formed monasteries and convents –

D)Thus a string of monasteries and convents were established all over the Roman world

Two of the most famous monks were Jerome, who mastered Hebrew and Greek translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Latin,

A)Giving the catholic church the Latin vulgate - Vulgate” in Latin mean Vulgar

B)Because at first the church of this time period thought to put the language of the people into the common tongue made it sound vulgar

C) Another famous monk was named Benedict who formed a monastery southeast of Rome and came up with

1) the Rule of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience

He implemented a balanced routine of Bible reading, prayer and work

A) One of the long-term effects of the monks was the preserving of ancient texts such as the early manuscripts of the Bible,

B) the writings of church fathers and even classic works like Plato and Homer

C) This period church history corresponds to the letter that Jesus wrote to the church of Thyatira

Thyatira – rebuked for allowing sin and compromise in the church

A) How this speaks to the age of Roman Catholic Christianity- Abuse of power - the Prophetess –

B) Although the church had many good works - very commended church

C) So many of their beliefs and practices were not founded in the Bible but in paganism

D) It has been nice to see in recent years that there has been a resurgence in some Catholic churches - to get back to the Bible

1) My Neighbors

In 410 AD, less than 100 years after becoming Christian, Rome fell to the Goths A) And 30 years later it was taken the ground by the Vandals and some wondered how could God's city could fall?

B) and the man who gave some answers was Saint Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo

C) He wrote a book called the City of God which reminded people that though we live in cities of man and are supposed to affect those cities of man,

1) the City of God is coming and it is for that city that we need to live – not a temporary one that often God judges for years of sins

What followed was a long period known as the “Middle Ages”

“The Middle Ages” refers to the time from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance in Europe, but from the perspective of Church history from the fall of Rome until the Reformation

A) Which in a 45 minute overview of church history we don't have time to get into but it was all pretty dark time

B) A few notable things that happened in the middle ages was the rise of Islam

1) The plague and the crusades

C) It was also during that time that Catholic church was divided between East and West

“Catholic” means “universal

A) but because of the crusades and differences in doctrine - the church in the West centered in Rome stayed the Roman Catholic church

B) the church in the East centered first at Constantinople and later in Moscow became the Eastern Orthodox churches -- major differences

The Roman Catholic Church in the West

- centered in Rome
- sees its authority coming from the Bible as interpreted by the Pope and church councils

Eastern Orthodox Churches in the East

- centered in Constantinople, then in Moscow
- no Pope, but they do venerate icons

C) The Division between Roman Catholic Christianity and Eastern Orthodox was the only major division of the church until the Protestant Reformation, 1517

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#5 – The Protestant Reformation – 1517 AD – Modern Day

A) Because of the great abuses of power and practices so far from biblical principles like the selling of indulgences

B)The Catholic church was doing that to raise money to build Saint Peter's basilica in Rome

C)Because of those abuses of power and because of the non-biblical practices

D)and because toward the end of the middle ages the Bible was becoming available in languages like German and English

1)for the common people to read- the stage was being set for the Protestant reformation

The Protestant Reformation officially began on October 31st 1517, when Martin Luther, a catholic priest and scholar

A)upset about the selling of indulgences nailed his 95 thesis to the church door at Wittenberg Germany

Luther's 95 thesis was a document that included 95 statements, or theses, questioning the foundation of religion and, specifically, the Roman Catholic Church.

The 95 Theses were expressions of Martin Luther's opinions about the practices and beliefs of the Catholic Church, which Luther posted to the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenberg and which he intended to debate with church leaders or anyone who would listen.

B)As Luther was beginning the reformation in Germany, which would eventually turn into the Lutheran Church

C)In Switzerland the churches that would be known as reformed churches started in Zurich and then in Geneva under the leadership of John Calvin

The Reformation brought a resurgence - back to the Bible - and the pureness of Christianity

A)Revivals broke out during that period of time

B)Some of the major denominations that we have today came from that time

See this graphic



This period of time in church history correlates with the church of Sardis with whom Jesus said:

You have a name that you are alive - Dead

A)And I think this is a good summary of the early protestant revival churches - They had a great name -

B)Protestants - Protesting against people who don't follow what the Bible says a church should be and a Christian should be

C)But now so many of those churches that began with those wonderful reformations would turn over in their graves

1)if they could see their churches now- A far cry from what their old reputation was

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#6 The Missions/Bible minded Movements - 1620 AD - Modern Times

The next 300 years of church history after Christians first landed at Plymouth Rock would be time of challenges for sure,

A)But it would also be a time of great revival, awakenings in understanding of the importance of the Word of God and the Spirit of God,

B)and missionary work would go all over the globe

C)what brought on the first revivals in the United States and in Europe as it so often does is first a falling away first

