



Church Era's; Is it Biblical?

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Many in the Churches of God believe in church eras. One Major split from the Church of God even calls itself “The Philadelphia Church of God” saying they are of the Philadelphian era of the Church. Is the concept of “Church eras” in the Bible?

Back in the heyday of the Worldwide Church of God, Herbert W Armstrong, and his organization believed that they were the Philadelphian era of the Church, like Gerald Flurry does today. Flurry now calls the Worldwide Church of God, now called Grace International, the “Laodicean era.” Who is right? Herbert W Armstrong, whom Gerald Flurry practically worships? Or Gerald Flurry himself? What about none of them being right?

The First Century Church of God

In the first century the seven churches existed *contemporaneous* along a Roman mail route. These seven were those of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. But, “We are not to suppose that they were the only Christian Churches then in Asia Minor; there were several others then in Phrygia, Pamphylia, Galatia, Pontus, Cappadocia, etc” (Clarke's Commentary).

Robertson's Word Pictures adds, “There were churches also at Troas (Acts 20:5.) and at Colossal and Hierapolis (Col 1:1; Col 2:1; Col 4:13) and possibly at Magnesia and Tralles.” But why did Jesus single out these seven?

The JFB Commentary explains, “*These seven are representative churches; and, as a complex whole, ideally complete, embody the chief spiritual characteristics of the Church, whether as faithful or unfaithful, in all ages.* The churches selected are *not* taken at random, *but have a many-sided completeness.* Thus, on one side we have Smyrna, a Church exposed to persecutions unto death; on the other Sardis, having a high *name* for *spiritual life and yet dead.* Again, Laodicea, in its own estimate *rich and having need of nothing,* with ample talents, yet *lukewarm* in Christ's cause; on the other hand, Philadelphia, with but a *little strength,* yet *keeping* Christ's word and having an *open door* of usefulness *set before* it by Christ Himself. Again, Ephesus, intolerant of *evil* and of *false apostles,* yet having *left its first love;* on the other hand, Thyatira, abounding in *works, love, service, and faith,* yet *suffering* the false *prophetess* to *seduce* many. In another aspect, Ephesus in conflict with false freedom, that is fleshly licentiousness (the Nicolaitanes); so also Pergamos in conflict with Balaam-like tempters to fornication and *idol-meats;* and on the other side, Philadelphia in conflict with the Jewish synagogue, that is, legal bondage. Finally, Sardis and Laodicea without any active opposition to call forth their spiritual energies; a dangerous position, considering man's natural indolence.” (Emphasis added). These are chosen because they represent the spiritual condition of the ENTIRE CHURCH OF GOD! Jesus said to each church when he finished his message, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the **CHURCHES;** [plural]” (Rev 2:11). This was a message to the WHOLE CHURCH OF GOD! The spiritual condition of all the churches of God were found in these seven. So Jesus used them as an example to the whole church. “The number *seven* is fixed on as representing *totality.* These *seven* represent the universal Church of all times and places. See Trench's [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia]”

Predestination

Now that we know why Jesus chose these seven churches; that these seven represented the spiritual condition of the entire church at that time, and that its message is *for the whole church of God today*. If we try and *read into this church era's*, then we come across a problem of Predestination.

The church eras are as follows according to the old WWCOG:

1. The **Ephesus Church Era** was predominant from 31 A.D. to circa 135 A.D. The Church of James, Peter, Paul, and John, etc.
2. The **Smyrna Church Era** was predominant circa 135 A.D. to circa 450 A.D. The Church led by Polycarp, Melito, Polycrates, etc.
3. The **Pergamos Church Era** was predominant circa 450 A.D. to circa 1050 A.D. An especially persecuted Church.
4. The **Thyatira Church Era** was predominant circa 1050 A.D. to circa 1600 A.D. The Church during the Inquisition.
5. The **Sardis Church Era** was predominant circa 1600 A.D. to circa 1933 A.D. Discusses early history of the Seventh Day Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and COG-7th Day.
6. The **Philadelphia Church Era** was predominant circa 1933 A.D. to 1986 A.D. The old Radio Church of God and old Worldwide Church of God, now only a small remnant remains
7. The **Laodicean Church Era** has been predominant circa 1986 A.D. to present. These are non-Philadelphians who mainly descended from the old WCG.

