

November 1995

Frank W. Nelte

THE 7 CHURCHES OF REVELATION

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus Christ was speaking to Simon Peter specifically and to all of the apostles in general. He said:

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18)

That Church which Jesus Christ built was founded on the Day of Pentecost in either 30 or 31 A.D., as recorded in Acts chapter 2. On that founding day 3000 people were baptized (verse 41). Jesus Himself had said that this Church would always exist and NEVER DIE OUT! But it has never been the dominant religion of any nation since that Day of Pentecost. In fact, it has been small, persecuted, politically insignificant, maligned, despised as a sect (e.g. Acts 28:22), imitated and gone unnoticed. Yet it was to somehow always survive ... that's what Christ said in Matt. 16:18. Historians and the world in general have not recognized that Church. Their attention has instead focused on the counterfeit churches that Satan has provided (see 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, etc.).

So WHERE has this true Church, that Jesus Christ Himself built, been for these past 19 centuries? That story is something God recorded for His true servants to understand in the form of a prophecy ... 19 centuries of Church history recorded in advance. To protect this message from being tampered with, God recorded it in a "coded" form ... to those who don't have the code the real meaning is hidden.

Let's try to understand ...

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

This last book of the New Testament was given by God to complete His written revelations to mankind. The whole Bible comprises God's revelation and this final book, given to the Apostle John in the 90's A.D., was to tie up all the loose ends, to provide vital keys that would enable God's servants with the help of His Holy Spirit to put the whole picture together. It is the Book of Revelation that enables us to put the prophecies of Daniel, of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and of the Minor Prophets into their right perspective. Through the Book of Revelation all of these O.T. prophecies receive a much sharper and more precise focus.

And that is the common way to present a puzzle ... first present a lot of important facts (i.e. the Old Testament) and only then present the vital keys (i.e. the Book of Revelation) that make it possible for all these vital facts to be placed in their correct locations in the greater picture. That is the recipe followed by every great suspense story ... only at the very end does the meaning of everything that has happened become obvious. The whole Bible, up to its conclusion in the last book, follows this same successful pattern.

The first verse of Revelation reads as follows:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified [it] by his angel unto his servant

John: (Revelation 1:1)

Notice that this divine revelation comes to us through a very precise channel: from God the Father to Jesus Christ to an angel to the Apostle John to the servants of God (i.e. to us). It was NOT given for the purpose of showing all of mankind things to come. Rather, it was given to ... "HIS SERVANTS"! Only God's true servants would understand the coded language of this revelation from God ... to all other people this would be a sealed book. That's how God planned it!

Next, this book reveals things that "must SHORTLY come to pass"! The Greek expression here is "dei genesthai en tachei", employing the second aorist middle infinitive of the verb "ginomai". The word "tachos" is used 7 times in the N.T., always in this construction "en tachei", and it comes from the same root as the adjective "tachus", which is used only once (in James 1:19) and means: quick, swift, etc.. The other 6 places where the expression "en tachei" is used are: Luke 18:8 ("speedily"), Romans 16:20 ("shortly"), Revelation 22:6 ("shortly"), Acts 12:7 ("quickly"), Acts 22:18 ("quickly"), and Acts 25:4 ("shortly").

Now the point is this: SHORTLY, QUICKLY or SPEEDILY does not mean 1900 years from now! You don't refer to 1900 years as "quickly"! Look at the Scriptures where this expression is used! So what does God tell us in Revelation 1:1? WHY is this expression used?

The answer seems to be that in this opening verse of the book God is showing us THE PERSPECTIVE for the whole book!

This perspective is repeated in other places. For example, in Revelation 1:10 the perspective is spelled out as John being projected forward in time to the time-frame of the Day of the Lord. The events described in the book of Revelation are "things which must shortly come to pass", not when viewed from John's own lifetime, but when viewed from the time-frame of the Day of the Lord! This time-frame is repeated at the end of this book, when Christ repeats this expression "the things which must shortly be done" in Revelation 22:6 and follows this in verse 7 with "BEHOLD I COME QUICKLY"!

This perspective of "the Day of the Lord" is further refined in Revelation 17:10, which reads ...

And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, [and] the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space. (Revelation 17:10)

Here is a vital key to understanding the whole book! The whole book of Revelation covers 2 separate stories, independent of each other, which run concurrently (I'll show this in a little while). The first story covers 7 successive eras of the true Church; the second story highlights 7 successive eras (or revivals or resurrections) of the Roman Empire.

THE PERSPECTIVE FROM WHICH BOTH STORIES ARE VIEWED IS: 5 ARE FALLEN, WE ARE APPROACHING THE END PART OF NUMBER 6, AND NUMBER 7 IS NOT YET AND IT WILL BE SHORT!

Revelation 17:10 pinpoints a specific part of the greater time-frame of "the day of the Lord" from which the whole book is told. The 5 eras and the 5 revivals are viewed as in the past. Era 6 and revival 6 are viewed as in the present tense. And era 7 and revival 7 are viewed as in the immediate future. Viewed from this vantage-point the events discussed must indeed "SHORTLY" come to pass!

Today we are living at that point in time from which the Apostle John saw this whole book revealed to him!

TWO SEPARATE STORIES

To understand Revelation more fully, we need to realize that it contains two separate stories, each with its own introduction. Both stories are progressive historical accounts (written in advance we call them "prophecies") that culminate in the establishment of the government of God on this Earth. After all, that is what the whole Bible is all about anyway ... the establishment of God's government. And tying all the loose ends together in the final section is how all good suspense stories are written.

The two stories run parallel to one another, as they progress through human history. While both stories are written from the same TIME perspective, they have vastly different vantage points in other respects.

So let's look at this more closely.

Revelation 1:1-3 is the introduction for the WHOLE book of Revelation. It is a general admonition to read and heed what is about to be revealed. Revelation 22:6-21 is the conclusion for the WHOLE book. It can easily be seen that this ties in with the introduction. But between Rev.1:3 and Rev.22:6 two separate stories unfold.

STORY 1 goes from Rev.1:4 to Rev.3:22. This story takes us through history from Christ's first coming to His second coming with repeated focus (in the form of the rewards that are mentioned) on the time even beyond the second coming. The perspective of this story is from the viewpoint of the true Church of God ... it focuses on what happens in the Church and to the Church. It is the history of God's Church.

What happens in the world outside of the Church is not really mentioned, except in the form of incidental hints. Put another way, the world only features in this story as it affects the Church. The whole account is written from the time-perspective of era #6 ... five are past and one is yet future.

Revelation 1:4-20 is the introduction for this story. Please note: Revelation 1:4-20 is NOT the introduction for the whole book! The focus in this introduction is on JESUS CHRIST! Verse 4 has a very brief reference to God the Father, to acknowledge His overall supremacy. But then all of verses 5-20 focus on Jesus Christ, not on the Father. This is in keeping with Christ's statement in Matthew 16:18, which we looked at earlier ... to build His Church.

Notice also that this story is NOT SEALED! Only the second story is sealed. "Not being sealed" means that this story contains its own explanations ... it does not contain codewords, the meaning of which God explains somewhere else in the Bible.

Chapters 2-3 are the body of the story. This is built specifically on the introduction in Rev.1:5-20. It covers the history of God's Church from Christ's first coming to His second coming.

THIS IS THE STORY WE WILL LOOK AT IN DETAIL IN THIS ARTICLE!

STORY 2 goes from Rev.4:1 - Rev.22:5. This story also takes us through human history from Christ's first coming on down to His second coming (at which time the two stories merge) and then on into the millennium and into eternity beyond.

Chapters 4-5 are the introduction for THIS story. In this introduction the focus is very clearly on God the Father and His glory and His might!

IT IS THIS STORY THAT IS SEALED WITH SEVEN SEALS!

Since only Jesus Christ is worthy to open the seals that cover this second story, it means that we MUST

look to the words of Jesus Christ elsewhere in the Bible to explain the key symbols that are needed to "open up" a correct understanding of this story.

This story reveals in advance the history of the world from the vantage point of Europe and from the time-perspective of revival #6 of the Holy Roman Empire. The true Church doesn't feature in this story, except as a brief inset section.

The story-flow of this story starts in Rev.6:1 and proceeds very methodically down to Rev.22:5 ... from Christ's first coming right on down to life in the New Jerusalem. Inserted into this story-flow are several "inset sections" which have nothing DIRECTLY to do with the story-flow.

This second story is really a subject for another write-up, but, without any lengthy explanations at this point, we might just very briefly get an overview here:

The story-flow goes as follows:

- Chapter 6 = the first 6 seals are opened;
- Chapter 8 = Seal #7 is opened and Trumpets #1 - #4 are blown;
- Chapter 9 = Trumpets #5 and #6 are blown;
- Chpt. 11:14-19 = Trumpet #7 is blown;
- Chapter 14 = Christ + firstfruits on Mount Zion;
- Chapter 15 = the PREPARATION for the 7 last plagues;
- Chapter 16 = the 7 last plagues are poured out;
- Chapter 19 = Christ destroys the human armies;
- Chapter 20 = the Millennium & the 2nd & the 3rd resurrections;
- Chpt. 21:1-22:5 = NEW heaven ... NEW earth ... NEW Jerusalem.

END OF STORY-FLOW!

The "inset sections" are as follows:

- Chapter 7 = the 144,000 and the Great Multitude;
- Chapter 10 = the little OPEN book;
- Chpt. 11:1-13 = the 2 witnesses;
- Chapter 12 = the true Church at the end-time;
- Chapter 13 = the false, persecuting church at the end-time;
- Chapter 17 = the Holy Roman Empire and the false church;

- Chapter 18 = "Babylon" and its destruction.

Perhaps I can at a later stage write an article about this second story. For now this will have to suffice. So now let's go back to the first story.

HOW TO VIEW THE 7 CHURCHES

The foundation for a correct understanding of this story lies in a correct understanding of THE INTRODUCTION! Chapters 2-3 are built on this introduction. As I mentioned earlier, this introduction focuses on Jesus Christ. Here are some points to keep in mind:

1) Rev.1:5-20 is all about Jesus Christ. To get a complete picture of Jesus Christ, we must read ALL of these verses. Any one verse alone gives a correct but INCOMPLETE view! This is important to understand because we find the statements in these verses repeated in chapters 2 and 3 ... and they are repeated for a reason.

2) The number "7" is used by God to picture completeness. When God gives us 7 different views of something, God expects us to put all 7 views together ourselves if we want to see the COMPLETE picture. In this story God gives us 7 times each of the following: a view of Jesus Christ, good points in an era, bad points, rewards offered, punishments mentioned, and advice to the era.

