

Identifying Modern Laodicea

Two of the Church Eras addressed in Revelation 2 & 3 have been described in various ways and at various times. A surprising array of deductions have been put forth to establish the credibility of one Organization over Another. Have we been as Clear-thinking as we should have been in our Presumptions?

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A number of evangelical churches recognize that the messages to the seven churches in Revelation's 2nd and 3rd chapters present a student of the Bible with more than one insightful consideration. First there is the obvious historical application of the messages to each of those seven actual congregations, second is the typical application where any church in any age (or any individual) could exhibit any of these seven characteristics. But it's a third consideration that's the most controversial, that these represent seven successive Church Eras extending in order through the entire Church Age.

Not an Exclusive Teaching

It was as a pre-teen in an evangelical Baptist Church in the mid-1950's that I was first made aware of the idea of 'church eras'. However, their series of 'successive' church identities and key developments that marked the transitions from one era to the next differed considerably from those that I later heard described by the Worldwide Church of God a few years later. The evangelical genre recognizes various developments within the protestant movement, where the Church of God excludes from its lineage those denominations that embraced various apostate teachings from Catholic or Protestant theology. Not the least of which is a rejection of Commandment-keeping and a Sabbath-keeping tradition which has existed from the earliest days to the present. Others include the immortal soul and the triune Godhead concept.

Now, one thing I will credit that Baptist Church for making clear is that they did maintain a distinct historical line of succession not from within the Catholic Church. They made a point of the fact that the true church was not a derivative of the apostate establishment that came into being after

the third century. However, there were sufficient theological commonalities, to some degree, to identify with the Protestant movement, but at arms-length. I recall one Baptist minister making a distinct point that the true church was not Protestant, it was not born of the protestant movement, its history was always distinct and separate of that. This was insightful in its own right, but one can't be sure that it's a view shared by all evangelicals.

Historical Succession

But, within either camp, one underlying concept is consistent: that the true church can be followed down thru the ages to modern times by observing the characteristics it was identified as having by Christ Himself in His messages to the angels of each of these seven churches in Asia Minor.

This of course led to the conclusion that the present church era has to be Laodicea, as that's the final era prior to the second coming. The Baptist conclusion, even in the 1950's, was that we today represent the Laodicean attitude. Considering our laid-back, prosperous condition since the end of World War II, that idea isn't all that incredible. The obvious tepid spirituality of modern believers easily reinforces the conclusion.

Though these two approaches are similar in certain respects, there's also a distinct difference. It's alleged that one can use these messages to identify which of the various church movements was or is the one true church in its day! Nowhere is this more strongly asserted than in and among the various worldwide groups that emerged from the now fractured parent organization.

It was upon this idea that the foundation was laid for a number of things that account for the situation we find among our various church groups today.

A Unique Tangent

As the worldwide organization grew and gained potency during the 1950's thru the late 1980's, the 'church eras' teaching was overemphasized and embellished with unique speculations. The point of doing so was to identify this one organization as being the **one true church**. One could easily verify that, we were told, by noting its 'brotherly love' as we could see exhibited among members. (Of course, that is not unique. It isn't hard to find churches that are far more loving than we were, but that's an aside.) We identified with this loving characteristic sufficiently to lay claim to the 'Philadelphia' identification. Never mind the realities!

But, more than this, the identification was used to keep the membership tightly enfolded within this one organization with the resultant claim that this is proof of it being the one true church. To be identified with or affiliated with any other church was to be in either a false church, or at best, to be of that other one: the lukewarm 'Laodicea'. The worldwide organization touted itself as being the true and the only Philadelphia. This furthered its 'exclusivist' stance and worked to keep the membership self-focused and 'loyal'. To do less, it was alleged, ones' salvation could be forfeit.

This served its purpose for a time, but later developments threw an unexpected curve ball into the crowd. Because, you see, that Philadelphia organization deliberately departed from its former belief system to embrace what had been previously deemed **rank apostasy**! This created a whole new set of considerations. The Philadelphia organization was then branded by a number of its former members as "Laodicean". That was convenient, though not accurate, if the description of them being 'lukewarm' was to be applied. The body of the former organization imposed its 'new' beliefs rather determinedly. There was little actual lethargy, at least from the administrative levels.

