

The Seven Church Eras of Revelation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Most in the churches of God have rejected there being seven consecutive church eras that stretch from the Apostolic church to the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus. Instead they claim Revelation chapters 1, 2 and 3 concern seven actual churches in Asia Minor or that the character of these seven churches always co-exist in the Church of God. Most daughter churches that came from the former Worldwide Church of God (WCG) and which continued largely in the teachings of its 1934 founder, the late Mr Herbert W. Armstrong, abandoned his doctrine there are seven consecutive church eras. I believe this was done to avoid the unpalatable truth that we were called from 1934 to God's seventh era of Laodicea rather than Philadelphia: this is enlarged on in Section 4.0. This short paper reviews in Section 2.0 Mr Armstrong's doctrine of there being seven distinct and successive church eras and in Section 3.0 examines the errors used to justify today's rejection of this doctrine.

2.0 MR ARMSTRONG TAUGHT 7 SUCCESSIVE CHURCH ERAS

Mr Armstrong taught there were 7 distinct successive church eras from the apostolic church to the Second Coming of Christ. Despite this some claim that he taught parallel church eras. That this is a false claim can be seen from the following quotations from Mr Armstrong's *Autobiography* and from his book *Mystery of the Ages*.

Autobiography Vol. 1 (PBK), Chapter 30, Section *The Crucial Test*, §3, page 525

“What actually was happening, though we did not understand it then, was that a NEW ERA was dawning in the history of the Church of God. The words of Christ are quoted in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of the Book of Revelation, foretelling the history of God's Church in seven successive eras, or phases. Events since that time have revealed this to be the era in which Christ's message is to go worldwide just before the end of this age.” (underlining my emphasis)

Mystery of the Ages (1st Ed. HBK), Chapter 6, Section *Seven Church Eras*, pages 282-283

“The book of Revelation records seven messages to seven churches that existed in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century A.D.

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 But these messages were intended for a wider audience than the Christians in these small towns. They are a series of remarkable prophecies, by which the future of the true Church was foretold in outline form, from the day it began on Pentecost, A.D. 31, until the Second Coming of Christ. The history of the Church would fall into seven distinct eras -- each with its own strengths and weaknesses and its own special trials and problems.

Just as a message could pass along the mail route from Ephesus to Laodicea, so would the truth of God be passed from era to era.

It was like a relay race -- in which the baton is passed from runner to runner, each one doing his part, until the finish line is reached.

Some time during the early decades of the second century, the baton was passed from the Ephesian era to the people that God had called to the Smyrna era of his Church.” (underlining my emphasis)

Since the quote from the *Autobiography* represents Mr Armstrong's early ministry and the quote from *Mystery of the Ages* his later ministry, it is plain that he taught throughout his ministry that there are seven distinct and consecutive church eras. Of course that does not prove there are seven church eras but it does disprove those who deny Mr Armstrong taught this doctrine. That there are indeed seven church eras is addressed in section 3.0.

Despite Mr Armstrong's teaching seven consecutive church eras and that his own was the sixth era of Philadelphia, he rather inconsistently claimed his sixth era was the end-time church era. It appears he expected Philadelphia to go to a place of safety during the Tribulations and that the seventh era of Laodicea would arise to experience the Tribulations. In this sense Mr Armstrong would have seen the sixth and seventh eras as parallel ones but with his sixth era of Philadelphia moved sideways and out of the way. See also Sections 3.4 and 4.0.

3.0 ERRORS USED TO JUSTIFY ABANDONING THE DOCTRINE OF SUCCESSIVE CHURCH ERAS

3.1 That Revelation Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Concerns Only 7 Short-lived Churches In Asia Minor

The first error is identifying Revelation chapters 1, 2 and 3 as addressing only seven short-lived Apostolic churches in Asia Minor instead of being part of Revelation's entire 22-chapter message to the end-time church. Why should three whole chapters or some 14 percent of Revelation be devoted to seven churches in Asia Minor which did not survive long in what is now Muslim Turkey? Surely those three chapters have an important message to the Church of God as we approach the close of this age! It should be plain that those seven early churches of Asia Minor which stretched along a then mail route from Ephesus to Laodicea, were a *type* of seven consecutive church eras that stretch along the time line from the Apostolic church to the close of this age.. It is especially important that the final church era of Laodicea can identify itself and accept the eye-salve offered by our Lord to His Church. The substance of that is discussed in my paper *Laodicea's Lamp!* (see References below).

Let us remember that much of chapter 1 belongs to Revelation's message to the seven churches. The symbolism given in Revelation 1:12-20 is quite extraordinary. In verse 20 Jesus speaks of a mystery and that mystery is now lost on most in the Church of God. It should be plain that the seven stars and seven golden candlesticks refer to the whole of God's Church and not just to seven short-lived churches Asia Minor. Revelation has a message for the end time Church of God, which is God's seventh era of Laodicea.

3.2 That Thyatira Continues To The Second Coming

Another error is that at least some church eras exist in parallel and continue to the Second Coming and that especially Philadelphia and Laodicea exist side by side. The concept of parallel eras or churches is usually based on the following words of Jesus to Thyatira: "*But that which ye have already hold fast till I come*" (Rev 2:25, KJV). God's Elect are always just one heart beat from death, and so one heart beat from their resurrection at the Second Coming. Therefore the Elect of any era must hold fast till the end of their life and that is equivalent to holding fast to the Second Coming. No other construction should be placed on Revelation 2:25. Had Thyatira survived as a viable era alongside later eras, then God's church would be divided and we would be unable to tell which is God's church. Remember also that Jesus removes the Lamp (spirit of truth) from a failed church era and that all church eras fail in the end. Therefore at any given time there is at most one church era with the Lamp. The parallel existence of two or more church eras would be confusing and so at most one Lamp will shine brightly at any one time.

