

## The Scriptural View of Church History? The Historical-Prophetic Interpretation of the Seven Churches of Revelation

by Mark Sidwell<sup>1</sup>

Understandably, Christians would like to use the Bible as a guide to studying history.<sup>2</sup> Christians rightly insist on the historical accuracy of Scripture, and they also insist on treating historical materials according to a biblical ethic of honesty, scrupulousness, fairness, and diligence, qualities any historian should strive to achieve when writing about the past.

Some Christians have laid out historical patterns that they believe are Bible-based. An obvious example is the image from Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2. A broad swath of interpreters agrees that the four metals in the image represent four consecutive major kingdoms. The Bible itself says that the Chaldean empire of Nebuchadnezzar is the gold head (v. 38). Although the other three are not identified in Scripture, interpreters normally see the silver as the Persians, the bronze as the Greeks/Macedonians of Alexander the Great, and the iron as the Romans. Even secular historians recognize the significance of these kingdoms in the ancient world.

Other approaches of historical periodization that appeal to the text of Scripture are less clear. One view that has twice experienced surges of popularity is the idea that history follows the pattern of the Creation week in Genesis. Appealing to 2 Peter 3:8 ("one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day"; cf. Ps 90:4), advocates of this view argue that there will be six thousand years of human history followed by a seventh period of rest as a "Sabbath" (variously interpreted as an era of peace, the Millennium, or eternity). Some in the early church gravitated to this view because they used the Septuagint as their standard translation of the OT. The numbers in the genealogies of Genesis along with other chronological data are greater in the Septuagint than those in the Masoretic Text, resulting in the calculation that the sixth "day" would end by AD 500.<sup>3</sup> Among the early proponents were reputedly Julius Africanus (c. 160–240), "the father of Christian chronography,"<sup>4</sup> and unquestionably Augustine of Hippo.<sup>5</sup> When the use of translations based on the Masoretic Text

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Jeff Straub, Brian Hand, and John Matzko for reading this article and providing helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>3</sup> See Gerhard Larsson, "The Chronology of the Pentateuch: A Comparison of the MT and LXX," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983): 401–9.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Wallraff, "The Beginnings of Christian Universal History: From Tatian to Julius Africanus," *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 14 (2011): 540.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, 546, 549, 550–51, in particular. Wallraff does note, however, that the extant fragments of Julius Africanus do not contain this scheme (551). See "The Extant Writings of Julius Africanus," in Alexander Roberts and James Donald, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (N.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 6:125–40; and Augustine, "The Catechizing

became more common, the chronology calculated led to an apparent conclusion of the six thousand years around the year 2000. As a result, some modern advocates revived the concept, particularly for calculations of prophecy.<sup>6</sup>

Another allegedly biblical pattern of history views the seven churches addressed by Christ in Revelation 2–3 as consecutive eras of church history. Trench labeled its supporters as “Periodists” who advocate a “historico-prophetic” view of the churches.<sup>7</sup> In these schemes, Ephesus (the first church described) portrays the earliest period of church history, and those described later proceed chronologically to Laodicea (the seventh church) picturing the final period of church history. Although one advocate called this understanding of the seven churches “The Scriptural View of Church History,”<sup>8</sup> a careful study reveals the scheme to be inadequate exegetically, theologically, and historically.

### *History of the Historical-Prophetic View*

The origin of the view appears to be medieval.<sup>9</sup> The earliest certain use of this scheme was among followers of the medieval prophetic writer Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202). Joachim, an Italian monk, was an oddity in medieval theology, advancing prophetic views that were essentially premillennial and futurist in contrast to the dominant amillennialism of his day. Furthermore, his writings speculated on the relation of prophecy to the understanding of history. He is perhaps best known for his trinitarian view of history, dividing human history into three overlapping eras that corresponded to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

