

Are the Seven Churches of Revelation Prophetic?

If you have even briefly looked at the material posted on this site, you see that there is a lot of focus on the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues as a discrete - and unified - set of end-time events. We have tried to make the case that these 21 events (seven Seals, seven Trumpets and seven Plagues) form a road map for the end-time Christian, and for the world as a whole.

In making that case, some feel that we have ignored the seven Churches. This objection comes from those who have been taught - even as I was - that the seven Churches comprise a prophetic panorama of the Church of God from the time of the Early Church until the Second Coming of Jesus. This view, or one very similar, has been standard within the Historicist community for hundreds of years.

An article like this cannot delve into the details of the suggested prophetic interpretations, or look at how many different suggested prophetic scenarios have been suggested for the seven Churches throughout the last 500 years. Rather, we want to look at the stories of the Churches, Seals, Trumpets and Plagues as they are told; as if we were reading them for the first time. We will look at the direct internal context that the Bible gives these stories. We will look at how the story of the Churches differs from the stories of the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues. We will note with interest the way in which Ellen White used the messages to the Churches. And finally, we will look at some of the benefits that accrue through understanding the universal application of these spiritual messages.

Direct, Internal Context

The most direct "prima facie" statement of the purpose of the messages to the seven Churches is that they are, in fact, *messages to the seven Churches*. This is clearly stated in Revelation 1, 2 and 3. Jesus is seen walking among the seven candlesticks that are said to be the seven Churches. The Churches themselves are identified as the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. And then, at the start of each of the messages, they are defined as the specific message to each of those churches.

When the Bible itself says that these words of advice, warning and council are intended as letters to these seven churches, we would be presumptuous to state that their primary purpose is anything other than what is stated. That these churches actually existed, and that John himself had served as an itinerant pastor to those churches, is a historic fact. That God intended to address concerns within those local congregations is obvious from the context.

The second - and equally clear - statement of the context in which these messages were given is found in Revelation 1: 19 and in Revelation 4:1. In the first passage we read, "Therefore, write down what you have seen, what is, and what is going to happen after this." (ISV) Here, John is given his marching orders. He is to write what he sees - both the things that are - "**what is**" - and the things which will occur in the future - "**what is going to happen after this.**"

Immediately after receiving this charge, he is given the messages to the seven Churches. These are the things that "are". They are concerned with current situations, with issues that had to be addressed in the churches that John was familiar with.

Note what happens the moment those issues had been addressed. "After these things I saw a door standing open in heaven. The first voice that I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and ***I will show you what must happen after this.***" This is a direct reference to the marching orders he had been given in Revelation 1:19. He is now being told that the information that is to follow is *prophetic*. He is now going to see the things that will occur before the return of Christ. What follows (the stories of the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues - as well as the 2nd coming of Jesus and the earth made new) is all looking forward in time. By definition, this is prophecy.

The Book of Revelation tells us which portion of its writing are concerned with present day (from John's perspective) events, and which part is a prophecy concerning events that were yet to happen.

Differential Evidence

Great dissimilarities separate the messages to the seven Churches from the stories of the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues. Even a casual reader of Revelation cannot but notice the differences in tone, style and motif. While the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues are obviously linked to each other, the messages to the seven Churches stand apart. While this list is not intended to be comprehensive, the following differences stand out.

1. **Numeric sequence.** The Seals, Trumpets and Plagues are all numbered sequentially - the first trumpet, the second trumpet, etc. The order of the events is important - one event happens before the other occurs. This is not the case in the Churches. We don't read of the first church, the second church, etc. In fact, all these churches existed at the same time, and the developments at the local church level happened in parallel. If there is an order to the messages to the churches, it is not one of time and sequence, but one of geography. When plotted on a map, the listed churches are seen as a loop - or as a circuit that a preacher would take to visit them.

2. **Not the same cast of characters.** The unity of the stories of the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues is clear from the numerous references to the same actors, locations

and themes. Throughout these story lines we see Jesus, the remnant, Satan (the serpent or dragon), a sealed book (then opened), various horsemen, famines and diseases, tribulation, martyrdom, the 144,000 servants, the 2 witnesses, the river Euphrates, the sea beast, the land beast (also called the false prophet), as well as numerous other themes and references. While not all of these elements appear in each sequence, one cannot help but see a large dynamic plot - a story line that carries the reader along like a raft on white water. You sense the flow of an unbroken story moving to its climax.

By contrast, the messages to the churches are like house-calls by a doctor. With love and concern he tells them where they need to take action to improve their spiritual health.

3. **No interlude.** One of the things that links the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues is the specific pattern used in their telling. Not only are they comprised of seven numbered events, but in each case we are told about six of those events - followed by what has been called an "interlude" - and then the seventh event. This interlude is most obvious in the Seals and Trumpets, while in the story of the Plagues it is only a sentence.

This pattern is completely missing in the messages to the Churches. There is no interlude.