3) The best overview of this story of the history of God's Church is obtained by making a grid. Take a large sheet of paper and place it sideways (i.e. in landscape lay-out). Then divide the whole page into 64 blocks by drawing 7 vertical lines and 7 horizontal lines (a bit like a chessboard).

In the 8 blocks across the top of the page write the following headings, starting from the left side:

ERA; HOW CHRIST APPEARS; GOOD POINTS; BAD POINTS; PUNISHMENTS STATED; REWARDS OFFERED; ADVICE GIVEN; OTHER COMMENTS.

Down the left hand side of the page, below the word "ERA" write the names of the 7 eras. The left hand vertical column should have these 8 titles:

ERA; EPHESUS; SMYRNA; PERGAMOS; THYATIRA; SARDIS, PHILADELPHIA; LAODICEA.

Make sure this grid covers the full size of your page. As you study chapters 2 and 3, fill in all of these points as they are given for each era. For each era you will then have one horizontal row. Then you are ready to see the whole picture which God wants you to see.

To get a complete picture of Jesus Christ, read the whole first vertical column (I am not counting the left hand column with the names of the 7 eras) and not only how He appears to one particular era. "7" views of Jesus Christ gives you the complete picture!

You want to know the good points God praises in His Church? Read the whole of column 2. A true Christian should strive to incorporate ALL of these points in his life.

You want to know the bad points God warns His Church about? Then read ALL of column 3.

You want to know the punishments for those who disobey God? Read the WHOLE of column 4. These are the punishments for those who reject God's ways.

Column 5 is very important to understand! Apart from one single reward mentioned (i.e. protection from

the Great Tribulation to era #6), ALL the rewards refer to the resurrection and thereafter. It is important to understand that these 7 rewards, added together, picture the total reward for EVERYONE IN THE FIRST RESURRECTION.

Over the years many people have viewed these rewards very selfishly ... wanting to claim the best rewards for themselves or for "their" era. Look at this vertical column! EVERYONE in the first resurrection will eat of the tree of life (Ephesus), EVERYONE will receive a crown of life and not be hurt by the second death (Smyrna), EVERYONE will eat the hidden manna and receive a white stone with a new name (Pergamos), EVERYONE will receive power over the nations and rule them with a rod of iron and receive the morning star (Thyatira), EVERYONE will be clothed in white and have his/her name in the book of life (Sardis), EVERYONE will receive new names and become a pillar in God's temple (Philadelphia), and EVERYONE will be with Christ at the marriage supper and sit with Christ on His throne (Laodicea).

Column 5 gives you the total or complete reward (7 pictures completeness) for everyone in the first resurrection. That includes all those who were not even a part of any of the 7 eras ... Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Elijah, etc.. To assume that people receive different rewards from God simply because they lived in a different era is not really correct. God does not reward us according to WHEN we have lived, but according to HOW we have lived!

The only reward mentioned that refers to this life is in the message to Philadelphia (i.e. "I will keep you from the hour of temptation ..."). This again shows us the time-perspective for this story ... the story is viewed from the perspective of era #6. God is not a respecter of persons and God also provided rewards that applied to this life to the people of His Church who lived throughout the first 5 eras ... but they are no longer relevant when viewed from the time-slot of era #6 where the first 5 eras are past tense!

This time-perspective also applies to the message to Laodicea. Viewed from the time-frame of Philadelphia, Laodicea is still TOTALLY unrepentant and unconverted! NONE of them have God's Spirit! As time passes, how many of them actually do come to repentance is not revealed, neither here in Revelation 3 nor anywhere else in the Bible! The idea that a fixed number of them (e.g. 50% ... or perhaps 144,000?) come to repentance is based on a misunderstanding of Matthew 25, Revelation 7, Revelation 12 and other Scriptures. People have simply read their preconceived ideas into these passages.

You want to know the advice God has for His Church? Then read ALL of column 6, not just the section that applies to your era.

The last column is for any additional information relating to each era that may not fit into any of the first 6 columns. You can also use it to record historic details you come across.

4) Once you have completed this grid (i.e. filled in all the details after studying these chapters), you'll notice the following gaps:

- ONE era has no good points mentioned (Laodicea ... because they are at that point not yet repentant);
- TWO eras have no bad points mentioned (Smyrna and Philadelphia);
- the same TWO eras also have no punishments mentioned.

Anytime you have repentant people who have God's Spirit, then there is at least SOMETHING good about them in God's sight ... God will not give His Spirit where there is nothing good! Understanding that era #7 is viewed from BEFORE they come to repentance (i.e. while they are in their unrepentant state)

should help us to understand the seventh message. The fact that no bad points and no punishments are listed in the messages to Smyrna and to Philadelphia again highlights the fact that every Christian is required by God to read ALL SEVEN messages and to heed them all. Of course there were people in Smyrna and of course there are people in Philadelphia who need correction from God. We all need correction from God ... as Hebrews 12:6, etc. makes very clear.

The fact that the whole story is presented from our time-frame and that God does not direct any correction at us DIRECTLY, again shows that God expects us to be admonished by the warnings in all 7 messages.

5) Seven times we see who these messages are addressed to ...

HE THAT HAS AN EAR TO HEAR, LET HIM HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS UNTO THE CHURCHES. (Revelation 2:7, etc.)

All 7 messages are addressed to EVERY Christian who is willing to listen. We are to learn from every stage of the history of God's Church and we are to heed every warning and admonition that God has given to His church. To look at these 7 messages and pick out the one to Philadelphia as applying exclusively to us would be the same as looking at 1 Corinthians and saying: "this doesn't apply to us because they lived in a different era". We understand that God recorded Romans and Corinthians and Galatians and Ephesians and the whole Old Testament for our benefit (see 1.Cor. 10:11), even though none of those books were written specifically to the Philadelphian era! The same approach holds true for the 7 messages in Revelation 2-3!

6) Let's look at the symbolism used in this story. I mentioned that this story is not sealed and that therefore we should expect to find the meaning of any symbols used explained in the context of this story itself. This is actually one of the purposes of the introduction ... to present the symbols used and to give their meanings.

The symbols regarding which we need to be clear are the "7 stars" and the "7 candlesticks". Both of these symbols are explained in Rev.1:20. The "7 candlesticks" represent the 7 churches. The "7 stars" represent the 7 angels of the churches. This symbolism of "stars" representing angels is also used elsewhere in the Bible ... see Revelation 12:4 and Job 38:7.

Now here is the point: people, including Mr. Herbert Armstrong himself, have sometimes speculated that the expression "unto the ANGEL of the church in Philadelphia write ..." might possibly mean that this was actually addressed to Mr. Armstrong himself, as the leader or "messenger" of the Philadelphian era.

THIS SPECULATION IS CLEARLY WRONG!

Here's why.

In Revelation 1:16 Jesus Christ is pictured as holding "7 stars" in His right hand. This symbolism is then explained in verse 20 to refer to "the angels of the 7 churches". The purpose of this explanation in verse 20 is so that when the story tells us ... "unto the ANGEL of ...", we are to understand that these angels are under the TOTAL AND COMPLETE control of Jesus Christ, pictured by being stars "IN HIS RIGHT HAND"! Human beings, as long as they are still mortal, are never pictured as "stars" ... in spite of what Hollywood might tell you to the contrary. Mortal human beings cannot really be compared to "stars".

The 7 messages are addressed TO the angels, but they are not intended FOR the angels. The 7 stars in

the right hand of Jesus Christ don't have any problems themselves with Balaam or with Jezebel or with losing their first love, etc..

God planned to develop His Church through a process of 7 eras up to the second coming of Jesus Christ. This is a vital part in God's overall plan. It is sufficiently important to God that God decided to assign one angel to watch over the progress and development of each of these 7 eras ... 7 angels in all. They monitor the progress and have a certain amount of responsibility towards God for seeing that things develop exactly as God has planned. They are not the ones who bring people to repentance, but they do assist God in a serving capacity ... see Hebrews 1:14

Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?
(Hebrews 1:14)

In a sense we could say that these messages are addressed to the angels because each message spells out the mandate to each of these angels ... how the era he is responsible for watching over will develop, its good points and its bad points, etc..

These 7 eras have spanned over 1900 years, and most eras have had more than one influential leader in God's eyes, even if we today don't know who those leaders were. In the Ephesian era first Peter was the key leader. When he died, John was the key leader. After John's death the era continued for another couple of hundred years under other leaders. If an era lasts about 300 years, to which leader in that timespan would the message be addressed? In fact, each message is addressed to an immortal angel who is there all the time, while human leaders come and go.

Further, the reasoning that PERHAPS the human leader is meant when each message starts with "unto the angel of ..." totally falls down when we apply this to the first era. How could we possibly say that the message ("you have left your first love") applied to Peter or to John? WHY would God possibly want to give us an account of messages to 7 specific human beings? WHY are those 7 human beings so important?

This should suffice to help us understand why the messages are addressed to angels.

7) Some general comments that apply to all 7 messages: to each era Jesus Christ chooses to reveal Himself in a certain way. It is always a repetition of something that was already revealed about Christ in chapter 1. How Christ reveals Himself provides a clue to some part of the message that follows. There is always a reason WHY Christ chooses to appear to each era the way that He does appear.

To each era Christ also says: "I KNOW YOUR WORKS". In itself this is a neutral statement, implying neither good nor bad works. It is simply Christ's way of saying: I know your deeds and actions. It is what follows that statement that determines whether they in fact have any works or not ... Laodicea, for example, doesn't have any good works at all mentioned, and Sardis is hardly better. So don't attach any special significance to that initial statement "I know your works"; it's what follows that counts!

To each era Christ also says: "HE THAT HAS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS UNTO THE CHURCHES" (plural!!). The message to each era is conveyed in exactly the same way that this whole book of Revelation was delivered to John ... from the Father to Jesus Christ to the angel for that era to God's servants (i.e. all of God's people). It comes through "the spirit"! Clearly, every "servant" of God (see Rev.1:1) is to carefully consider all 7 messages and to heed them, just as much as he is to heed the letters Paul wrote to various congregations.

8) THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "A CHURCH ERA" AND "CHRISTIANS": Since Jesus Christ first

established the Church in 30 or 31 A.D. it has always existed. The Church is made up of THE PEOPLE who have God's Spirit. For His own reasons God has structured the whole New Testament Church (from 30 or 31 A.D. down to Christ's second coming) into seven eras or periods. These are mentioned here in Revelation chapters 2-3. In these accounts each era is associated with specific characteristics or conditions.