One source of Joachim’s influence was his popularity among the Spiritual Franciscans, a minority of the order who demanded a return of the Franciscans to the ideals of Francis of Assisi regarding poverty and humility. Because the papacy backed the majority in modifying Francis’s pattern, the Spirituals also became fervent critics of the popes, identifying the pope as the antichrist. Joachim’s

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of the Unlearned,” sect. 28, in *Seventeen Short Treatises* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847), 218–19. I would like to thank one of my graduate students, Alwin Reimer, whose research on the Venerable Bede’s *De temporum ratione* helped me with the background for this section on ancient approaches to the Creation-day pattern.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Edgar C. Whisenant, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*, 44, and *On Borrowed Time*, 20 (published together), accessed 8 June 2023, Internet Archive, <https://ia801303.us.archive.org/19/items/ReasonsWhyTheRaptureWillBeIn1988PDF/14080011-88-Reasons-Why-The-Rapture-Will-Be-in-1988.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1863), 296. His “Excursus” on this view (291–312) is a helpful overview and critique of the history and nature of this approach.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Nash, “The Scriptural View of Church History,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 100 (January 1943): 188–98.

<sup>9</sup> Trench, 298, says some advocates have claimed to find this view among the Church Fathers but without offering any convincing evidence for a date that early.

<sup>10</sup> The acknowledged leader in studies of Joachim is Marjorie Reeves. See her *Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969). See also Delno C. West, ed., *Joachim of Fiore in Christian Thought: Essays on the Influence of the Calabrian Prophet* (New York: B. Franklin, 1975); and Matthias Riedl, ed., *A Companion to Joachim of Fiore*, Volume 75 in Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

ideas of judgment and renewal appealed strongly to the Spirituals and inspired their own studies of prophecy.<sup>11</sup>

Despite his focus on the number seven in prophecy, Joachim never treated the seven churches as ages of history, but his followers did. In fact, one writer included Joachim himself in the scheme, making him the terminus in the age of Sardis, which began with Charlemagne.<sup>12</sup> At least two writers developed the historical-prophetic view in their works: Franciscan Henry of Cossey (d. 1336) in his *Super Apocalypsim* and Augustinian Agostino Trionfo (1243–1328).<sup>13</sup>

Table 1. Examples of the Historical-Prophetic Interpretation of Revelation 2–3<sup>14</sup>

	Thomas Brightman	Campegius Vitranga	William Trotter	Clarence Larkin	C. I. Scofield	Charles Nash
<b>Ephesus</b>	Apostles to Constantine	NT to Decian persecution (250)	Apostolic age to the death of John	70–170	State of the Church in John’s day	Apostolic 30–100
<b>Smyrna</b>	Constantine to Gratian (382)	Decian persecution to Diocletian persecution	John to Constantine (311): Ten persecutions	170–312	John to Constantine (316)	Patristic 100–325
<b>Pergamos</b>	382–1300	End of Diocletian persecution to 700	Constantine to the establishment of the papacy (c. 700)	312–606	Constantine (316) to the rise of the papacy	Patronic 325–590
<b>Thyatira</b>	1300–1520	700 to the Waldensians (1200s)	C. 700 to the Reformation	606–1520	Rise of the papacy to the Reformation (1500)	Papal 590–1517
<b>Sardis</b>	First Reformation: German	1200 to the Reformation (1500)	The Reformation (perhaps concurrent with Philadelphia)	1520–1750	Protestant Reformation	Reformation 1517–1648

<sup>11</sup> See David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Reeves, 86. She commented wryly, “Thus Joachim himself achieved a place in one of those patterns of history which Henry of Cossey took so eagerly from him.”

<sup>13</sup> See Colin Hemer, “Seven Churches” in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 696–97.

<sup>14</sup> The view of Brightman is from his *A Revelation of the Apocalyp*s (Amsterdam: Iudocus Hondius & Hendrick Laurens, 1611), 50–105 *passim*. The views of Vitranga and Trotter are taken from E. B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticae*, 5th ed. (London: Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1862), 1:77. Larkin’s view is from his *Book of Revelation: A Study of the Last Prophetic Book of Holy Scripture* (Philadelphia: Clarence Larkin Estate, 1917), 20–29 *passim*. Scofield’s view is from the comments on Rev. 1:20 in C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 1331–32. Nash’s view is from his “The Scriptural View of Church History,” 188–98.