3.2 Angels or Men?

A common misconception is that seven literal spirit angels lead the seven church eras, based on statements like: "*Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write...*" (Rev 2:1). Note how Revelation 2:3 with, "*And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted*.", commends the angel of Ephesus for not having fainted. Since spirit beings do not faint we must conclude that these angels of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 are human messengers or church leaders and not literal angels. Being human they remain fallible and in the end they or their successors will fail to maintain their Lamp shining brightly in Satan's darkness.

3.3 Is Laodicea God's Church or Satan's church?

Another error is that Laodicea is not really a church of God era but something more akin to Satan's false church. Although Revelation chapter 3:14-21 gives a poor account of Laodicea, nevertheless Laodicea is plainly the seventh of God's seven church eras and which too received much Truth. Those who live in its day and respond to God's call must join Laodicea because there is then no other church with God's Lamp. When Laodicea is the current era of God's church, then the era of Philadelphia is over; and God's Lamp can only be found at Laodicea. This may be unpopular with those who claim to be Philadelphians but Revelation chapters 1, 2 and 3 outlines consecutive rather than concurrent church eras. Once God's Lamp has been assigned to the leader of Laodicea, this means the Lamp was already removed from Philadelphia.

3.4 Did Mr Tkach Lead Laodicea?

A further error is that Laodicea began when the late Mr Joseph W. Tkach became pastor general of the Worldwide Church of God upon Mr Armstrong's 1986 death. That claim makes no sense for two reasons. First that would mean the Lamp was not removed from the WCG but stayed in the WCG and so no change from Philadelphia to Laodicea took place. Second and most importantly it should be plain to all that God's Lamp never shone through Mr Tkach. Had Mr Tkach been truly converted to Mr Armstrong's teaching, then although he may have questioned aspects of couple of Mr Armstrong's teachings, he would not have rejected the entirety of Mr Armstrong's teaching

and return the WCG to a virtual mainstream Protestant doctrinal position. We must conclude that the late Mr Joseph W. Tkach and his team of Protestant reformists were never converted to Mr Armstrong's teachings and never received God's Lamp of Truth. Instead they extinguished in the WCG the remaining embers of Mr Armstrong's Lamp of Laodicea!

3.5 Did Mr Armstrong Witness the End of Sardis?

Although not quite relevant, next an error which distorted the historical time line of the Church of God. Mr Armstrong claimed he found during the late 1920s the Church of God Seventh Day and mistook this as the remnant of the Sardis era because it was by then largely devoid of life and so apparently fitted our Lord's words to Sardis: "...I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (Rev 3:1). It was a case of mistaken identity for what Mr Armstrong found was not Sardis but the dying embers of Philadelphia. All church eras, including Philadelphia, look dead after their Lamp is removed. Philadelphia or the era of *Brotherly Love* was the era of USA frontier days when the people were dependent on one another for survival. During the 1800s Philadelphia began to go wrong – for example the controversial Millerite movement. From Philadelphia came various daughter churches including the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and the Church of God Seventh Day.

NOTE: *Philadelphia* literally means *Brotherly Love* (Greek philos = love, adelphos = brother). Significantly in Revelation God does not identify this era by *Godly Love* (e.g. *Theophilus* - Greek theos = God) but by *Brotherly love*. This marks that even in the much lauded era of *Philadelphia* God took only second place to brother and no wonder this era too failed in the end.

4.0 LET US NOT DISDAIN LAODICEA FOR IT IS GOD'S SEVENTH CHURCH ERA!

God's seventh and final church era of Laodicea is much disdained by ministers of the former WCG who claim to be of Philadelphia. They should recognize that Laodicea is as much an era of God's Church as were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia: and that each of these eras failed in turn and had their Lamp removed and given to the next era. If they truly identify another church as Laodicea, then they should stop disdaining it and join it for then God's Lamp has been removed from Philadelphia and was given to Laodicea!

The paper *Laodicea's Lamp!* explains that the era of Laodicea began in 1934 and forty years later in 1974 showed its true colours of being lukewarm to God's key *Garden of Eden Marriage law* by rejecting this law. Then in 1977 Mr Herbert W. Armstrong compounded this sin by marrying a divorced woman whose husband was still alive. This was not only contrary to God's *Garden of Eden Marriage law* (Mat 5:32, 1 Cor 7:39 and Mark 10:2-9 with Gen 2:24) but also contrary to God's law for priests and ministers (Lev 21:7, 14) – this is explained in my papers *Laodicea's Lamp!* and *The Garden of Eden Marriage Law* (see Section 5.0 below). In 1978/79 our Lord spewed His unrepentant lukewarm messenger to Laodicea from His mouth.

The Church of God has failed to discern that the ongoing church schisms depicts prophecy for Laodicea being fulfilled before our eyes. The cause being our 1974 sin of rejecting God's *Garden of Eden Marriage law* and continuing our misguided romantic belief that we are Philadelphia instead of accepting that from 1934 Mr Armstrong led Laodicea!

5.0 REFERENCES

The first two items may be downloaded from www.rightly-dividing.net or requested by writing to the address below:

- *Laodicea's Lamp!*
- The Garden of Eden Marriage Law
- *Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong Vol 1* (paperback 1986 print)
- *Mystery of the Ages* (Ed. 1 hardback)

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