

CHURCH HISTORY

Through the Eyes of Christ

By Norman Holmes

Chapter 1

GOD DECLARES THE END FROM THE BEGINNING

Studying church history can reveal to us many treasures and mysteries of the kingdom of God. In the almost 2,000 years since Christ declared, "*I will build My church,*" an amazing collection of events herald the glorious fulfillment of that prophecy. From the four corners of the modern world back into the pages of ancient times, church history records the riches of the wisdom, power, and love of God that have been displayed to the world.

Christians rightly spend much time studying in the Old Testament about how God worked with His people, Israel. However, church history now shows us what God has done through His people in more recent times and through the better covenant sealed in Christ's own blood. And whereas the Old Testament focused on what God did in only one nation, now we can see what God is doing throughout all the nations of the world! When we consider the importance of church history we can wonder why most believers have a very vague grasp on the subject.

Interpreting Church History can be Confusing

The main reason most Christians do not study more about church history is that they become confused by the different ways that people try to explain it. How can we clearly grasp the progress and meaning of church history? There are mountains of facts and stories available, how can they be simply put into a comprehensive framework? While some periods of the Church's progress and growth are easily recognized by most historians, even these are often interpreted as having very opposite significance. Because of this confusion the average Christian has usually given up on really trying to understand church history. It is easier to read about Israel in the Old Testament or the beginnings of the Church in the Book of Acts because the authoritative testimony of the Bible makes these areas of history much clearer to understand.

Even the wisest of Church historians are hindered by their human frailties and their denominational perspectives. This makes them usually see the Church as progressing up to and finding its highest fulfillment in their own church affiliation. However, these human perspectives limit the church historian from seeing the importance of everything else that our Lord is doing through the worldwide body of Christ. And what happens if members of their own denomination or movement have carried the torch of the testimony of Christ farther ahead than their group as a whole has obtained? These forerunners who may have birthed new revivals, movements, or denominations will then often be dismissed as unbalanced or misguided, and as having little value to the true progress of church history.

The Word of God can Guide Us

However, God has not left us to be as sheep without a shepherd. We do not have to be limited to our own human resources when we study church history. Psalm 119:105 tells us, *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* This means that the word of God can guide us in two ways: both in our present walk with God (as a lamp to our feet) and also in giving us future direction (as a light to our path). Although the Scriptures were completed shortly after the beginning of the Church, they can continue to give fresh revelation and guidance to the Church down throughout history until the second coming of Christ. Indeed, we are further encouraged that, *“The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day,”* Prov.4:18 NIV.

The Lord gave us a more specific promise to guide us when we seek to understand church history. He declared, *“Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,’”* Isaiah 46:9-10.

Here the Lord said that when we consider past events we can see the sovereignty of our God because He declares the end from the beginning. The Lord goes on to say that what He has prophetically declared in advance, He will also cause to come to pass.

When the Lord declared this through the prophet Isaiah, He was specifically revealing that in the future He was going to raise up King Cyrus to judge Babylon and rebuild Jerusalem, Is.46:11 & 44:26-45:4. However, the Lord has often throughout history revealed His sovereignty and reality by declaring the end of a matter from the beginning. This is one of the ‘ways of God’ that can help us to understand both the character and actions of God.

We can easily see this principle at work when we look at the Old Testament people of God. The Israelites were first organized into a nation under the leadership of Moses. Yet when the nation was founded, the Lord spoke through Moses to declare their end from the beginning. While he declared many prophecies about their coming future, Moses gave his most complete prophecy just before his death. This is called the Song of Moses and is recorded in Deuteronomy 31:28- 32:43.

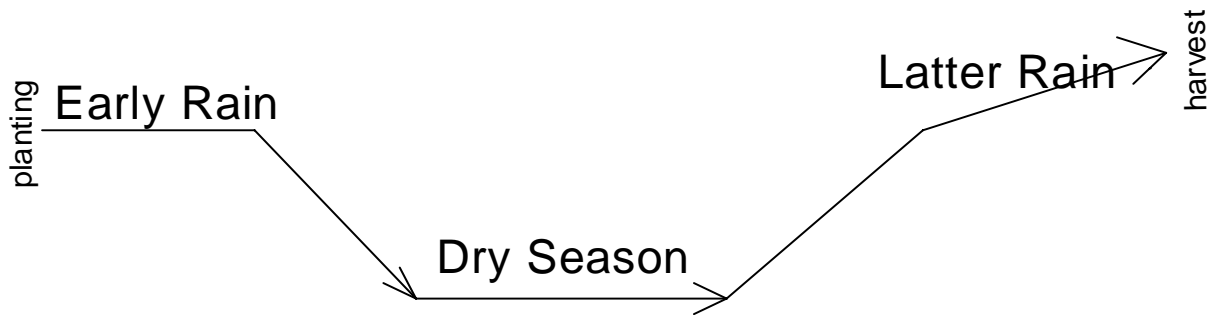
Moses warned the nation in this prophecy that their blessings would turn into judgment in the coming centuries because of their pride and idolatry. Then in the last verse of the Song of Moses he declared that the Gentiles would rejoice with Israel. The Apostle Paul quoted this in Romans 15:10 and said that it was becoming fulfilled during the Church age. For the very last declaration of his prophecy Moses then said that the Lord would provide atonement for the land and people of Israel. This will find complete fulfillment during the millennial kingdom of Christ after His second coming. Therefore we can clearly see through Moses' visionary prophecies that the Lord declared the end from the beginning concerning the history of the nation of Israel.