4. **No seven/heaven connection.** In addition to the pattern just mentioned, another noteworthy pattern emerges in the story of the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues. In each series the first six events all occur here on earth. They are calamities, judgments or other events that are roiling across the human landscape. But when we get to the seventh event in the series, our attention is always drawn to heaven. There we see some dramatic event, such as the censor being cast down, or Jesus being crowned as Lord of Lords. Even at the seventh plague we have our attention drawn to heaven where we hear a voice (could it be other than Jesus'?) saying, "It is Done."

This powerful replay of the Sabbath motif (six for man, one for God) is a critical element of the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues - but it is totally missing from the messages to the seven Churches.

5. **The Churches have their own pattern.** Just as the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues seem drawn from the same template, the messages to the seven churches have a number of common elements among them. In fact, they seem almost like a personalized set of form letters that can be outlined as:

- A. To _____
- B. From _____
- C. "I know _____"
- D. Good points
- E. Weak point
- F. Wise counsel

G. Reward to the "overcomers"

Just as the patterns in the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues are missing in the messages to the seven Churches, so this clear pattern within the letters to the seven churches is absent in the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues.

Ellen White

In this study we do not use Ellen White comments as "proof" of a position. (See our article on the use of EGW). The primary reason to bring her view into this discussion is that some Adventists hold her in such high regard that they are unwilling to consider a viewpoint that they see as falling outside those held by her. As such, I would like to make the following observations about Ellen White's references to the Seven Churches.

1. In all her years of writing, with tens of thousands of pages produced, Ellen White never wrote a definitive work on the meaning of the Seven Churches of Revelation. She was well aware of the Historicist view of the churches, but she never used her position as an opportunity to support that view. She never said - or even implied (to my knowledge) - that the messages to the Churches were a linear prophecy that pointed to the periods through which the church would pass. She did, however, make a statement to the effect that the messages and counsel to the churches applied to the church of God in different ages. (Notice that she said "different", not "consecutive".)

2. Her use of these passages in her own writing was primarily pastoral. She made frequent references to the counsels given (except for the Church of Thyatira, which she completely skipped) and applied them where they seemed to be needed. While she did apply the counsels and warnings to Laodicea to the Adventist believers in her day, she also applied Sardis and Philadelphia.

Universal Application

Tying to fit the Seven Churches into a prophetic role they were never designed for has the unintended effect of blunting their spiritual messages in at least two different ways.

First, once we are able to satisfy ourselves as to the eras that the different Churches spanned, we inevitably find that "our" era is the last one - Laodicea. And while the message to the Laodiceans is wonderful ("Buy of me gold tried in the fire..."), a solitary focus on that message may deprive me of the urgent encouragement that I need to "hold fast", or I may miss the warning that my first love for God has cooled.

Second, it puts us in a mental mode of trying to determine the church ages - and even the churches - to which these counsels apply. I may, for example, begin to wonder if some Protestant churches in North America are more Laodicean than others. In doing so I

am at risk of completely losing the personal benefit of Jesus' prescriptions, because I forget that the point of the counsel is not corporate, but personal. Only by accepting the universal applicability of these messages *to me* may I benefit from them.

This view does clear up one dilemma that I pondered for years - that of Laodicea as the "last Church". Since it was last in the list of churches, I was told that it was last in chronology, as well. But will God's final church on earth be Laodicean? Will the church that goes through the Time of Trouble - the church that will reflect Jesus' character - the church that finally takes the everlasting gospel to the whole world - will this church be lukewarm?

Thankfully, by God's grace, it will not.

Conclusions

The fact that the letters are not part of the predictive prophecy of Revelation does not make them any less important. Because they are potent letters of spiritual diagnosis they can be pointed directly at us! As we read them carefully and prayerfully, asking God for the "eye salve" that we need, we find our names included in the address line of some of these letters.

Do you remember what Paul said when he was attempting to wrap human words around God's love? He was forced to admit that even if he understood all prophecy, but fell short of experiencing God's love then he was no better than a noisy gong. What more pointed reminder could we have? Here we are, poised to jump into an in-depth look at the prophecies of Revelation, eager to push ahead. But Paul warns us in explicit language that understanding prophecies - when divorced from a comprehension of God's love for us - *can do us no good at all*.

Could it be that this is the reason that the letters to the churches are placed at the beginning of this remarkable book? Surely He must have known that before we got caught up in the drama of end-time events, before we were swept up in vivid pictures of destruction as the wrath of God is poured out on an unrepentant world - before all this - He needed to remind us that He is, foremost, a God that loves - not a God that destroys.

With this in mind, these letters demand a close look. It's interesting that while a cursory reading of these letters makes them seem like a series of complaints or like charges being filed in a legal case, a more careful reading reveals just the opposite. Yes, there are reproofs and reminders - even outright scolding. But even if these letters contained nothing more than scolding - even if there was no more overt statement of His love - they would still be evidence of His love for us. Did you notice what He said to the Laodiceans? "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline." These reproofs are given for one reason only - because He loves us.

But there is more than reproof here. There is understanding, concern, encouragement, counsel, and promise. Just look at these phrases:

“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance.”

“You have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake.”

“ You... have not denied My name.”

“...that you may become rich.”

“...I have loved you.”

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

These are the words of a God who loves. And they are addressed..... to every one of us.