In order to bridge the nearly 2000 years that are involved, each era would have to span on average 300 - 400 years (allowing only 100 years or less for the last two eras). Each era probably had anywhere from several thousand members up to perhaps nearly 100,000 members today for the last two eras combined.

At no stage along the way has God ever removed people's free will and free moral agency. Even as God set a choice before Israel in O.T. times, so also have Christians of all seven eras had free choice.

We have perhaps had a tendency in the past to oversimplify matters in this regard. We would say about the Ephesian era: "They lost their first love"; or about the Thyatira era: "They got involved with 'Jezebel' and with fornication and things offered to idols".

But wait a minute!

The Apostles Peter and James and John and Paul, etc. were all in the Ephesian era. Are we saying that THEY left their first love? Did Polycarp leave his first love? He was in that first era, right? Who are we talking about when we say "THEY left their first love"?

Well, we mean that a sizable segment of those that comprise the era got involved in leaving their first love. Were there MANY members in God's Church in the Ephesian era who did NOT leave their first love? Most assuredly! They are the ones who will represent that first era in the first resurrection. And were there others to whom the Thyatiran message applied perfectly ... people who continued to dabble a bit with the false religions and who became involved with fornication and things sacrificed to idols? Yes, certainly ... and Paul wrote to people like that in Corinth who were a part of that first era.

Have there been people in EVERY era right down to our time today who have left their first love? Yes, certainly. And have some people in every era become involved in fornication? Very, very likely! Nothing about fornication is mentioned in the messages to Philadelphia and Laodicea ... but if we were to make a list of all the Church people and the young people associated with the Church who, over just the last 20 years, have become involved in fornication and/or adultery, the list would be absolutely STAGGERING!

In the Old Testament one man was stoned to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. Yet if we were to make a list of the activities that are inappropriate for the Sabbath, which Church members and our families have engaged in over the last 20 years on Sabbath days and on Holy Days, we would have another STAGGERING list! But nothing about Sabbath-breaking is mentioned in the messages to the last two eras.

Yet there is no question that WE TOO ARE GUILTY BEFORE GOD!

THE POINT IS THIS: every era has contained people to whom the bad points of that era did not apply; and every era has also included people to whom the good points of that era did not apply. The brief messages to the eras (they are just a few sentences each) have merely applied to a sizable segment of that era, possibly even only at a specific time during that era. But people all along the way have had their free moral agency to resist going along with wrong activities and to get involved in doing the right things or to neglect to do so. In utilising their free choice, many have engaged in activities (good and bad) that are commented on in messages to eras other than their own.

What determined the identity of an era was not the people and their behaviour as much as THE LEADERSHIP OF THAT ERA! Possibly even the leadership only at a specific point in time! Think about this for a while!

Look at the Old Testament examples. You had a good king or a good judge and his "era" was good. When you had a bad king, then his "era" was bad. If the bad king's son was a good king, then another good "era" followed. While all these changes in leadership took place, did the people themselves really change in radical ways? Hardly! In most cases their changes were superficial.

This is evidenced by the fact that another shift in the nation's leadership always found some ready followers. Specifically, it was easy for a bad leader following a good one, to find ready supporters. THE SAME IS TRUE TODAY!!

Think about the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the problems they had. Why did many intermarry with the local people? It was the bad example of the leadership ... remember, the leaders were the worst offenders in this episode of intermarriage!

It was THE LEADERSHIP AT SOME STAGE of an era that provided the identifying features for that era. The members of the Church were a part of a specific era because they were IN the Church when a specific leadership was in power! For example, after the deaths of most of the original Apostles a false leadership VERY QUICKLY took over to the point of even rejecting the Apostle John in his old age (see III John 9 - 10). The fact that a good leader emerged here or there didn't change this trend! By sheer numbers a bad leadership took over.

In some cases a new era may have started with God inspiring a new leadership to raise up new congregations in new locations. At other times existing congregations from one era became the new era because a new leadership took over those existing congregations. The first situation applied when there were "revivals" of faith and zeal, where the zealous ones wanted to get away from the complacent and compromising influences of congregations that had ceased to do the work. The second situation applied when existing congregations basically degenerated over time and eventually a new leadership reflected these new attitudes.

But God saw to it that all the while there was a steady progression towards the goal. Each era in turn came ... and PASSED AWAY INTO HISTORY. In a way, it was much the same as on the level of secular history ... the empires God had predicted through Daniel and through John came ... and then passed away. Some made a greater impact on the world scene than others. So also with the eras of the Church.

Once an era has been replaced by a new era, there is no way to revive the previous era ... no more than the Persian Empire could be revived once Alexander had taken over. Alexander only reigned a very few years and then died. One might have thought that that would have presented an opportunity for the Medo-Persians to regroup and to make a comeback. But that simply was not possible because God had ordained that once the "he goat" had smashed the "ram", the "ram" was wiped out for good (see Daniel chapter 8). It's the same way with the eras of the Church ... each has its God-ordained time-span and then passes into history!

Some people may have started out their Christian lives as members of one era and before they died they were the members of the next era ... because a change in leadership had occurred. Some of those members might have changed along with the new leadership (for better or for worse) and others might have resisted changing. Yet they were now part of a new era.

We need to understand that being part of an era does NOT automatically mean the message directed to that era is talking about YOU! The message to the era you are a part of applies to you ONLY if the

description of that era also reflects YOUR present condition! If the description does NOT reflect your condition, then the message also does not apply to you. Specifically, if the bad points mentioned don't apply to you (and none of the bad points apply to EVERYONE in a given era, except in the case of Laodicea), then the punishments that are stated also don't apply to you. That is what God means when He tells us: "he that has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the CHURCHES".

With this background we are now ready to examine all 7 messages and to fill in our chart.

THE EPHESIAN ERA: REV. 2:1-7

1) HOW CHRIST APPEARS TO THIS ERA:

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; (Revelation 2:1)

He is pictured as being IN FULL CONTROL of ALL the eras ... holding the 7 angels in His right hand and being present (walking) in all 7 eras. This picture is already a clue to the punishment that is going to be mentioned to this era. It is in Christ's power to REMOVE one of these eras "out of its place".

2) THE GOOD POINTS:

They are many ...

I know thy works, and thy LABOUR, and thy PATIENCE, and how thou CANST NOT BEAR THEM WHICH ARE EVIL: and THOU HAST TRIED THEM which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast FOUND THEM LIARS: And hast BORNE, and hast PATIENCE, and for my name's sake hast LABOURED, and hast NOT FAINTED. (Revelation 2:2-3)

But this thou hast, that thou HATEST THE DEEDS OF THE NICOLAITANS, which I also hate. (Revelation 2:6)

TWICE they are recommended for patience and for labouring! They really worked hard! This was the era that spread God's truth throughout the Roman Empire ... ON FOOT! No radio, no television and no printed media! I suspect that this description fits the Apostle Paul perfectly. And also the other Apostles of that time, though we are told less about their particular efforts.

These verses describe the early LEADERS of the Church (Peter, Paul, John, etc.) and they in turn inspired and motivated others to follow their examples of zeal, dedication and commitment. These verses reflect their influence on the Church.

3) BAD POINTS:

Just one is mentioned ...

Nevertheless I have [somewhat] against thee, because THOU HAST LEFT THY FIRST LOVE. (Revelation 2:4)

Who is this talking about? ... Peter? ... Paul? ... John? It is not really referring to these men. It is talking about an attitude that developed, perhaps already while these leaders were still alive, but certainly after

they had died and could no longer exert any positive influence on the Church. WHY did this attitude develop? Because ungodly men, who managed to worm their way into positions of leadership (Jude 4), opposed the teachings of the apostles (3 John 9-10).

Notice that Christ does not mention any wrong TEACHINGS here. The problem He mentions involves a wrong ATTITUDE. But this wrong attitude would show itself in wrong practices.

WHO was the "first love" they had left? From our perspective today we take the term "first love" to refer to that first enthusiasm we experience for the truth of God. But that is from OUR perspective. How about the perspective of the people in that era?

The Church had been founded through the work and ministry of ONE individual. Many of them had personally seen Him (1 Cor. 15:6). They had personally witnessed many of His miracles. They eagerly anticipated His return to set up the Kingdom of God in their life-time. He had become the focal point of their lives ... they lived and laboured patiently to do His Work. That individual was Jesus Christ.

JESUS CHRIST WAS THE FIRST LOVE OF THAT FIRST ERA!

When it became evident that Christ would NOT return in their life-time, THEN some felt let down and questioned whether Christ would return at all. It wasn't that they stopped keeping the Sabbath or the Holy Days or stopped tithing ... they just questioned whether all their sacrifices had really been worth it.

It was to counter this specific attitude ("don't forsake Jesus Christ, your first love") that Paul wrote his whole epistle to the Hebrews. THAT is why Hebrews spends so much time explaining and expounding on Christ's high office and present functions. Paul's way of trying to stir people up against this wrong attitude is found in Hebrews 6:9-10 ...

But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak. For God [is] not unrighteous to forget YOUR WORK AND LABOUR OF LOVE, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. (Hebrews 6:9-10)

This wrong attitude is extremely serious! That is why it is the book of Hebrews that explains and expounds on the unpardonable sin. Think about this for a moment: outside of the gospels the unpardonable sin is discussed ONLY in the book of Hebrews! To people who really had no DOCTRINAL difficulties! Paul's discussion of the unpardonable sin ... IN A WARNING SORT OF WAY ... is mirrored in the severity of the punishment that is mentioned to this era. To understand the Ephesian era of the Church more fully, study the book of Hebrews.

4) PUNISHMENTS STATED:

This is found in verse 5 ...

... or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will REMOVE THY CANDLESTICK OUT OF HIS PLACE, except thou repent. (Revelation 2:5)

All 7 of the candlesticks have "specific places". There is a predetermined sequence and these 7, and THESE 7 ONLY, make up the whole New Testament Church of God from Christ's first coming down to His second coming. Revelation 1:20 states very clearly that the 7 candlesticks represent the 7 churches.

Now understand this!

THERE ARE NO OTHER CHURCHES ANYWHERE AT ANY TIME WHICH HAVE JESUS CHRIST WALKING "IN THEIR MIDST"!

The first 3 chapters of the book of Revelation leave no room for anyone in New Testament times being a true Christian without being a part of one of these 7 eras. They are the only churches in whose midst Jesus Christ "walks" ... is present! "Seven" is the number of completeness ... these chapters give us a picture of the COMPLETE Church of God. Please understand this: this vision is to make clear to us that Jesus Christ simply does NOT walk amongst any other churches, even if they DO call themselves "Christian".