There was another religious leader who thought he was part of the Philadelphian era of the church as well, and had his own time table of eras. Adventist and former Baptist preacher William Miller (1782-1849). This was before Herbert W Armstrong. HWA did not restore this truth, but read these old publications from the Adventist church, in which the Church of God Seventh Day was an offshoot, and this is the church that HWA came out of and started the Worldwide Church of God.

Miller's Scenario went like this:

1. **"Ephesus era"** – people of the first century.
2. **"Smyrna era"** – years 100 to 312.
3. **"Pergamos era"** – years 312 to 538.
4. **"Thyatira era"** – from year 538 to the 10th century.
5. **"Sardis era"** – 10th century to the "Reformation".
6. **"Philadelphia era"** – from the "Reformation" to 1798.
7. **"Laodicea era"** – from 1798 to 1843. (According to Miller, Jesus was to come 1843, and so, that year was "the end").

Now today we have Gerald Flurry claiming to be the Philadelphian era of the church of God. The Living Church of God is also proclaiming that they are the "remnant" of the Philadelphian era. Yet both of these churches say they are the *only* true church? Many others proclaim this as well. The Restored Church of God is another church that proclaims itself as the "remnant" of the

Philadelphian era, and the only true church of God-Pretty confusing? Yes! Is it because it's in the Bible? No! This is a result of *man's interpretation* of the Bible instead of letting the Bible interpret itself!

Ponder that question of "predestination." *For this has everything to do with church eras.*

Dire warnings of having their "candlestick removed out of its place" were made against the Ephesus church. *What choice did those people have if they are part of that era?*

Do you understand?

In other words, if you had the *misfortune* to be born, grow up and come into the truth of God, becoming converted and a member of God's church at some given "era," if that "era" fulfilled a part of the prophecies of Revelation 2 and 3, the church leaders of that "era" *caused it to have the peculiar character or nature* as revealed in Revelation 2 and 3, *what chance did you have?* Did FATE determine what would happen to you? If that's the case then you *do not* have a choice in the matter! This is totally contrary to what the Bible teaches-*you have a choice* when it comes to your salvation! *The concept of church eras takes away that choice!*

Or would you reason there could have been *exceptions*?

IF you reason there could be "exceptions" to the rule; if you reason that just because the "leaders" became corrupt, allowed the doctrines of the Nicolaitans, or "that woman Jezebel," to teach the members of the church to eat unclean meats and commit fornication, but that there were *exceptions*, meaning some scattered individuals *within the church* who did not go along with these false teachings; then *what are you saying?*

You are saying what is probably the *obvious* truth concerning ALL SEVEN of the "eras" or so-called "phases" of God's church!

But before summarizing this obvious conclusion, ponder that question of "predestination."

Was it mere blind FATE that anyone converted and becoming a member of the Church of God (Seventh Day), whether third or fourth generation family member, or new convert, was just *automatically* was consigned to the "Sardis era," and therefore was (and is) looked upon by Almighty God as spiritually "DEAD"?

If, on the other hand, you had the fortune to be born into a family that was members of the Worldwide Church of God-you grew up, came to Ambassador College and became a fruitful church member-was it your "good fortune" to end up as a member of the "Philadelphian era"?

Or, if you are a member of the Worldwide church of God but are *not* really studying, praying, overcoming-if you are *not* watching world events, and *not* truly close to God-are you one of the "Laodiceans" who will be left behind when the day of the "great escape" comes? Not if it is predetermined!

If you were converted and became a member of God's church and *you do everything according to the Bible with all your heart, mind, and soul*, but, because you were born in a certain era of the church, are still called spiritually "dead" because you are in the era of Sardis? Or Christ still calls you, "lukewarm" because you are in the Laodicean era? Or what if you don't obey God's word, and fall away from the truth, are you still faithful and "not denied his name" because you are in the era of Philadelphia?

Confusing isn't it? Well, man's doctrines put into the Bible makes it all confusing. This is one of the many problems of church eras, the problem of predestination. It's just not there.

The conclusion which you should logically have come to earlier is that there were (and are), no doubt, exceptions in EVERY church!

Consider the average local congregation for a moment.

Say you are dealing with a congregation of around 200 people in a Midwestern city.

At any given time of the year, there will be a small handful of people who have *just barely* been baptized, who are *brand new* in the truth!

