

SEVEN

THE SEVEN CHURCH PERIODS

Many Pre-Tribulationists believe that the 7 churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3, are symbolic of 7 periods in the Church Age. The promise of being kept from the “*hour of trial*,” which they interpret as a promise of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture, was made to the church of Philadelphia:

Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. (Revelation 3.10)

They argue that we are living in the period of the last true church. Therefore, Christians will be raptured prior to the start of the Tribulation.

Arguments for the seven periods of the Church Age

**Cyrus Scofield
(1843-1921)**

Dr. Cyrus Scofield came under the influence of James H. Brookes, pastor of Walnut Street Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri, who was a prominent dispensational premillennialist. In 1883, Scofield was ordained as a Congregationalist minister. He became the pastor of a small mission church, the First Congregational Church in Dallas, Texas (now the Scofield Memorial Church). The church grew from 14 to over 500 members before he resigned its pastorate in 1895. He believed the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation were symbolic of seven periods of the Church Age. He said the messages to the churches had a fourfold purpose. The fourth purpose is “prophetic, as disclosing seven phases of the spiritual history of the church from, say, A.D. 96 to the end” (*The First Scofield Study Bible*, p. 1331). He then explained what each church represented:

Again, these messages by their very terms go beyond the local assemblies mentioned. Most conclusively of all, these messages do present an exact foreview of the spiritual history of the church, and in this precise order. Ephesus gives the general state at the date of the writing; Smyrna, the period of the great persecutions; Pergamos, the church settled down in the world, “where Satan’s throne is,” after the conversion of Constantine, say, A.D. 316. Thyatira is the Papacy, developed out of the Pergamos state: Balaalism (worldliness) and Nicolaitanism (priestly assumption) having conquered. As Jezebel brought idolatry into Israel, so Romanism weds Christian doctrine to pagan ceremonies. Sardis is the Protestant Reformation, whose works were not “fulfilled.” Philadelphia is whatever bears clear testimony to the Word and the Name in the time of self-satisfied profession represented by Laodicea. (Ibid., pp. 1331-1332)

Scofield did not believe in the doctrine of *imminence*. He believed that Christ could not return until the Philadelphia period of the Church Age started. He also believed that four *warning signs* would take place before the Rapture: the appearing of Elijah, cosmical disturbances, the insensibility of the professing church, and the apostasy of the professing church (Ibid., p. 1349).

Arnold Fruchtenbaum

Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, founder and director of Ariel Ministries, an organization which specializes in the evangelization of Jews, gives 1648 as the date of the start of the sixth church period (*The Footsteps of the Messiah*, 1993, p. 48). If the “*hour of trial*” is the Tribulation, then the Lord could not have returned to rapture them (keep them from the hour of trial) until the Philadelphia church period started in 1649. (I believe the Philadelphia period began with the open door of missions, when William Cary sailed for India in 1792, F.K.B.)

Timothy LaHaye

Dr. Timothy LaHaye believes the 7 churches of Revelation are symbolic of 7 periods of the Church Age:

In my commentary on the Book of Revelation, I pointed out that the seven churches of Asia were selected out of the hundreds of young churches at that time because they were types of the seven church ages that would exist from the first century to the present. (*No Fear of the Storm*, p. 41)

LaHaye believes that the Philadelphia period of the Church Age began in 1750 and will continue until the Rapture. He takes the promise to the Philadelphia church that they would be kept from the “*hour of trial*” (Revelation 3.10) as meaning that the Church in the last days would be kept from going through the Tribulation:

This text represents Christ’s message to one of His seven churches, the church of Philadelphia. It must transcend the one little church of Asia to which he wrote, for the church of Philadelphia is extinct and the hour “which shall come upon the whole world” has not yet come. (Ibid., p. 41)

According to LaHaye’s own belief, the Rapture was not an *imminent* event until the Philadelphia period began in 1750.

Conclusion

The men who teach the doctrine of *imminence* should avoid writing and talking about the 7 eras of the Church Age. Teachers of *imminence* who claim that the 7 churches in Revelation symbolize 7 eras of Church history destroy their argument for

imminence. If the promise to keep the church of Philadelphia from the “*hour of trial*” (Tribulation) is a promise for us today, then the Rapture could not have taken place until at least the beginning of that era, around 1792. It is self-defeating for the teachers of the doctrine of *imminence* to teach this theory.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter Seven

1. If the 7 churches in the book of Revelation are symbolic of 7 periods of Church history, could Jesus Christ return at *any moment* since Pentecost?
2. Why could Christ not return before the period of the Philadelphia church?
3. Why should the men who teach the doctrine of *imminence* avoid writing and talking about the 7 eras of the Church Age?
4. Does the doctrine of *imminence* contradict Scripture and also the command by Jesus to “watch” for His return?

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