Now what would happen if Christ removed the Ephesian candlestick "OUT OF HIS PLACE"? Well, then there would be only SIX candlesticks left which have Jesus Christ walking in their midst. There are no replacement candlesticks to choose from ... none waiting in the wings. It would mean that in future Christ would reckon the history of His New Testament Church to have consisted of only SIX eras, not seven! That's why Paul warned this era in Hebrews about the unpardonable sin ... it is the same kind of serious warning.

5) REWARDS OFFERED:

These are found in verse 7 ...

... To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:7)

This is a clear reference to Revelation 22:2 and refers to beyond the time of the second resurrection and beyond the second death. Clearly this reward applies to EVERYONE who will be in the first resurrection. It is NOT limited to those who were in the Ephesian era.

6) ADVICE GIVEN:

This is found in the first part of verse 5 ...

Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works ...
(Revelation 2:5)

It seems like this advice was specifically needed at a certain time during the Ephesian era, though this is also advice for Christians throughout the ages. Christians at any time during the past 1900 plus years have needed to take this advice to heart. In EVERY era there have been people who have needed this advice. But it very possibly had a specific application to a sizable segment of the later Ephesian era.

7) OTHER COMMENTS:

This is the era that started off with the apostles. They had all the true teachings which Jesus Christ had taught them in person (see Matthew 28:20). They looked forward to the kingdom of God and to the return of Jesus Christ. They had a zeal and many good traits. At some stage they started to let down and once all the original apostles had died false teachers entered the flock. In rough terms, this era probably spanned the time from the day of Pentecost 30 or 31 A.D. into the 300's A.D..

This is one of three eras which really does "the work of God"!

A GENERAL COMMENT: We have in the past tried to find different groups in history that were in all probability a part of the true Church of God. I do NOT want to do that in this article, because I do not feel that anything can be gained by such an exercise. Frankly, it really doesn't matter whether the true people of God were known as "Nazarenes" or as "Quartodecimani" or as "Ebionites" or as "Bogomils" or as "Waldensians" or as "Lollards", etc.. Our records will AT BEST be very sketchy and incomplete. And when everything is said and done, we are still only guessing. There is not even any assurance that those who at different times referred to themselves as "The Church of God" were necessarily true Christians.

What is important about these chapters here is NOT that we find out who actually fitted into which era (e.g. Constantine of Mananali into Pergamos and Peter Waldo into Thyira, etc.), but rather that we learn from these chapters exactly what God wants US to learn ABOUT US and things God wants US to heed and where and how God wants US to change! The whole section is a message to "him that has an ear" ... and that should be every one of us. And to do all this, we need to read and study ALL SEVEN messages, and not just the one we identify as "our" era.

THE SMYRNA ERA: REV. 2:8-11

This is the shortest of the 7 messages.

1) HOW CHRIST APPEARS TO THIS ERA:

... These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; (Revelation 2:8)

This is a focus on the first resurrection. The first death is nothing more than a stepping stone to eternal life beyond. This picture is already a hint at the reward that is going to be mentioned.

2) THE GOOD POINTS:

I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and [I know] the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but [are] the synagogue of Satan. (Revelation 2:9)

... behold, the devil shall cast [some] of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. (Revelation 2:10)

This era endured tribulation (i.e. persecution) and poverty. They also endured opposition from the great false church which had already developed. This included being unjustly imprisoned. Very likely there was a ten year period (i.e. "ten days") of intense persecution at one stage of this era.

This is the first of two eras to which no "bad points" and consequently also no "punishments" are stated. This does not mean that there was nothing that anyone, who was a part of this era, had to correct. They were not "perfect Christians". It DOES mean that Jesus Christ chose not to highlight or to focus on any particular problems. Specifically, it is noteworthy that no false teachings of any kind are referred to as major problems in this era.

3) REWARDS OFFERED:

This is closely linked to the way Christ appeared to this era.

... and I will give thee a crown of life. (Revelation 2:10)

... He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death. (Revelation 2:11)

The focus is beyond the second death. Again, this reward is clearly not limited to those from the Smyrna era. It really applies to everyone in the first resurrection.

4) ADVICE GIVEN:

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer ... be thou faithful unto death. (Revelation 2:10)

This advice is aimed at the persecution this group was exposed to. As such, this advice is equally applicable to all Christians throughout the ages, since we are all tempted to fear suffering and death. The fear of death is one of the chains Satan uses to enslave humanity, as Paul explained in Hebrews.

And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:15)

Overcoming the fear of death and the fear of suffering amounts to overcoming Satan. This advice is also for us.

5) OTHER COMMENTS:

This era was a poor and persecuted lot. In spite of persecutions, it seems like they continued to cling to the truth of God. In general terms this era probably spanned the time from the 300's A.D. into the 600's A.D.. From this era we can see that God does allow His people to be persecuted and even to be killed. The persecutions seem to indicate that they basically kept to themselves and did not associate with those of the false churches, thereby avoiding doctrinal errors.

THE PERGAMOS ERA: REV. 2:12-17

1) HOW CHRIST APPEARS TO THIS ERA:

... These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; (Revelation 2:12)

The sharp sword which cuts both ways is the Bible, the Word of God. It is the Bible which tells us what is right and what is wrong. So Jesus Christ appears to this era as the One who judges both doctrines and conduct. The way Christ appears to this group hints at the problems that are going to be mentioned.

2) THE GOOD POINTS:

I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, [even] where Satan's seat [is]: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas [was] my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. (Revelation 2:13)

The people of this era lived in the areas that were controlled by the Catholic Church. They held fast to the name "Church of God" and they did not deny the faith. At one stage of this era a prominent servant of God opposed the Catholic "Pope" (thus the codename "Antipas") and for this he was killed. This tells

us that this era suffered persecution from the popes.

BY THE WAY:

This expression "EVEN IN THOSE DAYS WHEREIN ANTIPAS [WAS] MY FAITHFUL MARTYR" should make quite clear to us that this whole account of the seven churches is one of consecutive time-periods. It is NOT about seven congregations which were contemporaneous with the Apostle John. {The verb "WAS slain" in the Greek is actually the aorist passive indicative, which is not really the same as the past tense, even though it is frequently translated into the English past tense.} This expression is clearly a reference to a time beyond the lifetime of the Apostle John. And the codename "Antipas" is supposed to tell us this.

3) THE BAD POINTS:

This is the first era for which "a few" bad points are listed.

But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. (Revelation 2:14-15)

The problems that Christ points out with this era are problems with wrong teachings and wrong practices, more so than a wrong attitude. However, wrong ACTIONS inevitably also produce wrong attitudes. Note also that it says: "you have there THEM that ..." do these wrong things. The problems mentioned here applied to SOME people who associated with that era. Others did not get involved in these things.

The doctrine of Balaam involved two things: get people to transgress sexually (i.e. "fornication") and get people to compromise with pagan customs like Christmas, Easter and ALL of the ways of society (i.e. "things sacrificed or dedicated to idols"). The doctrine of the Nicolaitans represented a compromising approach to life ... be tolerant towards the wrong things other people are engaged in, show understanding for these wrong ways and don't condemn the wrong ways.

In this last verse God makes very clear that He HATES this type of compromising approach, of tolerating evil. It is exactly the same approach that God had already condemned through the prophet Malachi.

Ye have wearied the LORD with your words ... When ye say, Every one that doeth evil [is] good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them ... (Malachi 2:17)

So in this era the influence of the Catholic Church, which "Antipas" vigorously opposed, was being condoned and tolerated by a certain segment, and it was even finding acceptance.

The lessons are plain to see. We today are ALSO being pressured to "eat things dedicated unto idols" and to accept the compromising approach of the Nicolaitans. Today we refer to this as the Worldwide Church of God trying to lead God's people back into the religion of the Protestants. We are being encouraged to compromise with the ways of this world, the whole package. We hardly understand what God means when He instructs us ...

And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, COME OUT OF HER, MY PEOPLE, that ye be

not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. (Revelation 18:4)

For many people it becomes the case that they don't really WANT to "come out of" the ways of the society all around us. They much prefer remaining a part of this world. Therefore their eyes will be closed to what "come out of her" really means.

4) PUNISHMENTS STATED:

... or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.
(Revelation 2:16)

Notice the use of the pronouns here. Christ said: "I will quickly come unto YOU", and then He said: "I will fight against THEM". The punishment only applies to those who get involved in the pagan ways of the world around them. In plain language, this expression "fight against them with the sword of my mouth" means that people will be judged by the Word of God, the sword. The Word of God makes abundantly clear that we are not to compromise God's ways at all. It is the same as the statement in Revelation 20:12 ...

... and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. (Revelation 20:12)

5) REWARDS OFFERED:

... To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth [it].
(Revelation 2:17)

These rewards look beyond the resurrection. They are not limited to those who were a part of the Pergamos era; they really apply to all who will be in the first resurrection. The reference to "a new name which no man knows except he that receives it" is a reference to the first resurrection. It is the same terminology that is used for all of the 144000 who will be in the first resurrection, when they "sing a new song ... that no man could learn except the 144000" (see Rev. 14:3). It is something that identifies them as one group, which nobody else thereafter will ever be able to become a part of. "The white stone" represents membership of the group that make up the first resurrection.

6) ADVICE GIVEN:

This is very brief: REPENT! (Rev. 2:16).

Repent for tolerating wrong practices. Repent for putting up with evil from others who are supposedly "brethren". God hates compromise.

7) OTHER COMMENTS:

In general terms this era probably spanned the time from the 600's A.D. to somewhere around 1000 A.D.. They did not have a printed Bible available. Very few of them would have been able to read Greek, let alone Hebrew. The Bible was not yet available in their own spoken languages. They relied basically on the Latin Vulgate translation to know what the Word of God tells us.

It seems that at times false teachers arose, who encouraged people to accept and to compromise with the ways of the society around them. Some of those ways were clearly pagan (i.e. dedicated to idols). There were also other teachers, Antipas being a notable one, who refuted and opposed these false influences.

The lesson for us is: don't tolerate or condone false ideas. God will never accept those who compromise with the ways of this world!

THE THYATIRA ERA: REV. 2:18-29

1) HOW CHRIST APPEARS TO THIS ERA:

... These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet [are] like fine brass; (Revelation 2:18)

To this era Christ appears in His glory at His second coming. This ties in with the rewards that are mentioned to this era ... power over the nations.

2) THE GOOD POINTS:

There are quite a number of things they are recommended for.