If you remember how it was when you FIRST came out of this world, began to *hunger and thirst* for the truth of God, began hungrily *devouring* the Bible, and finally were baptized, had hands laid on you for the receiving of God's Holy Spirit, and went to your *very first feasts*, you remember what it means to be "in your *first love*"!

The "character" of the "Ephesian era" seems to be that of a church which is encouraged to regain its lost "first love"!

Perhaps *some few* in your congregation of 200 are powerfully attracted by some of the satanic entertainments-X-rated motion pictures, pornography and other assorted forms of licentiousness.

Perhaps you could say *they* are like those in "Thyatira" and have similar problems.

You might find a number of people in the congregation, such as a few elderly widow ladies, who truly seem to have the spirit of "brotherly love." Maybe they exemplify the attitude of 1 Corinthians 13. Surely they would be thought of as exemplifying the "Philadelphian attitude."

But would there be those who could be called "spiritually dead"? Tired "burnt-out" old Christians who are just "waiting it out" to the end?

Would there be a number who would be adjudged by the pastor to be "lukewarm" in their faith?

Of course!

ANY average, local congregation would be made up of hundreds of *differing* personalities, characters and levels of spirituality.

In other words, *each local church* might well exemplify EVERY ONE of the various difficulties, trials and tribulations, strong points or character of the “seven churches” of *Revelation 2 and 3!*

And THAT is the *true answer* to the whole question of “eras.” There are no eras—this message is for the entire church!

Remember, God’s Word says “he that hath an ear, let him hear what the spirit saith unto the churches” *plural!* (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). *All* members of the church are to heed the warning to all the seven churches! *None* is to listen exclusively to a warning to *his own* “era”!

More Problems

There are several other problems one must face when dealing with church eras; Chronology of church eras for example. How do we know when one era ends and the other begins?

Another example is the New Testament itself! The New Testament was written, according to “church era” believers, during the “Ephesian era.” The problem in the Ephesian era was that they “left their first love.” (Rev 2:4). Do you find anywhere in the New Testament *before* the book of Revelation, of any of the Apostles writing about the church leaving their “first love”? *If that was the main problem in this era shouldn’t there be a whole chapter or book in the New Testament that is dedicated to this problem?* Does this mean that the Apostles had that problem as well? Those that ate, slept, and communed with Christ, were willing to be put to death for their faith in Christ! Did they leave their first love? Or did they die for their love of Christ following what Jesus said, “Greater *love* hath no man than this, that a man *lay down his life for his friends.*” (John 15:13)? What does the Bible say? The Bible says they lay down their lives for Christ; they DID NOT leave their first love!

Another error is that at least some of the church eras *existed side by side and will continue to the Second Coming of Jesus.* Notice Jesus told Thyatira, “But that which ye have *already* hold fast *till I come*” (Rev 2:25). If this was an era of the church, *why speak of his second coming?*

Again, with Pergamos, he says, “Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will *fight against them with the sword of my mouth*” (v.16). If it was just about death, or persecution the language would have been different. But he is speaking of an event of his second coming, (Rev 19). If it was an era that was *to last to a certain time, and another was to come after that,* why mention his second coming when *he smites the nations?* Are these two churches to continue till the second coming? This is what it is indicating in these passages!

Here is another problem. To the Ephesian church, Jesus told them, “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, *and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.*” (v.5). If one era begins, and the other ends, and the church dies off, then should not all the candlesticks accept one, Philadelphia be removed? Yet God speaks *of only one, Ephesus.* What of the others?

There are too many problems trying to fit a chronology of church eras into these seven churches. The only thing prophetic about chapters 2 and 3 is what Jesus said, “He that hath an ear, *let him*

hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” We must take these messages of Jesus and apply them to our churches today, and hold fast till he comes. To stay faithful or the candlestick will be removed from the church of God today, and Jesus will not dwell in the church, and so on...This is the prophetic message of Revelation 2 and 3! It is for the whole church of God, and not certain eras of the church of God.

Lastly, take a Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance or a Vine’s Expository Words Dictionary, or even a Bible software program and search for the word “era” or “epoch.” It’s not in the Bible *when it pertains to the church!* These churches are reading into the Bible something that’s just not there. This is a doctrine of man and not from God.