	Thomas Brightman	Campegius Vitringa	William Trotter	Clarence Larkin	C. I. Scofield	Charles Nash
<b>Philadelphia</b>	Second Reformation: Reformed (Swiss, Scottish, etc.)	Early period of the Reformation	The Reformation (perhaps concurrent with Sardis)	1750–1900	Faithful Christianity since the Reformation (concurrent with Laodicea)	Missionary expansion, 1648 to the present (concurrent with Laodicea)
<b>Laodicea</b>	Third Reformation: English	Later Reformation to 1700	The Church prior to the Second Coming	Since 1900	Lukewarm Christianity since the Reformation (concurrent with Philadelphia)	Rationalistic (concurrent with Philadelphia)

With the renewal of biblical study that accompanied the Renaissance and the Reformation, a new set of interpreters saw a pattern of history in Revelation 2–3. The view appealed to several English writers.<sup>15</sup> Thomas Brightman (1562–1607) identified the first four churches with consecutive eras up to the Reformation. However, after the condemnation of “Jezebel” in the Thyatira age (which Brightman interpreted as the fall of the Catholic Church), he divided the last three churches into phases of the Reformation: German (Sardis), Reformed (Philadelphia), and English (Laodicea).<sup>16</sup> (See Table 1.) Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614–87) provided one of the fullest and most influential expositions of the idea, although he did not outline his eras precisely.<sup>17</sup> Reformed writers also promoted the concept, notably Johannes Cocceius (1603–69), perhaps best known as the systematizer of covenant theology, whom Trench regards as the major popularizer of his era.<sup>18</sup> Later Dutch theologian Campegius Vitringa (1669–1723) promoted a version that seems to have been even more widely disseminated. (See Table 1.)<sup>19</sup>

With the nineteenth century came a surge in prophetic study that also gave new impetus to the historical-prophetic interpretation. One influential, relatively mainstream scholar who advanced the

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<sup>15</sup> Worth mentioning from this era is the scheme of famed scientist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), although his interpretation—like his theology in general—was rather eccentric. Newton placed all seven eras in early church history, beginning with Domitian and the Ephesus age in the late first century and identifying Laodicea with the era of Emperors Valentinian and Valens (late 300s). See Elliott, 1:77.

<sup>16</sup> *Revelation of the Apocalyp*s, 50–105 *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> Henry More, *An Exposition of the Seven Epistles to the Seven Churches Together With a Brief Discourse of Idolatry, With Application to the Church Of Rome* (London: James Flesher, 1669).

<sup>18</sup> Trench, 303–4.

<sup>19</sup> A curious footnote on the use of this framework is the Philadelphian Society founded in the late seventeenth century by Jane Leade. A mystic, theosophical group, the society took the name in part because of how they believed they fit into the prophetic scheme of history. See Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom’s Children: A Christian Esoteric Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 61. Note the even fuller discussion of the Philadelphian name in E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1931), 281, although Broadbent does not mention the unorthodox nature of the society.

view was German theologian John Peter Lange (1802–84). His influence in America was particularly widespread through the edition of his commentary on the Scripture translated and edited by Philip Schaff.<sup>20</sup> However, many major contributors to the spread of the view were writers in the growing dispensationalist school. The view found support among the earliest promoters of dispensationalism, Plymouth Brethren teachers such as William Trotter (1818–65).<sup>21</sup> Also promoting the view was Clarence Larkin (1850–1924), a Baptist pastor and skilled draftsman whose beautifully crafted charts of prophetic teaching appeared on the walls of classrooms in Sunday schools, Bible colleges, and seminaries.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, the greatest popularizer of the historical-prophetic view in modern times was C. I. Scofield (1843–1921), whose best-selling *Scofield Reference Bible* disseminated and popularized dispensationalism among generations of fundamentalist and evangelical Christians wherever English was spoken. So when Scofield advanced the historical-prophetic view in his comments on Revelation 1:20, he publicized the view perhaps as it had never been publicized before.<sup>23</sup> (See Table 1 for the specifics of his outline.)