I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last [to be] more than the first. (Revelation 2:19)

The expression "I know your works" is used for every era. In itself it is a neutral statement, basically meaning "I know your actions". If an era is to be RECOMMENDED for "works", then the word "works" has to be repeated in the message to convey this point.

I know some people who try to make a big thing out of THE NAME "Philadelphia" meaning "brotherly love". However, the fact is that Thyatira is THE ONLY ERA which is commended for "love" (translated as "charity" in the KJV).

Thyatira is commended for love, for service, for faith, for patience and for DOING THE WORK! In addition they have an unexpected good point in that "the last works are more than the first" ... so often it is the other way around.

This is the second era that really did the work of God. It was this era that took the truth of God right across Europe and into Britain.

3) THE BAD POINTS:

Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. (Revelation 2:20)

Notice that the bad points are the same ones that were mentioned to the previous era, though the order is reversed. It is a matter of sexual transgressions which were being condoned, and an involvement in the customs of the false religion. However, what this message tells us is that the wrong influence was

getting stronger ... going from Balaam to Jezebel represents an escalation. Jezebel was worse than Balaam; Jezebel zealously practised the things that Balaam had only "advised". And with Jezebel the "fornication" takes precedence.

In plain terms, this is telling this era that they PERMITTED or ALLOWED the Catholic Church to influence God's servants with their pagan customs, disguised as "Christian".

Today in the Worldwide Church of God Jezebel is once again being permitted to teach and to seduce God's servants with pagan teachings and pagan customs. Many of Jezebel's teachings are now readily accepted in the Worldwide Church of God.

What we should also realize from this message is that not all in this era were involved in these wrong practices. On the one hand, there were those in this era who were really doing a mighty work, and they certainly had the fruits of God's Spirit evident in their lives. And this was the case right to the end of this era. But at the same time there were also those who accepted and adopted some Catholic teachings and some Catholic customs. And these individuals were accepted as equal brethren in the Church. The clear implication is that these people who taught the things of Jezebel should have been cut off from the fellowship of the Church.

4) PUNISHMENTS STATED:

It is important to carefully notice the use of the pronouns in these verses. Here are the verses that apply.

And I gave HER space to repent of HER fornication; and SHE repented not. Behold, I will cast HER into a bed, AND THEM that commit adultery WITH HER into great tribulation, except THEY repent of THEIR deeds. And I will kill HER children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto EVERY ONE OF YOU according to YOUR works. But unto YOU I say, AND UNTO THE REST in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon YOU none other burden. (Revelation 2:21-24)

The pronouns "her" and "she" refer to Jezebel, the false church. The pronouns "they" and "their" refer to those who have accepted Jezebel's teachings. The pronouns "you" and "your" refer to those in this era who did NOT get involved in any of Jezebel's ways, who totally rejected Jezebel's influence.

This tells us that God will punish the false church and all those who accept the teachings and customs of that church. Those who have not been involved with any of these things will not be affected by these punishments. People are all individually and personally responsible for their conduct and their way of life.

5) REWARDS OFFERED:

Several things are mentioned here.

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. (Revelation 2:26-28)

The rewards include "power over the nations" and "ruling them with a rod of iron". Clearly, these rewards are also not limited to the people from the Thyatira era. ALL those who will be in the first resurrection will

receive "power over the nations".

"The morning star" is a reference to Jesus Christ (see Rev. 22:16). So this expression "I will give him the morning star" is a way of saying that they will inherit all things WITH Jesus Christ. They will become "joint-heirs of God" with Jesus Christ (see Romans 8:17). But this also applies to EVERYONE in the first resurrection. This reward does not in any way set those from Thyatira apart from others in the first resurrection.

6) ADVICE GIVEN:

This is quite brief and to the point.

But that which ye have [already] hold fast till I come. (Revelation 2:25)

This is addressed to those who had NOT compromised with Jezebel. They had the truth of God. They already had godly love and an attitude of service and faith and patience and they had real works to prove these attributes (since faith WITHOUT works is dead, James 2:17, 26). These things they are told to hold fast.

This advice applies to anyone who has the truth and is pressured to let go of it in favour of false teachings. We are all to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered" (Jude 1:3).

7) OTHER COMMENTS:

In general terms this era probably spanned from around 1000 A.D. into the 1500's A.D.. They too did not yet have the Bible available in their own languages, or even printed in any language. It was only towards the end of this era that a few translations into the vernacular languages started to appear.

The two eras of Pergamos and Thyatira combined spanned almost 1000 years, or about one half of the entire time for all seven eras. The problems in both of these eras were the same. Thus for about 50% of the entire history of the N. T. Church of God there will have been pressure from the Catholic Church, a pressure to compromise, a pressure to accept some pagan customs as "Christian", a pressure to accept certain doctrinal explanations, and attempts by "ungodly men" (see Jude 4) to infiltrate the Church of God and to take over control. For that entire period of time the only Bible available to most people in the Church of God would have been the Latin Vulgate version.

The combined effects of "Balaam" and "Jezebel" and "the Nicolaitanes" over an almost 1000 year period left their mark on the Church. This will become evident in the next message.

THE SARDIS ERA: REV. 3:1-6

1) HOW CHRIST APPEARS TO THIS ERA:

... These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars ... (Revelation 3:1)

To this era Jesus Christ identifies Himself in two ways: firstly that He sees everything, and secondly (similar to Ephesus) that He is in full control over the seven angels that oversee the seven eras. They report everything faithfully to Him.

"The seven spirits" are before God the Father (Revelation 4:5) and they are symbolized as "eyes" and as "horns" (see Revelation 5:6) ... they are an expression of God's ability to "see everything" and also an expression of the power of God.

So Christ reveals Himself to this era as the One who sees everything. This hints at the problem that is going to be exposed, a problem which some might not "see".

2) THE GOOD POINTS:

There is really only one thing in their favour.

Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments ... (Revelation 3:4)

This is the only good thing that God tells us about the Sardis era ... that there were still a few people who had "not defiled their garments". This expression refers back to being involved with Jezebel. The implication is that all the others in this grouping HAD defiled their garments through contact with Jezebel.

3) BAD POINTS:

... thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. ... I have not found thy works perfect before God. (Revelation 3:1-2)

This is the final result of almost 1000 years of exposure to the influence of the false religion. It has taken its toll. The majority have been defiled by false teachings and practices. Even though they still have THE NAME "Church of God", they really are, spiritually speaking, dead. It took Satan about 1000 years of influence, very sneaky and crafty at first, but always pushing further and further, to get the Church of God to where they had lost almost all of the truth.

THIS IS ALWAYS THE END-RESULT OF COMPROMISE!

They had condoned Balaam, they had put up with Jezebel. Making allowance for others to compromise also affects us. It affects the way WE OURSELVES think. We become oblivious to the things we are losing. We don't understand how our whole outlook and our whole perspective becomes "defiled". We think we ourselves are okay as long as we aren't actually DOING the things for which we show "understanding" towards others.

This era was the let-down after the powerful work that had been done by the previous era. They had no real "works" to speak of.

4) PUNISHMENTS STATED:

... If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. (Revelation 3:3)

The punishment mentioned is that what they thought they had will be UNEXPECTEDLY taken away. They think they have salvation guaranteed. But if they don't watch and repent then that will be taken from them.

5) REWARDS OFFERED:

... and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. (Revelation 3:4)

He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. (Revelation 3:5)

These rewards (to be clothed in white and to not have one's name blotted out of the book of life) certainly also apply to everyone else in the first resurrection. Again this is not limited to this specific era.

6) ADVICE GIVEN:

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die (Revelation 3:2)

Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. (Revelation 3:3)

The Greek verb here translated as "strengthen" is "sterizo" and it means: make stable, fix, establish.

The picture is one of more and more of the truth of God being lost. So the admonition is: first of all STABILIZE the truth that is left. If this is not done, then you will also lose that. Think back and compare the vast gap between the things YOU received when you took over and the things you today still have. Realize just how much you have lost and let go of.

The Greek verb translated "hold fast" in verse 3 is a different word from the one that is used in Rev. 2:25 and in Rev. 3:11. Here the Greek word is "tereo" and this means: watch over, give heed to, observe, etc.. So again the admonition (in verse 3) is: think about the things you received and watch over them. Don't jettison the truth you were given.

In view of the things that have happened in the Worldwide Church of God over the past decade, this advice is as applicable to us today as it was to the Sardis era.

The admonition "remember therefore HOW you have received and heard" is important to note. THIS was the first era to have access to the Word of God FREELY! The Bible became available in all languages and it became available in the form of printed books. It was during this era that virtually every family was able to obtain and own a copy of the Bible, the whole Bible.

Thus Sardis did not have the same excuse for getting involved in the ways of Jezebel that Pergamos and Thyatira might have had. Back then people had not really had access to their own copies of the Bible; they had relied almost totally on someone else, who could read and speak Latin, to translate from the Latin Vulgate into the common languages. But from the time of Sardis onwards vast numbers of people could read for themselves a copy of God's Word in their own language in their own homes. This brought a greater accountability with it!

7) OTHER COMMENTS:

In general terms, this era has come from the 1500's into our present century. In the 1850's the majority of those who made up the Sardis era joined with the Sunday-keeping churches. A small remnant continued to hold fast to the Sabbath. It was a part of this remnant with whom Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong came into contact in the late 1920's. Today, in 1995, there is a movement among the last remnants of

this era to also join the Sunday-keepers. Thus, finally, they are ready to die out completely.

THE PHILADELPHIAN ERA: REV. 3:7-13

That's us, right? This is the era we have looked at most of the time, often to the exclusion of the other eras. Let's take a close look at it now.

1) HOW CHRIST APPEARS TO THIS ERA:

... These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; (Revelation 3:7)

To this era Christ shows Himself as **IN FULL CONTROL OF GOD'S WORK**; it is He who opens and shuts doors. This is already an indication of what is in store for this era ... they (i.e. we) are supposed to go through the open doors that Jesus Christ will set before them (us).

This is the third and last of the seven eras that is involved in "doing the work".

"The key of David" refers to unlocking the identity of the kingly line of David. This requires an understanding of the identity of the nations of Israel. Jesus Christ has that key, and implied is that He would give it to this era.

2) THE GOOD POINTS:

I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. (Revelation 3:8)

... thou hast kept the word of my patience ... (Revelation 3:10)

Notice a somewhat different approach in this description. With the other eras that are already past the focus is on what they achieved and accomplished (see from Ephesus down to Thyatira). But with this era the focus is not on accomplishments, but on **OPPORTUNITIES**! An "open door" is an opportunity! Whether this era actually does walk through this door and utilizes this opportunity is not really stated in this verse.