1)the age of Enlightenment brought many wonderful things to our world in the form of education and technology

But it caused many Christians to question their faith or try to reconcile their faith with theories of science

A)But as this belief began to sweep over Europe and the United States, God began a great work of revival

B)The story of the Great Awakening in the United States and Europe is really about three men, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley and George Whitefield

C)Each in their own ways and in their own corners of the world brought radical change to the Christian church for good

1)But in each case the revivals started as people started reaching out, not just focusing in, and getting back to teaching the Word of God

D)From their ministries thousands of Baptist and Methodist churches were founded in America and in Europe

The 1800's were also a time of progress - steamships, trains made travel and the availability of goods easy compared to a generation before

A)Now while there was a downside to industrial revolution in working conditions, the one thing that age also did was open up missions

B)William Carey, Hudson Taylor took steps of faith through open doors God provided and the world was changed

1)at the time of William Carey and Hudson Taylor, very few churches had any type of foreign missions' programs and even fewer spend any money and such endeavors

C)However, 76 years after William Carey's death – more than 1,200 missionaries from 160 mission boards met in Edinburg England

1)and by that time the percentage of Christian pastors doing ministry outside of Europe and America had increased by 1,000 percent

Another effect of the Industrial revolution was again horrible working conditions, orphans on the streets and slavery still a world problem

A)Into this scene God sent a Baptist pastor by the name of Charles Spurgeon

B)When many pastors of the day were beginning to focus on only social reform,

C)Spurgeon balanced social reform with evangelism and the preaching of the Word of God in his church in London -

1)the result was the first modern mega church with thousands of people flocking to hear Spurgeon preach and teach

England had Spurgeon, America had DL Moody who had been saved less than a year when a financial panic rocked the United States

A)He went from selling shoes to saving souls

B)Moody was rejected by much of the local church- so he would preach openly in tents and outdoors

C)Seminary students would count his grammatical errors during his sermons

1)Mr. Moody - we counted 45 grammatical errors in your sermon tonight

D)Moody responded by saying - I am using all the English I know to tell people about Jesus what are you doing with yours ?

1)1871 Moody went to England and his preaching crusades reached over four million people

That era of Church history was marked by an Open door for the gospel

A)Which is exactly what Jesus said about the 6th church - the church of Philadelphia - The Church with open doors

B)The Church with Divine opportunities

C)We noted on Sunday - that church was a dependent church - Little strength

1)**Dedicated church - kept the word -**

2)**Courageous church - Daring**

That spirit lives on in those today who daringly seek to take the gospel to unreached people groups all over the world

A) People who are dependent on the Holy Spirit

B) Dedicated to the word of God

C) God using them in powerful ways

But that time period in church history also gave birth to another

An Overview of Church History

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#6 – The Missions/Bible minded Movements – 1620 AD – Modern Times

#7 - The Modern church – 1920 – Modern Times

During the missions/ Bible minded Movements

The church became accepted and popular - many parts of the world especially Europe - The West

A) The West - many people flocking to Christian churches

B) Churches became rich and built big buildings - increased in popularity

C) And in many respects it has caused much of the church to become like Laodicean church - Luke Warm

1) Self Reliant

AW Tozer who once said: If you were to take the Holy Spirit out the church today 75% of the churches wouldn't know he was gone

Don't get me wrong - I think the Lord is working through the modern day church throughout the world today - including here in America

A) But at the same time especially here in the West - although the church has been quite popular -

B) The effects of the church has not been as significant as we would suppose - especially when 63% of Americans claim to be Christians

C) As of 2022 US population was 333 million - 63% would be 210 million people

D) Does our society reflect that there are 210 million followers of Jesus in America?

I think OUR modern churches depending upon where you are at in the world today are like these churches in the book of Revelation

A) There are some places where the church is like the church of Smyrna - persecuted but Thriving

B) Nations where the most people are coming to Jesus - places where it is against the law to follow Jesus

1) China - Middle East - Iraq - Iran

C) The movement of Jesus is flourishing in those countries in the midst of great persecution

Then there are churches especially in the West that are compromised - embracing liberal theologies - Pergamos and Thyatira

A) And there are Churches like Sardis - Name alive - great history but they are dead

B) Churches like Ephesus - the church is like a machine - lots going on but missing their passion and love

C) Churches like Laodicea - so self-reliant - pushed Jesus out

But I pray that we would be like the church of Philadelphia

A) Continue to make an impact - walk through OPEN DOORS - relying on the Divine Resources

B) Stay dependent - Little strength

1) Dedicated to the Word

2) Courageous to stand

C) So that if the Lord tarries and persecution comes upon us here in the West - we will be like the Church of Smyrna

1) And our Brothers and sisters in persecuted countries - AMEN