Although the historical-prophetic view may be less prevalent now as in earlier years, it is still far from unknown. For example, Charles Nash (1888–1963) of Dallas Theological Seminary presented a standard exposition resembling Scofield’s (see Table 1), and James L. Boyer (1911–2003) of Grace Theological Seminary offered a somewhat more nuanced defense of the view.<sup>24</sup> Less reputedly, leaders of some unorthodox sects used the pattern to promote their own views.<sup>25</sup> Even today the historical-prophetic view retains a following among popular Bible expositors.<sup>26</sup>

### *Nature of the Historical-Prophetic View*

Why do supporters of this view believe it is a proper approach to church history? Advocates argue in part that the historical-prophetic scheme is valid because of its relationship to the number seven, which appears throughout the Book of Revelation and is obviously significant to the book’s interpretation. Boyer saw “that significance as representing completeness, fullness, the ‘whole’ of something.” In chapters 2–3, therefore, “this symbolic significance to the seven churches of Revelation points to this sevenfold picture as presenting in some way the whole of the church.” Boyer argued that this wholeness was obviously not all of the churches in John’s day, for there were far more than seven

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<sup>20</sup> Lange’s argument for the historical-prophetic approach is found in John Peter Lange, *James–Revelation*, 10:139–41, vol. 12 in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, trans. Philip Schaff (N.d.; reprint, Grant Rapids: Zondervan, 1960). This modern multivolume edition preserves the volume and page numbers of the original volumes.

<sup>21</sup> William Trotter, *Plain Papers on Prophetic and Other Subjects* (London: Pickering and Inglis, n.d.), 308–11.

<sup>22</sup> *Book of Revelation*, 20–29 *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1331–32.

<sup>24</sup> James L. Boyer, “Are the Seven Letters of Revelation 2–3 Prophetic?,” *Grace Theological Journal*, 6 (1985): 267–73.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong (1892–1986), leader of the cultic Worldwide Church of God, regarded his own ministry as the transition from Sardis to Philadelphia. See his sermon on Revelation 12, 18 April 1981, accessed 19 June 2023, <https://www.hwalibrary.com/cgi-bin/get/hwa.cgi?action=getsermon&InfoID=1335271765>.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., David Jeremiah, “The Seven Churches of Revelation in Church History,” accessed 19 June 2023, <https://davidjeremiah.blog/christs-message-for-the-seven-churches-of-revelation-and-today/>.

in existence. Nor did he think they represent seven types of churches, because there are more types than these seven. Almost by default and the process of elimination, one is left with the conclusion that the seven churches must represent the whole of Christian history.<sup>27</sup>

Another argument derived directly from the text is based on Revelation 1:19, where Christ says to John, “Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.” Viewing this verse as an outline of the book, some interpreters see chapter 1 as things John had seen in the past, chapters 2 and 3 as the “things which are,” and material from chapter 4 onward as things yet to come. In the historical-prophetic approach, the seven churches and “things which are” do not portray only conditions in John’s own day but rather describe all events from John’s day to the onset of things yet to come at the coming of Christ. The seven churches then are the description in symbolic form of events between Christ’s first and second comings.<sup>28</sup>