This is once again a clear indication of the perspective of this whole story.

The perspective is from this time-slot of Philadelphia. That is why the achievements of the previous eras can be listed as history. But the potential achievements of the Philadelphian era itself still lie ahead ... it remains to be seen whether Philadelphia actually **DOES** walk through this "open door".

The expression "kept the word of my patience" refers to faithfully keeping God's commandments. This is explained in Revelation 14:12.

Here is **THE PATIENCE** of the saints: here [are] they that **KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD**, and the faith of Jesus. (Revelation 14:12)

This gives us a picture of a commandment-keeping Church that has retained the name "Church of God".

The expression "I have set before you an open door and no man can shut it" shows what God expects this era to do. They are to "go through" the open door that is set before them. The expression "for you have a little strength" explains WHY God sets this open door before Philadelphia. Because they are weak in regard to what it is that God expects them to accomplish, therefore God has set an open door before them ... to make it easier for them to do the job. Philadelphia really does not have ANY excuse for not getting the job done that God has in mind for them. The little strength that they DO have is sufficient when combined with the opportunities which God has opened up for them.

Specifically WHAT it is that Philadelphia is to do is not recorded in these verses. For that we have to look elsewhere. In Hebrews 13:8 we are told:

Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. (Hebrews 13:8)

It is safe to assume that the instructions Jesus Christ gave to His Church at the end of His ministry are still applicable in the time of Philadelphia. And Jesus Christ gave His Church a very clear command before He returned to heaven to the Father.

GO YE THEREFORE, AND TEACH ALL NATIONS, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, [even] unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matthew 28:19-20)

They were to "teach" ALL nations with the goal of making disciples, whom they would then also baptize. (The word "teach" which is used in this verse really means "make disciples".) Now exactly HOW were they to go and teach all nations? The answer is BY PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD! The same instructions are recorded in the gospel of Mark as follows:

And he said unto them, GO YE INTO ALL THE WORLD, AND PREACH THE GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. (Mark 16:15-16)

That is PRECISELY what has happened over these past 1900 years. The Church of God has gone out and preached the gospel wherever this was possible to do. In the process of doing this, God has "called" certain people into His Church and into the fellowship. God "calling" people into the Church has been very closely linked to those people first being exposed to the message of the gospel. A clear example of this is found in the case with Cornelius which is recorded in Acts chapter 10. Even though the prayers of Cornelius had already been heard by God (Acts 10:4-6), Cornelius STILL had to first be exposed to the message of the gospel before God gave him His Holy Spirit (verses 34-44).

"The open door" set before Philadelphia is for the express purpose of "preaching the gospel" in order to make disciples. But that "preaching of the gospel" by Philadelphia is not intended to be "a witness to the world".

So in this message we are given the picture of a commandment-keeping church which received a great deal of help from God in order to preach the gospel on a large scale.

3) NO BAD POINTS & NO PUNISHMENTS MENTIONED:

As with the message to Smyrna, no bad points are listed for this era and thus no punishments are

referred to either. However, before we draw any hasty conclusions from this omission, we need to again keep the time perspective in mind.

It is a mistake to assume that the Philadelphian era has no problems which need to be addressed and dealt with. This era STARTS OUT with keeping the commandments of God and having the name "Church of God". Since the whole account for all seven eras is written from the time-perspective of this era, therefore we, more than any other group, are really expected to "hear what the Spirit says unto ALL the churches".

It is a matter of history (over the past 50 years or so) that we have had some people within our fellowship who have embodied all of the bad points that have been mentioned thus far. There are those who have left their first love, those who have become involved with fornication, those who have become involved with the things dedicated to idols, those who are spiritually dead, those who really don't have any good works, and those who have the compromising attitude of the Nicolaitanes. To SOME degree all of those previous admonitions have applied to some people in this Philadelphian era.

With the whole account written from our time-slot, we really are expected to apply the principle of 1 Corinthians 11:31.

For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. (1 Corinthians 11:31)

If we are willing to accept all of the correction, which Christ has already mentioned, as admonitions to us personally, then we don't need any additional correction. It is already all there for us to see and to take to heart.

But there is another reason why no correction is mentioned in the message to Philadelphia. Let's understand.

THE PEOPLE who make up the last two eras (i.e. Philadelphia and Laodicea) are going to be largely together. They will for the most part probably view themselves as ONE body of believers, (even if they are spread across a number of different organizational structures). This is also in keeping with the parable Christ told in Matthew chapter 25. There the 5 wise virgins seem to represent the Philadelphian era and the 5 foolish virgins seem to represent the Laodicean era. And until it is time to go to the place of safety all ten of them are basically together, looking forward to the same events.

So if you have two groups with vastly different attitudes together, what should happen when you address both groups? What happens when you sternly correct the one group, while praising the other? How should ALL of them respond to this? What happens if you don't tell people which of these two groups they individually belong to? What if you tell people to look into their own hearts and to then decide for themselves which of the two groups they are a part of?

Here we have a large group of people who together make up two eras. So God praises the first group and severely corrects the second group. Then God tells us to figure out for ourselves which of these two groups we are a part of. So everyone concludes that they are a part of the first group and no one admits to belonging to the second group.

But since they are together, the strong correction for the second group is AUTOMATICALLY intended to be a warning to the first group. Everyone in the whole group is expected (by God!) to examine himself for the bad points that apply to the second group.

IT WOULD BE THE WORST MISTAKE OF ALL FOR SOMEONE TO ASSUME: "WELL, SINCE I AM A PART OF PHILADELPHIA, THEREFORE THE WARNINGS TO LAODICEA DON'T APPLY TO ME!"

To help explain the attitude we should have, let me give you an analogy:

Two small brothers are playing and they get into some mischief. The one boy gets caught and then the father of the two boys addresses them both and then punishes the one who was caught. What should the attitude of the one who was not caught be? Should he be self-righteous and say: "my brother deserves to be punished because he did this or that"? Or should he say: "I know that I too am guilty and therefore I too really deserve to be punished; I am just lucky in that I wasn't caught"? More to the point, WHAT LESSON should the one who was not punished learn from this episode? Should he not examine himself for the exact same points for which his brother was punished, to make sure that he is not still doing the same thing?

Before we conclude that the warnings to Laodicea don't apply to us, we need to FIRST examine ourselves for the faults that are mentioned to Laodicea. The principle of Proverbs 19:25 says ...

Smite a scorner, and the simple will beware: and reprove one that hath understanding, [and] he will understand knowledge. (Proverbs 19:25)

Laodicea is going to be "smitten" and we all need to "beware". We need to be sure to examine ourselves for THE EXACT SAME POINTS for which "our brothers" are going to be punished!

4) REWARDS OFFERED:

Several things are mentioned here.

Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. (Revelation 3:9)

Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, [which is] new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and [I will write upon him] my new name. (Revelation 3:12)

These rewards refer to after God the Father has come to this earth with the New Jerusalem. ALL OF THESE POINTS APPLY TO EVERYONE IN THE FIRST RESURRECTION!

There has been a tendency by some (actually by many!) to view these rewards SELFISHLY ... as if God would somehow give different rewards to people in the first resurrection based purely on the time-period during which they lived, i.e. based on which era they were a part of.

That idea is totally false. It is nothing more than wishful thinking!

This selfish kind of wrong thinking guarantees even those who develop very little godly character, but who can convince themselves that they are "Philadelphian Christians", a better and more impressive

reward than anyone from the previous five eras, even if such individuals developed ten times as much godly character. No matter how much character such individuals developed (the apostles Peter, Paul, James, John, etc.), they can never become "pillars" in the temple of God, because we reserve that privilege exclusively for us Philadelphians.

We are not going to share our rewards with any other era, right?!

No, that is not right. But that is what many people seem to feel.

Oh yes, we want the Ephesian era to share the tree of life with us; we want the Smyrna era to share the crown of life with us; we don't place much importance on the "white stone" and the "hidden manna" of the Pergamos era; we want the Thyatira era to share ruling over the nations with us and to share the Morning Star with us; we want the Sardis era to share having our names in the book of life with us; we want the Laodicean era to share being at the marriage supper with us ... BUT WE DON'T WANT TO SHARE WITH ANYONE ELSE BEING PILLARS IN THE TEMPLE OF GOD!

So please understand the following things.

Everyone in the first resurrection will have the name of God written on him. This will identify him for all future eternity as having been one of those who were in the first resurrection. Everyone in the first resurrection will also have the name of New Jerusalem written on him. This will identify him as a permanent citizen of the capital city of the universe. That is the city where God the Father will permanently live (Rev. 21:3). And everyone in the first resurrection will become a pillar in the temple of God. That is where Christ is preparing "mansions" for everyone (see John 14:2). And during the millennium all those who are still physical, mortal people will come and worship God before the feet of all those who were in the first resurrection, not just before those who were "Philadelphians".

Rewards depend on growth in character. They depend on whether our one pound gained ten more pounds or only five more pounds or perhaps only one more pound (see Luke 19:13-19). They don't depend on the era of history during which we receive that one pound from God. They depend, rather, on what we do with what we are given.

But there is one "reward" which is mentioned in the message to Philadelphia and which applies ONLY to Philadelphia. And that reward is mentioned because of the timing of the whole account. This reward is mentioned because it applies to this life here and now. It is found in verse 10.

Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.
(Revelation 3:10)

This "reward" is a reference to protection during the time of the great tribulation. This is the only reward in the whole story that applies to this life. None of the other eras have any "rewards" mentioned that apply to this life. Since the first five eras are viewed as past tense, therefore there was no point in mentioning specific protection which God very likely may have granted to many of His true people at various times in the past.

5) ADVICE GIVEN:

Behold, I come quickly: HOLD THAT FAST WHICH THOU HAST, that no man take thy crown.
(Revelation 3:11)

This advice to "hold fast" implies that this group will face great pressure to "let go" of the truth which they have until that time "kept". This should be very easy to understand today, in November 1995.

Over the last almost ten years, since Mr. Armstrong's death, there has been a great deal of pressure on all of God's people to "let go" of the faith that was once delivered unto us. That faith which was delivered unto us did not consist of perfect understanding of every small doctrinal detail; what it consists of is A WAY OF LIFE BASED ON OBEDIENCE TO THE LAWS OF GOD!

