

A Truth About Revelation 2 And 3

by John W. Ritenbaugh
Forerunner, "Personal,"

Among the best-known and strongest beliefs held by those who left the Worldwide Church of God during its doctrinal heresies is that the seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3 describe church eras. That is, they comprise seven long periods from the church's founding by Jesus Christ up to the present and continuing until His return.

But is this belief true? Is any part of it true? On what biblical foundation is this idea based?

Herbert W. Armstrong zealously taught what he believed to be true, and he was equally zealous in carrying out what he believed were his God-ordained responsibilities. Occasionally, some of his doctrinal teachings were found to be wrong or not completely correct, but he nonetheless preached those beliefs with typical, convincing fervency. It is difficult to find fault with that approach. When he realized he had been wrong, he preached the revised doctrine with equal zeal, which is exactly as he should have done. So, we cannot rely on his fervor in supporting a doctrinal position as proof of the truth. As he often said, "Don't believe me! Believe your Bible!"

Origins

The beginning of this idea of church eras in Revelation 2-3 occurred long before I was baptized in late 1959. As far as my awareness of it, it seemed to have always existed. It may have its origins in the Church of God, Seventh Day, the church Herbert Armstrong fellowshiped with before forming the Radio Church of God. Elements of it appeared in a church booklet, *A True History of the True Church*, first published in 1959 and authored by Dr. Herman Hoeh. I read it soon after its publication.

Jesus says in Matthew 16:18, "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail

against it.” Undoubtedly, this verse played a part in the early thinking behind this concept. Yet, the church has misunderstood this verse. Its dominant interpretation has been that Greek *hades* always refers to “the grave.” This understanding is incorrect in this case.

What Christ is describing in this verse is an active, military-style engagement: a spiritual war between the church and its enemies. Since a grave is merely a receptacle for a dead body, it does not—cannot—make war. Jesus’ phrase “gates of Hades,” which Matthew correctly remembered and recorded for us, is a metaphorical expression describing the forces of evil, Satan and his horde of demons. They, not the grave, make war against the church. Christ asserts that the demonic forces of evil will not triumph over His church.

Jesus pictures His church—His spiritual Body—as dominating the warfare between it and the Adversary and his minions. We can be assured that Christ has already defeated Satan, as shown in the encounter recorded in Matthew 4 and Luke 4, and in His resurrection and ascension to His Father’s right hand in heaven. We will be saved by His continuing life (Romans 5:10).

Those of His faithful brethren, the elect, have nothing to fear about His willingness and His ability to overcome Satan on our behalf. Knowing that the church, with Him as its Head, is on the offensive ought to be faith-building.

Tracing Roots

We can understand the church to be a Family descended from Jesus Christ. Families do not just pop out of the ground; they come from somewhere. Every family has ancestors and ultimately, a founding ancestor. Our Savior is the Father, the Founder, of the church Family. (He—and we as His brethren—also have a Father in heaven, but using “father” for Christ indicates the originator of a distinct people. See similar usages in Isaiah 9:6; Jeremiah 31:9.) As such, He is called “the second man” and “the last Adam,” which we often combine into “the Second Adam” (I Corinthians 15:45, 47). Just as all humans descended from the first man, Adam, all Christ’s spiritual progeny derive from Him.

It is common for families to search out their ancestors, those from whom they are physically descended, through whatever records have survived. Biblically, the Jews and Levites kept extensive ancestral records because God gave important assignments and responsibilities to certain families among them.

Such research shows, for instance, that I am descended on my father's side from a German couple named John and Mary (Woell or Wells) Reichenbach, whose names abruptly appear in an official document, a marriage certificate, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1832. To the best of my knowledge, nobody has ever traced my roots any further back than that. They were likely my family's original immigrants to America.

In a similar way, Dr. Herman Hoeh traced the roots of the Radio Church of God and later the Worldwide Church of God by seeking doctrinal correspondences between religious groups named in histories written as far back as 2,000 years ago. Information he found led him to determine that some of these groups were spiritual ancestors of the present-day church of God. Ironically, nearly all of this interesting information came from those groups' enemies.

He found names like the Nazarenes, the Bogomils, the Paulicians, the Athyngani (Athingani, Athinganoi), Waldensians, Lollards, Sabbatarian Baptists, and many others besides. He also found the names of the leaders of some of those groups: Polycarp, Polycrates, Constantine of Mannanali, Peter Du Bois, Peter Waldo, Walter Lollard, Stephen Mumford, and two men whose first names only were recorded, Arnold and Henri.

Then, according to the periods in which those organizations and leaders existed, Dr. Hoeh fit them into the list of churches in Revelation 2 and 3. In this way, he constructed a chain of church eras, linked through the centuries by common doctrines.

Coexisting Churches

Because Christ is alive, the church continues its unbroken life from the time He founded it. But the question remains: Did Christ intend us to understand Revelation 2-3 through this "eras" method of interpretation? Obviously, the

Bible does not say so explicitly. If it is a correct interpretation, it is because God's Word often serves more than one purpose. A section of Scripture can have multiple applications. In any case, the "era" method of interpretation is neither the most accurate nor the most important one.