A somewhat subtler argument has to do with the selection of these seven representative cities. The argument is that Christ chose to address these particular churches because, despite their relative unimportance individually, they lent themselves to a larger purpose. Joseph Mede (1586–1638), for example, noted that the seven churches were not “the most famous Churches then in the world, as *Antioch, Alexandria, Rome*, and many other, and such (no doubt) as had need of instruction as well as those here named.” Therefore, he cautiously argued that “these *Seven Churches*, besides their *Literal* respect, were intended (and it may be chiefly) to be as *Patterns* and *Types* of the several Ages of the Catholick Church from the beginning thereof unto the end of the World.”<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the most common argument is that the scheme agrees with the evidence of history. Scofield wrote, “Most conclusively of all, these messages do present an exact foreview of the spiritual history of the church, and in this precise order.”<sup>30</sup> Although John Walvoord did not endorse the concept, he noted the weight of this argument: “What is claimed is that there does seem to be a remarkable progression in the messages. It would seem almost incredible that such a progression should be a pure accident, and the order of the messages to the churches seems to be divinely selected to give prophetically the main movement of church history.”<sup>31</sup>

One of the fuller defenses of this argument, and in fact the entire historical-prophetic interpretation, was by popular Bible expositor and teacher H. A. Ironside (1876–1951).<sup>32</sup> Noting that Revelation 1:20 refers to a “mystery” concerning “the seven golden candlesticks,” which are the seven churches, Ironside speculated on what this mystery might be. He told a “parable”:

Sometime ago, rummaging through an old castle, some people came across a very strange-looking old lock which secured a stout door. They shook the door and tried to open it, but to no avail.

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<sup>27</sup> Boyer, 270.

<sup>28</sup> See Arno Clemens Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible* (New York: Our Hope, n.d.), 9:214–22.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Mede, “Discourse 52. Revel. 3:19,” in *The Works of the Pious and Profoundly-Learned Joseph Mede* (London: Roger Norton, 1672), 297 (emphasis original). Boyer, 270, argued along similar lines.

<sup>30</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1331.

<sup>31</sup> John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 52.

<sup>32</sup> H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1920), 33–78.

They tried one way and another to move the lock, but could not turn it. By and by somebody picked up a bunch of old keys from rubbish on the floor and he said, "Maybe I can unlock it." He tried one key and it made no impression. He tried another and it gave a little; another and it gave a little more; and so on, but none would open the lock. At last he came to a peculiar old key. He slipped it into the lock, gave a turn, and the lock was open. They said, "Undoubtedly this key was meant for this lock."<sup>33</sup>

The "key"—the answer—to the "mystery" of the seven churches, he suggested, was to see "a prophetic history of the church for the entire dispensation." He compared the history of the church to each of the situations in the seven churches and said the key "fitted perfectly," concluding "There, the mystery is all clear. The lock has been opened; therefore we have the right key."<sup>34</sup>

### *Critique*

Despite these arguments, the case for the historical-prophetic position is weak.<sup>35</sup> The biblical data, which should be the heart of any argument over the meaning of Scripture, are far from definite. The appeal to the use of the number seven in Revelation and the Bible in general is an argument of some weight, but it by no means leads decisively to the idea of a historical pattern. "Seven" likely does communicate wholeness or completeness as in Revelation's pattern of seven found in the seals, trumpets, bowls, and much more, but that fact hardly proves that the "wholeness" the seven churches represent is clearly the history of the Christian church.

Likewise, the appeal to Revelation 1:19 does not clinch the case. The reference to "things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" may indeed provide the outline for the prophecy, but saying "the things which are" refers to the whole history of the church is an assumption. Elliott just as cogently argued that "the things that are" meant "the state of things in the Church *as they then were*" in the first century and that these chapters were not part of "things which shall be hereafter."<sup>36</sup> A possible interpretation of this phrase as encompassing the whole Christian era does not conclusively prove the idea true.<sup>37</sup>

What is supposedly the strongest argument for the view, its apparent congruity with the known course of the church's history, is not nearly so convincing as it appears at first glance. One problem is

<sup>33</sup> Ironside, 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Among those who have previously critiqued this view in addition to Trench was Robert L. Thomas, "The Chronological Interpretation of Revelation 2–3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124 (1967): 321–31; see particularly 323–27. Thomas briefly outlined shortcomings of the view and provided good citations both of proponents and critics. The essential content of this article is also found in his commentary *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 1:505–15. Even a defender such as Boyer noted weaknesses in the traditional arguments for the view (268–69).