It consists of what we do and how we live, when we work and when we rest, the things we participate in and the things we avoid, how we dress and how we look, what we eat and what we avoid eating, how we handle our finances and how we handle our health problems, how we treat our parents and how we treat our children, how we treat our neighbours and how we treat strangers, the truth we accept and the heresies we reject, how we respond to praise and to criticism and to false accusations, the way we speak and the songs we sing, etc..

It is a whole way of life which was delivered to us when we came into God's Church. And that is the way of life God tells us to "hold fast" and which during the past ten years we have been pressured to "let go" of in the name of progress, enlightenment and "new understanding".

How much have you personally already let go of?

In the Worldwide News of November 16, 1981 (today exactly 14 years ago) Mr. Herbert Armstrong wrote a long lead article with a huge headline which read:

"HOW SUBTLY SATAN USED MAKEUP TO START THE CHURCH OFF THE TRACK".

The subtitle of that article read:

"How Satan BEGAN Injecting Liberalism into God's Church".

People who didn't like Mr. Armstrong's article say that he was just "against" makeup. In that way they can make makeup the whole issue that is at stake. But makeup isn't "the whole issue". Makeup is only the tip of the iceberg. But people don't want to acknowledge that. They would rather have each potential change in the Church's teachings examined on its own merits.

That sounds really great!

But there is just one problem with that. And that is this: by treating each potential change as an individual issue, you very conveniently NEVER see "the whole picture"! You never see (or refuse to admit) that one change will INEVITABLY lead to the next one ... and the next one ... and the next one, etc.. That is the true big picture.

THE PROOF IS BEFORE YOUR EYES!

You, who are today upset with the changes that Pasadena introduced during Mr. Tkach's brief stay in power, do you admit that Mr. Armstrong was right in his 1981 article? Satan has "USED" makeup and he has used it "TO START" the Church off the track. Through makeup Satan "BEGAN" to inject liberalism into the Church. Can you see and admit that the changes, which you today reject, are the automatic consequences of the Church having accepted makeup?

Please understand this! Mr. Armstrong wasn't primarily concerned with makeup. Mr. Armstrong understood, better than anyone else, the automatic consequences that the acceptance of makeup will have. And he was right, prophetically so!

WHEN YOU ACCEPTED MAKEUP BACK INTO THE CHURCH, THEN YOU WERE NOT HOLDING FAST TO THAT WHICH YOU HAD! YOU WERE LETTING GO! AND IN SO DOING YOU BECAME JOINTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MULTITUDE OF HERESIES THAT HAVE SINCE THEN ENTERED THE CHURCH OF GOD AS A DIRECT CONSEQUENCE TO THE ACCEPTANCE OF MAKEUP!

The proof for this is plain to see! For all those who have accepted makeup, it didn't really stop there. They have also accepted OTHER changes. And now they are CONFUSED! They are no longer confident about the things they believe. A popular phrase with many such people when you ask them for their official explanations for certain teachings is:

"THAT IS STILL ON THE TABLE!"

If you have not held fast to the teaching regarding makeup that you had when Mr. Armstrong was still alive, then your understanding has been darkened and your heart has been blinded (compare Ephesians 4:18). You may at this stage not be very far off the track, but you are most assuredly OFF the track, because you are no longer ON it! And that is what Mr. Armstrong explained 14 years ago!

YOUR "CROWN" IS AT STAKE!

Satan has used makeup exactly as Mr. Armstrong explained ... to introduce a host of heretical ideas and practices into the Church of God. If you really WANT makeup, then you will also desperately try to convince yourself that there isn't any connection between all the heresies that the Worldwide Church of God has accepted and the re-introduction of makeup. But you will be wrong. That is what Mr. Armstrong told you 14 years ago. And that is what I am telling you today.

6) OTHER COMMENTS:

This era started with Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong in the late 1920's and early 1930's. In the late 1920's Mr. Armstrong came into contact with remnants of the Sardis era, and from the beginning of 1934 onwards God used Mr. Armstrong to raise up a new era.

The way God raised this era up was by continuing to guide Mr. Armstrong into a constantly better and fuller understanding of the truth. Very few of the truths of the Bible had "remained" in the Sardis era. And so God restored a great deal of understanding in the course of Mr. Armstrong's over 50 years as the leader of this era. It was not the restoration of "ALL truth", but it was the restoration of a great deal of the truth. And that restoration certainly didn't stop with Mr. Armstrong's death. We are still learning more all the time.

The restoration of ALL truth is contingent on a correct UNDERSTANDING of all things. And that will only be available once Jesus Christ Himself has returned. We do not yet have all understanding. And so we do not yet have all the truth.

THE LAODICEAN ERA: REV. 3:14-22

This is the final era of the Church of God.

1) HOW CHRIST APPEARS TO THIS ERA:

And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; (Revelation 3:14)

The Greek word here translated as "beginning" is "arche". This word is used 57 times in the New Testament and it is translated in various passages with the words "beginning, principality, magistrates, corner, power, rule, principles". Here in Revelation 3:14 it would be more correctly translated as "the beginner of the creation of God" or "the ruler of the creation of God" or "the one who has power over the creation of God".

So to this era Jesus Christ appears as THE BEGINNER of the creation of God. That is a very significant way of appearing. "The beginning" is when something starts. Now this whole story is concerned with a SPIRITUAL creation, the process of God building the Family of God.

So what is the beginning of God's spiritual creation in you? How does that creation start?

REPENTANCE is the beginning of our spiritual creation! That is the first step. That is how the whole process starts. That is God's first instruction to us ... to repent. If we don't repent then the process never gets going.

So understand this: the way Jesus Christ appears to this era is a hint that they have a problem with real repentance. The people this is addressed to have actually NEVER YET come to true repentance.

Many people have a hard time trying to understand this. The way they reason goes like this: all seven of these eras are God's Church. THEREFORE the people in all seven of these eras must have repented at some time and then received God's Spirit. Therefore the Laodiceans MUST have had God's Spirit.

There are two problems with this kind of reasoning. Firstly, this ignores the timeframe from which this era is being viewed. Secondly, this approach uses REASONING to counter the things that Jesus Christ plainly says to this era.

So understand the perspective of this message. Jesus Christ is describing the Laodicean era from the timeframe of Philadelphia, which is from a time BEFORE any of them come to repentance. Understand that ALL those who at that point in time are already repentant are in fact a part of the Philadelphian era. You can't have really repentant Laodiceans as long as Philadelphia is still prominent. The timeframe is the key here.

People then ask: "Well, if they are not yet repentant HOW could God possibly call them "HIS Church"? The answer is that this is something God has done all along in His dealings with humanity. Remember what Paul explained in Romans 4:17?

(As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, [even] GOD, who quickeneth the dead, and CALLETH THOSE THINGS WHICH BE NOT AS THOUGH THEY WERE. (Romans 4:17)

God always looks ahead! He did so with Abraham. And He does so with the Laodiceans. And He does so with all of Israel. Paul explained this in Romans chapter 11. After explaining that "blindness in part is happened to Israel" Paul then mentioned:

AND SO ALL ISRAEL SHALL BE SAVED: as it is written ... (Romans 11:26)

For all of Israel God is looking ahead. God looks ahead to the final outcome. And He also looks ahead with the Laodiceans. That is why God can address a message to "the church of the Laodiceans" even before any of them come to true repentance.

In Revelation chapter 12 God gives us a very brief view of this same group of people, but from a later time-perspective. Notice the account. When Satan attacks the Church of God (verse 13), then God takes His truly repentant people to the place of safety (verses 14-16). Once the Philadelphians have been taken to the place of safety, THEN the Laodiceans that are left behind are described as follows:

And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with THE REMNANT OF HER SEED, WHICH KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD, AND HAVE THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS CHRIST. (Revelation 12:17)

The timing of THIS verse is very clearly "six eras are past, and number seven is present". Number six has just been taken to supernatural protection from the face of Satan. This is a LATER perspective than the one we are given in Revelation chapter 3.

So consider: the as yet unrepentant Laodiceans in Revelation chapter 3 are referred to as "the church" of the Laodiceans precisely because God knows that some of them WILL later come to repentance.

Consider also the following point.

The five eras that are past were made up of people who came to repentance (as well as always having unrepentant "tares" in their midst) and who were then tested as to whether they would remain faithful to the original calling. Punishments are mentioned for those who don't remain faithful to God. In a sense, these people faced their testing AFTER coming into God's Church. That also includes us today who are at this point in time truly repentant and converted Christians.

The one era that is viewed as yet future is made up of people who are hired into the vineyard at the eleventh hour. Some of their time of testing is BEFORE they come to true repentance. They are not being tested on whether they will remain faithful to their calling for many years or even for many decades. Their testing is CONCENTRATED into THE PROCESS by which they come to true repentance. The repentance process itself embodies their time of testing. Once these people have actually really repented, there is no time left for them to be tried and tested for many years. Before repentance these people are "failing" the test, but they still have the opportunity to "pass" the test if they will truly repent in the time that remains.

Consider further.

God planned all seven eras out in advance. He planned to include one era that starts out unrepentant. WHY did God plan it out this way? God could have planned it without including such a group of unrepentant people in the last era. But He chose to do it this way. Why?

This is an expression of the mercy and the grace of God! By doing it THIS way, it allows God to extend the opportunity to be in the first resurrection virtually up to the last day, up to the eleventh hour. Doing it this way means that God does NOT have to have a cut-off date at a considerable time BEFORE the return of Christ from when onwards He will no longer extend the opportunity to anyone to be in the first resurrection.

It is not a matter of suddenly, on impulse as it were, extending the opportunity for salvation to someone; like totally out of the blue offering "the thief on the stake" the chance to be in the first resurrection. Not at all! {By the way: "the thief on the stake" will be in the second resurrection and not in the first.}

Those who will be in the first resurrection have to have a certain amount of understanding, on which their commitment to God is going to be based. That is why we are tested after we have come to repentance. For the Laodiceans this exposure to understanding takes place BEFORE they really repent. I don't mean that Laodiceans have to have a fully correct understanding. But they do need to, in general terms, have a fair understanding of God's basic plan and purpose. They need to know what God is doing and what God expects.

Understand that God "cannot" (God really CAN do what He wants to do; so I use the word "cannot" in quotes because it is not the way God has chosen to do things) just have people in the first resurrection, who spent their entire lives as faithful Catholics or Methodists or Baptists and who in the last three days of their physical lives came into contact with the truth of God and then repented and then died. There must be a foundation of a better understanding of the truth of God than that which is taught by all of these false churches. That is where the Laodicean era fits in.