There was **no** lukewarmness. The reoriented entity was decidedly **cold**! And, as is now evident, its advocacy had been well entrenched within all along!

Downside Up

Now, with the doctrinal overthrow having been so

firmly imposed, how could anyone allege that same identification as before? Nor could one allege the same 'brotherly love' component considering all of the ill-treatment of those who held on to former teachings. A new momentum emerged at this point to re-identify the true Philadelphians. And, wouldn't you know, each separated group saw themselves as being IT, while regarding all others who separated as they did as being Laodiceans!

Not an Organization

You see, it was the misconception, that these seven messages were churches rather than eras. That laid the base for the earlier conclusions. They were written to churches originally, (under their historic application) but eras are spans of time, not religious organizations per se. One era can span a number of organizations, a number of generations and include multiple organizations simultaneously. They did in the past. Eras are eras, churches are churches. We should not blur the two. But the doctrinal overthrow of the 'parent' organization of this generation – if nothing else – gave rise to the need to re-identify who represented Philadelphia and who was that (by us despised) Laodicean entity.

It was especially curious to see the convoluted explanations that emerged after the new administration changed its organization's doctrinal paradigms so thoroughly. Here, what had been considered Philadelphia was now re-identified by its 'separatists' as Laodicea. The segment that came out of that Laodicean environment now pronounced themselves to be the true Philadelphians. Yet not one ounce of doctrinal fervor was added to the zeal level of the membership over what had been while in the original organization. Nor did those re-established organizations press them to have more, other than for them to exhibit the same degree of resolute 'loyalty' toward them that had once been required in their former group.

Strange Developments Indeed

So, Philadelphia was described as having become Laodicean and a new Philadelphia emerged by withdrawing from within what was now that Laodicean group. This has to be seen as a 'curious' reasoning process to put it mildly. While earlier the theology of the parent group had insisted that

‘no two church eras exist at the same time’, (to bolster its exclusivist position) that position was conveniently laid aside. The alternative considerations were unthinkable! More recent divisions that have occurred within the genre have produced similar identifications. I am aware of one organization, possibly two, that later emerged from within one of these re-identified Philadelphian groups, who then regarded themselves as the true Philadelphians, while labeling their former association now as having become Laodicea.

One Era Morphing Into the Next?

Did this situation exist in any previous church era? Did any one of them emerge from within their preceding era, or were each raised up as separate entities, consisting of all newly called-out peoples? Did any era ever ‘pass the baton’ to their successor era as was alleged recently? There’s no precedent of such a thing ever happening.

It leaves us with the question, WHO IS Laodicea really and who IS Philadelphia? At one time it was alleged that the Philadelphian era would extend right up to the time of the Church’s flight to a place of safety.¹ The Laodicean era was identified as that short period between the flight of the Philadelphians to the Second Coming, with that church being severely persecuted, and with many martyred nearly at the onset (in that they aren’t going to be protected). This was a potent tool to develop resolute loyalty in the ‘Philadelphian’ membership. No-one wanted to be found in that ‘other group’ and experience its tribulations!

Leaving aside the obvious flaws in such reasoning, such as the shortness of the time period described (only 3½ years) and the intensive persecutions to be endured by that remnant, (how can one be lukewarm under such extreme duress?),² unthinking members carried on with the assurance that all was well as it had been determined in this regard.

God’s Spirit Within

Where we might be deficient in our thinking is in

¹ Evangelist Gerald Waterhouse made these points very emphatically. Request the transcript of a 1980 sermon, similar to many given in his eleven around-the-world trips.

² Revelation 12:6; 14 & 17.

our underlying presumption. Some deem all church groups other than ‘theirs’ inferior, despite the one essential quality: The indwelling of God’s Spirit.