<sup>36</sup> Elliott, 79 (emphasis original). Likewise, Trench, 308, thought the emphasis is "simultaneity" not "succession."

<sup>37</sup> One may argue along these same lines against Mede's idea that the very selection of these seven churches indicates that they have a larger purpose that supports the historical-prophetic view. For example, Trench, 294, allowed that the selection of these cities over more significant locations pointed to some fitness in considering them but did not consider this fact of a proof of the historical view.

evident on the surface: the diversity of the schemes. A survey of just the outlines described in this article reveals that they differ in how to delineate each period of history. Does the Ephesian era end with Constantine (Brightman), Decius (Vitringa), the death of the Apostle John (Scofield), or AD 170 (Larkin)? On what basis do we make this decision?<sup>38</sup> Neal noted that the overlap in periods that some interpreters suggest (one thinks of the schemes of Brightman, Trotter, and Scofield) also undermines the idea of the churches representing distinct historical periods. If anything, such overlapping suggests that the interpreter rather than the data shapes the interpretation of the supposed pattern.<sup>39</sup>

This diversity reveals the subjectivity that underlies the approach. Ironside viewed an apparent congruity of scriptural with historical data as the key that unlocked the mystery of the seven churches—we have only to look at the history of the church and then compare it to Revelation 2–3. Trench, however, anticipated this argument, noting that when a key opens a complicated lock, “it is difficult not to believe that they were made for one another. But there is nothing here of the kind.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the superficial appearance of congruity is subjective and therefore deceiving.

Part of the problem arises from misunderstanding the complicated nature of history and assuming too great a human ability to grasp it. Historians do not have access to all the data concerning a period of history and disagree on interpreting the data they do have. Although some followers of the nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke thought they could write “history as it really happened,” assuming that thorough study of available primary sources would lead to absolute historical truth, few historians today would profess to believe such a notion. The subjectivity of historical knowledge is all too obvious, regardless of the historian’s sincerity, care, or diligence.<sup>41</sup> If one knew that the Bible teaches a historical pattern of the seven churches by plain statement of that fact, then one could proceed with some confidence to organize the data of history by that pattern. But simply to assume that the pattern is correct and then to offer as proof the data of history that fits the pattern is circular reasoning. Boyer tried to avoid this problem by arguing that the seven churches are not the Church in general but only genuine gospel churches in each age,<sup>42</sup> but his interpretation actually makes the historical argument even more difficult to prove because historical evidence of such churches is painfully thin in periods such as the Middle Ages, as well as involving further subjective challenges in determining what is a “gospel church.”

Another problem for futurist interpreters such as Scofield is that the historical-prophetic view of the seven church repeats the problems of the historical approach to prophecy, problems which futurists cite as a shortcoming. Historical interpreters view the whole of Revelation as a symbolic picture of the history of the Church, identifying the various visions as representing the events of history. Futurist

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<sup>38</sup> Neal noted that “the fact that interpreters have not been able to agree which church matches which period seems to prove that there is not enough real evidence to connect each church with a specific period of history.” Marshall Neal, *Seven Churches: God’s Revelation to the Church Today* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1977), 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Trench, 308–9.

<sup>41</sup> A good discussion of the challenges of historical research and writing, from a Christian perspective, is Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Boyer, 272.



