

The Significance of John's Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia: Studies in Eschatology

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The apostle's address to the seven churches of Asia (Rev 1-3) are generally recognised by modern commentators to be an integral part of the book, however, much disagreement remains as to their nature and purpose. Dispensationalists, while recognising the relevance to the historical churches of Asia, project them forward as a prophecy of seven distinct periods of Church history, deteriorating from the purity of the Ephesian church of John's day to the laxity of the Laodicean church at the end of the age.^[1] On the other hand, many believe that history, in the sovereign purpose of God, is progressively advancing toward a climactic victory in which the Church is the divine agency of unparalleled blessing.^[2] In regard to the dispensational approach, Still feels that it

... would apply better to some ages than to others. For example, it is easier to fit the first and the last ages into this scheme than some of the others. It is perhaps better, therefore, not to follow any strict sequence of interpretation, but to see the seven messages to the seven churches as covering the varied states or conditions of the whole church in all ages and in all places between the first and second comings of Christ. Thus any of the seven messages can be applied to the church historically, in any day or in any place, locally or nationally.^[3]

In discussing these differing interpretations, Plummer states,

Of these we may safely set aside all those which make the seven letters to be pictures of successive periods in the history of the Church. On the other hand, we may safely deny that the letters are purely typical and relate to nothing definite in history. Rather, they are both historical and typical. They refer primarily to the actual condition of the several churches in St John's own day and then are intended for the instruction, encouragement and warning of the Church and the churches throughout all time.^[4]

To understand, therefore, the eschatological significance of the letters to the seven churches, they must be seen in their significance to the original audience and not in any way be artificially transposed to other periods of history so as to satisfy a particular 'millennial' preference.

In discussing the various 'millennial' views, Chilton comments,

In essence, the question of the Millennium centres on the mediatorial Kingdom of Christ: when did (or will) Christ's Kingdom begin? And once we pose the question this way, something amazing happens – something almost unheard of in Christian circles: Unity! From the Day of Pentecost onward, orthodox Christians have recognised that Christ's reign began at His Resurrection/Ascension and continues until all things have been thoroughly subdued under His feet, as St Peter clearly declared (Acts 2:30-36). 'The Millennium', in these terms, is simply the Kingdom of Christ. It was inaugurated at Christ's First Advent, has been in existence for almost two thousand years, and will go on until Christ's Second Advent at the Last Day. In 'millennial' terminology this means that the return of Christ and the resurrection of all men will take place after the 'Millennium'. In this objective sense, therefore, orthodox Christianity has always been post-millennialist. ...At the same time, orthodox Christianity has always been a-millennialist (i.e., non-millennarian). The historic Church has always rejected the heresy of Millenarianism (in past centuries, this was called 'chiliasm', meaning 'thousand-year-ism'). The notion that the reign of Christ is something wholly future, to be brought in by some great social cataclysm, is not a Christian doctrine.^[5]

If, therefore, the Kingdom of Christ in the Church can be viewed as the essential reality of the so-called 'millennium', the letters possess eschatological relevance. It must be appreciated that the term 'eschatology,' as F. F. Bruce maintains, has

broader connotations than just terminal events: “Eschatology may ... denote the consummation of God’s purpose whether it coincides with the end of the world (or of history) or not, whether the consummation is totally final or marks a stage in the unfolding pattern of his purpose.”^[6] Viewing, then, the reign of Christ in the Church as the consummation of the unfolding divine plan, any Apostolic writing addressed to the churches must possess eschatological meaning. The greatest eschatological event of history is the Incarnation/Resurrection/Ascension of Christ, to which the whole OT economy pointed. Christ, the King, now reigns in and through the Church which is the agency of increasing light and blessing in the world until all nations are discipled and taught of the Lord. Historically, the greatest antagonist to the Church’s mandate to teach and preach the gospel of the Kingdom is the messianic state, hand-in-glove with apostate religion. Both of these were the source of great pressure and suffering to the churches of proconsular Asia. This is the antichrist with which the book and the seven churches are contending.^[7]

Swete maintains that the Revelation “...is a genuine outcome of the time, written with a view to the special needs of a particular group of Christian societies; it portrays the life of those societies and ministers to their spiritual necessities. In form it is an epistle, containing an apocalyptic prophecy; in spirit and inner purpose, it is a pastoral.”^[8] Therefore, John the revelator is concerned to equip these Christians with the knowledge of Christ’s victory over every enemy and to show that he is “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). The book is a unity and as a whole is addressed to the seven churches of Asia: “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches ...” (1:11); and again at the close: “I Jesus, have send My angel to testify to you these things for the churches ...” (22:16). And to what purpose has John written: “... to show ... the things which must shortly take place ... for the time is near.” (1:1, 3); confirmed again at the close: “... These words are faithful and true; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must shortly take place.” (22:6). To say that these things, soon to take place, are in the distant future is to make a mockery both of the Asian churches’ predicament and of John’s pastoral word to them. The Revelation, in total, is written for the benefit and encouragement of these Christians who are in a cosmic struggle with spiritual forces that have already been conquered through the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, and whose temporal judgement in the Roman state and apostate Judaism is imminent.

In conclusion, any arbitrary division of the book that relegates chapter 4 onwards to some distant future, and the first three chapters a prophecy of Church history, is not only a denial of the unity of the Revelation, but also a denial of the letter’s relevance to a true biblical eschatology that views the Ascension and Enthronement of Christ, demonstrated through the agency of the Church, as the beginning of the Kingdom of God in the New Covenant. The churches of Asia confronted the historic enemies of Christ which would also be confronted by all future generations. Thus, John’s letters have relevance to the whole eschatological age of the Church and the Kingdom.

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References

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- ^[2]D.W. Richardson, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”. (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964), pp. 44-45
- ^[3]W. Still, “A Vision of Glory: An exposition of the Book of Revelation”, (Glasgow: Gray, 1987), p. 28
- ^[4]A. Plummer, “The Pulpit Commentary: The Revelation of St John the Divine”, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), Vol. 22, p. 56
- ^[5]D. Chilton, “The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation”, (Ft Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 494
- ^[6]F.F. Bruce, “Evangelical Dictionary of Theology”, ed. W. Elwell, (Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 1984), p. 362
- ^[7]H.B. Swete, “Commentary on Revelation”, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), p. 1xxviii-xciii
- ^[8]*ibid*, p. xciv

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