In order to be A church of God, God’s Spirit must be in them, even Laodicean people. “*If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his!*” (Rom. 8:9) Wouldn’t the converse also be true? Anyone who is called into one of the true churches of God, whether a congregation or an Era, he is one of God’s true Saints. Then, on the basis of what would we harbor a low regard toward such people? A simple answer that would make the most sense is that it allows one believer, in his own mind, to imagine himself elevated in stature over other brethren.

It is the opinion of too many, even yet, that ones’ chosen affiliation can make a person Philadelphian or Laodicean, without there being one iota of difference within ones’ character when making such a switchover! But, thinking **is** that shallow too much of the time. Laodicean today, Philadelphian tomorrow, or is it simply a matter of ones’ affiliation?

Indelible Characteristics

But what criteria do we use to determine who is a true Laodicean? Can a leopard change its spots? Would a change of its habitat make any difference? No, the spots go with the animal. A new habitat doesn’t change their markings! So why would a change of affiliation make any difference in the nature and character of an individual Christian? Frankly it doesn’t, and those who deceive themselves into thinking such a thing is consequential are simply being self-delusional. What we are is what we are. If we are Laodicean in attitude and responsiveness, it makes little difference where we plant our ample buttockials.

Identifying with one ministry over another in our time is no different than it was in the days of Paul, Apollos and Cephas. Those who regarded themselves as being ‘OF’ one of those or ‘OF’ another are just as carnally oriented as believers were in the first century. (see 1st Cor. 1:12 & 3:1-4) Is it all that different when someone in this age does a very similar thing? Are we not carnal. Paul asks?

Christ addressed the Laodicean condition in clear

terms. We need to consider their condition before making casual determinations as to ones' true assignment. His assessment of Laodicea was, "*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; I know thy works, that **thou art neither cold nor hot**: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because **thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot**, I will spue thee out of my mouth. 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: 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.*" (Rev. 3:14-18)

But to the previous era, Philadelphia, He said, "*And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; 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; 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**. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, ... to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. 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.*" (Rev. 3:7-10)

Now, what would it involve for a member of one group to transform their attitudes and their zeal to become the other? These characteristics are dramatically different! Yet we have people who think that to be 'OF' one era as opposed to another is a matter of simply re-identifying themselves with a different organization. A person's underlying zeal level isn't given a second thought.

How We Were Trained to Be

When we consider the general attitude among the membership of the late twentieth century, we are presented with some sobering realizations. Whatever personal enthusiasm there might have

been in individual members, we were all nurtured to become somewhat reticent in our expressions.

Having a ministry that acted as though it wasn't accountable to anyone, other than God, members were discouraged from 'knowing them by their fruits'. No amount of scrutiny was allowed toward the minister, especially the top-ranking ministry. Such was proclaimed to be tantamount to "judging God". The attitude was taken that God would not **allow** the minister to be or do anything wrong. And, if he did, God would correct him!

We were reminded that "God would never reveal anything to the likes of you!" This expressed the disdain held by the ministry toward the members. Being held in such a low regard bolstered our reluctance to respond as a true Christian should.

WE Need DO Nothing!

Such an approach made the membership pointedly non-responsive to even the most egregious things. We were submissive, we were passive, we were not inclined to discuss matters with anyone, even if we did become alerted to something amiss.

The membership, under pressure when needed, came to regard themselves as not responsible for anything. After all, the leadership – God's true ministry – was His sole responsibility, or so we reasoned. As a result, members exhibited no real concern for the welfare of Christ's Bride. Since we'd concluded that it wasn't our purview to monitor what was happening or respond to anything, it was declared to be 'left up to God'. While imagining ourselves to be 'in need of nothing' we extended that also to matters of great importance, such as 'holding fast' to the Truth and 'not denying His Name', as Revelation 3:8 commends Philadelphia for doing. We felt that since we needed nothing materially, by extension, we also needed to DO nothing responsively!

Thus, we were trained to be Laodicean, while not being aware of it. The joke was on us! (Or, at least, some of us.) Who's a real Philadelphian and who is a real Laodicean is a matter of zeal, how we respond to the mandate of our calling, to hold fast to the Truths once delivered to the true Ministers of God. It isn't by affiliation alone! 