In Revelation 2-3, Jesus leaves a few clues about the letters' primary application:

» Revelation 2:16 (to Pergamos): Repent, or else *I will come to you quickly* and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

» Revelation 2:25 (to Thyatira): But hold fast what you have *till I come*.

» Revelation 3:3 (to Sardis): Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, *I will come upon you as a thief*, and you will not know *what hour I will come* upon you.

» Revelation 3:10-11 (to Philadelphia): Because you have kept My command to persevere, *I also will keep you from the hour of trial* which shall come upon all the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, *I am coming quickly!* Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

» Revelation 3:20 (to Laodicea): Behold, *I stand at the door* and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

Now notice Revelation 2:23 in the letter to Thyatira: "I will kill her children with death, and *all the churches* shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works."

As the italicized phrases in the first five passages show, each an admonition to a different church, the similarity is that He mentions His imminent return directly or strongly alludes to it. Then, Revelation 2:23 more than implies

that “all the churches” exist at the same time. Understood in tandem with the first five passages, Revelation 2:23 reveals that “all the churches”—all seven—are not scattered over long eras of time but exist together at the end time!

This understanding parallels the reality of the seven churches in the first century. When the apostle John wrote Revelation, they all existed simultaneously in the western portion of Asia Minor (today’s Turkey). Ancient Roman documents record they were all stops on the same circuitous mail route through that region.

An End-Time Book

John records Jesus Christ saying of Himself in Revelation 1:11:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,” and,
“What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”

The book of Revelation, like a letter carried along a mail route, was to be sent to all seven churches at the same time. It is unlikely that the apostle sent it through the postal system of the day but had it hand-delivered by one or more of his companions. This verse confirms that the seven churches existed concurrently in the first century.

The preceding two verses reveal a vital piece of information:

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet . . . (Revelation 1:9-10)

In Greek, the words underlying “the Lord’s Day” simply mean “a day belonging to the Lord.” In the Bible, what does “a day belonging to the Lord” refer to? Revelation 6:17, a few chapters later in the same book, specifies which day it is: “For the great day of His wrath has come, and who

is able to stand?” We know from the dozens of times a similar Hebrew phrase is used in the Old Testament that “the Lord’s Day” or “the Day of the Lord” is not a single day but a period of God’s judgment. Revelation 16:14 prophesies: “For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.” He is speaking about what is commonly called “the Battle of Armageddon” (verse 16), which occurs at the climax of the Day of the Lord, Christ’s return.

In Revelation 1, “the Lord’s Day” is not a recurring day of the week. It is the day of God’s wrath, the time of the decisive battle of God against His adversaries. So he could write this book, Jesus projected John’s mind miraculously into the time just before His return, a time called “the Lord’s Day” or “the Day of the Lord.” That period of God’s judgment is still to come, perhaps soon.

We need to add Jesus’ detailed instructions to John in Revelation 1:19-20:

Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.

Jesus tells John to record for posterity his visions of the past, the present, and the future, that is, during the Lord’s Day. Our Savior’s focus in his doing this, however, is on what He speaks of next: the seven angels (or messengers) and the seven churches. Within the time element of the Day of the Lord, they provide the object of the book’s instruction. Jesus intended John’s writing—the book of Revelation—to be instruction for the seven angels and churches in the time of the Lord’s Day.

Revelation 1:13 shows the reader that Christ—here called “One like the Son of Man”—stands “in the midst of the seven lampstands [churches]” on the Day of the Lord, in that period just before His return. He is with, not just one church (Laodicea), nor with just two churches (Philadelphia and Laodicea), but with *all seven* at the same time. We can only conclude that all seven are in existence *right now*.

Models for Today

The entire book of Revelation involves the Day of the Lord, including the entirety of chapters 2 and 3. The original seven churches physically existed in the first century, but Christ used them—all of them, individually and collectively—as types and representations of what will exist just before Christ's return. The spiritual attitudes they exhibited then are models of what exists in the churches of God today.

The book itself gives no indication that the seven letters cover eras, as seven successive stages of the true church. Instead, through the many centuries, one can find these seven basic attitudes whenever and wherever we identify a remnant of God's true church.

In each letter, Jesus tells us to listen to what He says to all the churches (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Each child of God must evaluate himself thoroughly and honestly in light of Christ's revelations in all seven letters and begin working on changing the flaws he finds. This instruction suggests that each church today has members within it that reflect several or perhaps all the attitudes Christ mentions. It is likely, however, that one of the seven attitudes will dominate a particular church.

A final thought: Despite the mixture of good and bad found in Christ's evaluations of these churches—and some stern divine warnings—He still considers each of them His church. He expects each individual member to make the necessary changes in himself within the church where Christ, the Head of the church, has placed him. Nowhere does He counsel anyone to jump from one group to another. (An exception would be if one's church group teaches obvious false doctrine.) The sense is we should work out spiritual problems and weaknesses where we are.

The real issue is not where one is but *what* one is. If a church member's faith depends on being a member of a certain church group, his or her spirituality is suspect. Too much faith in certain members, ministers, or corporate bodies is deeply concerning. Our faith needs to be in Christ and His power to transform us into His image, not in an organization and its human flaws.