critics note that proponents of the historical approach need to regularly reshuffle events to keep their theories current with history as it continues to unfold. But by adopting a historical view of the seven churches, futurists undercut one of the strengths of their position and end up like historical interpreters trying to fit the course of history to their pattern and then make changes as history moves on. As Trench noted, the historical approach to the churches “would require readjustment and redistribution throughout, at once chronological and dogmatic.”<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, holding to a historical pattern of the seven churches in history militates against the idea of Christ’s imminent return. Christ’s return could not take place until the seven ages were complete. James Boyer noted this argument and offered a nuanced reply. He said that the nature of the seven churches was not an “explicit” prophecy expressly set down in the text but rather an “implicit” prophecy apparent only after the fact. Just as the OT prophecies about Christ’s incarnation and his Second Coming were not understood as separate events until Christ first came to earth, so the prophetic nature of the seven churches was not evident until time had passed and revealed the historic pattern.<sup>44</sup> Although this explanation eliminated the problem of denying the imminence of Christ’s return, Boyer’s approach still assumed that his generation could discern the pattern because history had clearly reached the last age. However, if Christ’s return remains some years in the future, then the argument has no weight, because only Christians of some future era could discern the meaning. We cannot recognize the pattern without first presuming the correctness of the view.

The historical-prophetic view also raises a question about interpreting the meaning of the churches. Elliott argued that the seven churches are intended to have universal application, as shown by the repeated exhortation, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”<sup>45</sup> Yet the historical-prophetic approach would limit such application for eras before the last because Christians in earlier ages could not know about churches after their own day and therefore not know how to understand and apply these passages.

Another problem with the historical-prophetic approach is the common assumption that the interpreter’s own era is the “Laodicean age,” the final period of lukewarmness and apostasy. Admittedly, as has been seen, not every interpreter of this school viewed himself as living in the final age, although virtually all were sure that the first three or four eras were already behind them.<sup>46</sup> Many interpreters assumed they were living in the final age, however, and there are significant ramifications to this assumption, one being that the course of history is downward. But what if the present era should happen *not* to be the last age. How would we know what the character of this age should be? Also, such interpreters tend to read their own situation into the whole era. Perhaps contemporary churches in the West are “Laodicean”: smug, satiated, rich, and lukewarm, but what objective, empirical

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<sup>43</sup> Trench, 301.

<sup>44</sup> Boyer, 269–70.

<sup>45</sup> Elliott, 79–80.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Lange, 10:189, cited the Catholic interpreter Bartholomew Holzhauser (1613–58), who saw himself in the Sardis age with the Philadelphia age perhaps in the “immediate future.” For a summary of Holzhauser’s approach, see Francis Mersman, “Bartholomew Holzhauser,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1910), accessed 29 June 2023, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07439b.htm>.

data exist for making such a generalization? Furthermore, do the non-Western churches count? For instance, do the house churches of China reflect a Laodicean lukewarmness?

### *Conclusion*

Although the historical-prophetic approach to the seven churches is problematic, those who affirm this view believe in the inspiration of Scripture, the certainty and supernatural character of prophecy, and God's sovereignty over history. Therefore, criticism of this view does not imply proponents are heretical or disobedient.

Still it is important to note the problems that can arise from a historical-prophetic interpretation of the seven churches. We could easily mishandle or misinterpret historical evidence if we try to force it into an invalid framework. Also, the tendency to classify one's own era as "Laodicean" can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and can contribute to negative assumptions about the course of history. Even if the aforementioned belief in inevitable decline is true, we would still need to know for certain where we stand in the prophetic calendar in order to apply this fact. Finally, it is important to let the Scripture speak for itself. Trench warned that "it will be good always to remember, that there is a temptation to make Scripture mean more than in the intention of the Holy Ghost it does mean."<sup>47</sup>

Positively, we ought to redirect our energies toward forming a valid Christian approach to history. Rather than focus on alleged patterns, we might lay out those qualities that Scripture outlines for the calling of a historian and for the nature of historical work. Believing as we do in an inspired, inerrant Bible given for our edification, we might study a passage such as Luke's preface to his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4) and see what it suggests about how we should write history. We could likewise use the data of Scripture as a firm basis for describing the course of history. We might, for example, look at Revelation 2–3 not as an outline for historical events but in order to study the seven churches for what they tell us about Christianity in the NT era. Such approaches would more firmly ground a Christian approach to history in what the Bible clearly reveals and teaches.

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<sup>47</sup> Trench, 292.