The Laodiceans in the first resurrection are people who have learnt and accepted the true teachings of the Bible from the Philadelphian era, BUT WITHOUT COMING TO REPENTANCE at this present point in time! Those who have not accepted the true teachings of the Word of God are not even Laodiceans. Christ explained this in Matthew chapter 25.

It is the parable of the ten virgins. All ten of them are "virgins", which means that they are not defiled with the teachings of the false churches. But only five of them have "oil"; i.e. only five of them have God's Spirit. The five wise virgins represent the Philadelphian era which is taken to the place of safety. The five foolish virgins who do not have the Holy Spirit (i.e. they have no oil) represent the Laodicean era and they go into the tribulation.

The point to take note of is this: for anyone to have "THE POTENTIAL" to become a Laodicean who will repent during the tribulation and in that way still be in the first resurrection, the person must START OUT as "a virgin" (i.e. free from pagan heretical teachings), albeit an unrepentant virgin. So it is important for the Philadelphian era to have made the truth available to those who will form the repentant group of Laodiceans in the first resurrection. Since there is no time AFTER they have repented for these Laodiceans to learn the truth of God, therefore they have to learn these things before repentance.

That is the way God can have people in the first resurrection whose lives ended only days or weeks after they came to true repentance. The knowledge and understanding of the truth had preceded their unconditional commitment to God by a considerable period of time. And BECAUSE they did not have the character to repent when they first understood the truth, THEREFORE they have to prove to God that they will nevertheless be faithful from then onwards. That proof to God is provided by the trials they will accept in the process of true repentance. It will be the ultimate trial of being willing to die in order to be faithful to God.

But let's move on.

2) THE GOOD POINTS:

There aren't any! Not even one! There are not even "a few names" which have not defiled themselves. There is NOTHING good in this description of this era.

When people are truly repentant, when at least SOME people have the Holy Spirit of God, then there is

at least SOMETHING good that can be said for them. But that is not the case with Laodicea, as viewed from the time-perspective of Revelation chapter 3.

Think about that! There is not one good thing that Jesus Christ mentions about this group.

3) BAD POINTS:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. (Revelation 3:15)

The most outstanding characteristic about this group of people is that they are UNCOMMITTED! They are not cold and not hot, neither totally "for" nor totally "against". Their conduct does not really reveal where they stand. They don't evidence any firm views on the things they do and the things they accept. In short, when you ask them to commit themselves about where they stand doctrinally, their answer is:

"IT IS STILL ON THE TABLE!"

This is a group of people that is clearly NOT "holding fast" to the things that had been delivered to the Church. They are re-examining the faith that was once delivered to them and willing to accept new explanations for the things they once practised and believed.

But now notice God's detailed description of this group.

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: (Revelation 3:17)

The next thing to notice about this group is that they are not teachable! People who have "need of nothing" are unteachable; they feel that they don't "need" the things you could teach them. They are already self-sufficient.

They have a TOTALLY WRONG ASSESSMENT of their own spiritual condition. They think that they are spiritually rich, but they are poor! They are the very opposite of the people in the Smyrna era, remember? When God said that the people in Smyrna were "rich" (Rev. 2:9), God meant that they were really converted and committed to God's ways, even in spite of persecutions and hardships. So what does God mean when He says that the Laodiceans are "poor"?

Isn't it obvious that this means that they are unconverted because they are still unrepentant? They are "poor" because they don't have the free gift of God's Spirit.

Next, when God tells us that these people "DON'T KNOW" that they are poor and wretched and miserable and blind and naked, God is telling us that these people DON'T EVEN KNOW that they are unrepentant and don't have God's Spirit. They think that they DO have "oil", i.e. the Holy Spirit, and therefore they think of themselves as "rich".

They are "blind" because they don't see the true self. They are "naked" because they are totally devoid of God's righteousness. They are "poor" because they don't have God's Spirit.

The word translated as "wretched" is interesting. It is the Greek word "talaiporos" and, according to Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, it is formed from two words which mean "to

undergo a callus". It is also used to mean "enduring toil and troubles", "afflicted" and "wretched". But the root words from which this word is formed are interesting.

This is a group of people who "have undergone a callus", i.e. they have become "thick-skinned" towards the truth of God. It is difficult to get through to their consciences. And they don't even know this.

The Greek word translated as "miserable" is "eleeinos" and it means "to be pitied". They are to be "pitied" because they are heading not only for the tribulation, but also for the lake of fire!

There is no reference in this section to false doctrines, because that would only mask the real problem. The real problem is one of a wrong attitude, an unrepentant attitude. The bad points that are listed for this group, both individually and collectively, should make this abundantly clear. There is no such thing as a really repentant person who is spiritually "poor and blind and naked and calloused and uncommitted".

Let's move on.

4) PUNISHMENTS STATED:

So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I WILL SPUE THEE OUT OF MY MOUTH. (Revelation 3:16)

What does this mean ... "I will spit you out of my mouth"? What do YOU feel about the things YOU "spit out"? What value do YOU attach to the things YOU "spit out"?

To "spit" something out of your mouth is a way of expressing total rejection and disgust. It pictures attaching no value whatsoever to the things you spit out; they are totally worthless to you.

This is fully in line with the rest of the description of this group. There was nothing good about them to start with and, unless they really change, they will be totally rejected. This means that they are in danger of committing the unpardonable sin.

The severity of this punishment is only equalled by the punishment mentioned to the Ephesian era (for leaving their first love). But there is also a difference. Note this carefully.

IF the candlestick which represents an era is "removed out of his place", then this does not really affect the individuals who had lived in faithful submission to God. Their individual, personal fates for all future eternity are not really tied to the position of the era during which they lived. After all, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and all the righteous men and women from Old Testament times are not a part of one specific "era" of the Church either.

BUT IF Jesus Christ spits one whole era out of His mouth, and He doesn't even have a few names in that era who are worthy of being mentioned, then they are ALL heading for the lake of fire. They are not repentant and have thus far never yet been repentant, but they ARE accountable for the things they have been given.

The threat of this punishment is clearly tied to the spiritual condition of this group AT THE TIME THAT THEY ARE PICTURED AT IN THIS ACCOUNT! The purpose of this strong pronouncement of a punishment is to wake them up! To get through the thick calluses which they have developed towards the truth!

When we see the same group at a somewhat later point in time, in Revelation 12:17, then the tone is far different. There we see a certain measure of acceptance being expressed by God. There they are described as "keeping the commandments of God and having the testimony of Jesus Christ". They will then STILL have the opportunity to make good. But the going will be extremely tough!

5) REWARDS OFFERED:

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will SUP WITH HIM, AND HE WITH ME. (Revelation 3:20)

To him that overcometh will I grant TO SIT WITH ME IN MY THRONE, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. (Revelation 3:21)

Both of these rewards clearly apply to everyone who will be in the first resurrection. Everyone in the first resurrection will take part in the marriage supper that takes place at Christ's second coming. And everyone who overcomes will become a joint-heir with Jesus Christ and sit with Him on His throne. This is certainly not limited to those of the Laodicean era.

6) ADVICE GIVEN:

... I would thou wert cold or hot. (Revelation 3:15)

I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and [that] the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. (Revelation 3:18)

If they were "hot" it means they would be repentant, zealous and committed. Therefore they would be in the first resurrection. If they were "cold", they would be uninvolved with God's Church and therefore less accountable, and they would in all likelihood be in the second resurrection. But if they are between those two groups, they have some attributes of both groups without being fully committed to either group. In that condition they could only end up in the lake of fire.

The advice to this group is: YOU NEED TO COME TO A REAL REPENTANCE! Real repentance involves having our eyes opened to God's way of thinking and seeing; it involves rejecting our own righteousness and putting on God's righteousness; and it involves being prepared to face opposition and persecution for the things we must commit to.

But there is more.

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. (Revelation 3:19)

Here God makes clear that He really wants them to be "hot" (i.e. "zealous"). While "cold" is better than "lukewarm", it is still not what God wants.

God's rebuke in this message has been very strong; actually the strongest of all the messages. But it is an expression of God's love! Thick calluses are not removed by gently stroking them with a feather! They require the sharpness of the twoedged sword of the Word of God (see Hebrews 4:12) to get through them.

These people don't have much time! When the real trials confront them, they will have to make up their minds in a hurry. They will have to quickly commit to God, because they will face imminent death either way. The severity of God's rebuke is motivated by God's desire to see them make the right decisions in those difficult circumstances.

7) OTHER COMMENTS:

I suspect that this era started when Mr. Armstrong died and when Mr. Joseph W. Tkach became Pastor General, though even before Mr. Armstrong's death there were many "Laodiceans" attending with the Church. Mr. Tkach's stay in power was characterized by the advancement and promotion of quite a number of men who really don't even have God's Spirit. Gradually Mr. Tkach built up a team of unrepentant administrators.

Gradually at first, and then later more forcefully, those who do have God's Spirit guiding them were forced out of positions of authority and influence. As they were forced out, so they were replaced by others who are unrepentant. Those truly converted administrators which Mr. Tkach "inherited" were gradually pressured more and more to compromise their convictions. This is not to say that they necessarily gave in to this pressure, but the pressure was being put on them nonetheless. Initial compromises that we were pressured to accept involved only insignificant "non-issues". But they were used to pave the way.

The importance with such very minor compromises over "non-issues" was not the compromises themselves; the importance of such very small compromises lay in THE PRINCIPLE of being willing to, at least sometimes, go along with compromise. This transgressed the principle of Luke 16:10 ...

He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and HE THAT IS UNJUST IN THE LEAST IS UNJUST ALSO IN MUCH. (Luke 16:10)

When Jesus Christ spoke these words, He obviously knew exactly what He was saying. And we, in our battle with Satan, should EXPECT Satan to want to coerce us into compromising with those things that we can convince ourselves are "THE LEAST IMPORTANT" as far as our obedience to God is concerned.

And that concludes our examination of all seven of the eras of the Church of God!

You should now have all the details filled into your chart. Read each column on your own. That will enable you to get the complete picture that God has revealed in these chapters. We are now at a point in time just beyond the timing of the story we have just read. Now we are at the point where SIX eras have fallen, and the seventh one which is in existence right now "must continue a short space" (like Rev. 17:10).

The minds of those to whom the message of Laodicea is addressed have undergone a process of becoming calloused. For many this started off with accepting changes that could be labelled as insignificant non-issues. They were, with some contempt, labelled by one man as "majoring in the minors". It should be noted that the man who used this expression has himself now "majored" in all of the changes that have been introduced. He is living proof that the process didn't stop with "the minor things". It never does ... as those who can see Satan's part in the whole picture will readily understand.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches!

Frank W. Nelte