We can also see this same principle applied when we consider the New Testament people of God, the Church. A very concise prophecy of church history was given by our Lord when He declared, *"I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,"* Mt.16:18b KJV. In the Bible, 'gates' speak of more than just the defenses of a place. The gates of a city were also the place where the rulers sat and governed; where they formulated their battle plans and sent out their armies, 1 Kg.22:10-12, 2 Sam.18:4 & 19:8. The Lord Jesus was actually suggesting that not only would the Church grow to triumph over the powers of Satan, but that there could be many battles and enemy attacks along the way.

A more detailed yet still simple understanding of church history can be unlocked for us through two verses in the book of James. We read there in chapter 5 verses 7 and 8, *"Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."* Here we read that before the second coming of Christ our Lord will be like a farmer who will patiently wait for the harvest. The harvest speaks of when our Lord returns for His mature, fruitful Church. Yet before the harvest becomes mature there must first come the early and the latter rain.

The Three Agricultural Seasons of Israel

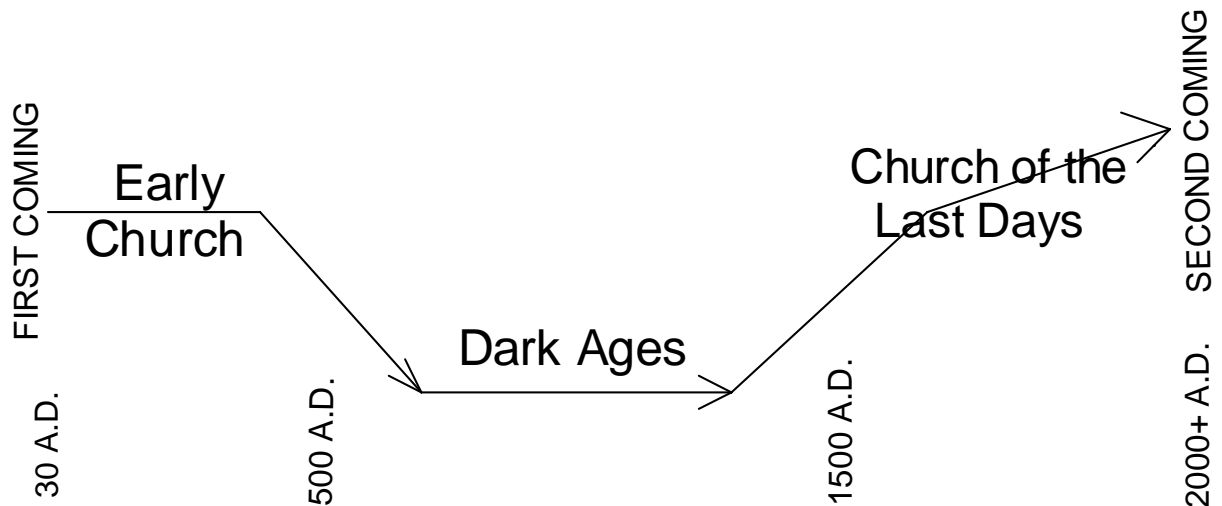
To understand this scripture properly we must first know about the yearly agricultural cycle in the land of Israel. Their planting season began in the fall before the 'early rain' started in October. After the crops had sprouted up came a dry season, which lasted until the 'latter rain' fell in March or April. This helped the crops to fully mature and become fruitful before the harvest time. These three seasons in their agricultural year could be simply portrayed as follows:



The Three Seasons of Church History

Moreover, the book of James parallels the agricultural cycle of Israel with the growth of the Church until the second coming of Christ. And when we look at the main ‘seasons’ of Church history, we can see that they have a distinct similarity with the three seasons in the Israeli agricultural year. These can be seen in the chart on the following page.

The Early Church started on the Day of Pentecost with the rain of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the Disciples of Christ. This was like the ‘early rain’ that prepared the way for the coming harvest. By the power of the Spirit the early Christians spread the gospel with miracles and healings, and through persecution and martyrdom. This outpouring of the Spirit lasted for centuries as Christianity took root and grew throughout many nations.



As the centuries progressed, the churches became successful, prosperous, and spiritually dry. This era has been termed the ‘Dark Ages’ or the ‘Middle Ages’ by historians. Bible Christianity was largely replaced by the religious doctrines and rituals of men. Ignorance

and superstition ruled the masses. This period of church history parallels with the dry season of Israel's agricultural cycle.

After the traditional church denominations of that time (Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Coptic, Syrian, etc.) had become spiritually stagnant and dry, the Lord again chose to begin pouring out His Spirit. These fresh outpourings of God's Spirit are like the 'latter rain' that prepared the crops in Israel for the harvest. Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, a multitude of organizations, revivals, and missionary movements have been restoring the Church and preparing a worldwide harvest for the second coming of Christ. This third season is what we will call 'The Church of the Last Days.'

So we can see through these three stages how church history parallels the agricultural seasons of Israel. Through this prophecy of James the Word of God gives us a simple yet clear outline, "*declaring the end from the beginning.*"

The Seven Parables and Seven Letters of Christ

Furthermore, there are two other portions of scripture in which the Lord Jesus Himself gave very detailed prophetic accounts about the history and growth of the Church. These are the seven parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 and the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

The seven parables in Matthew Chapter 13 clearly teach us about the growth of God's kingdom through the Church. The first four of these parables compare the kingdom of God with things that started small but which grew large: various seeds in the first three parables and leaven in the fourth. The next two parables are about gaining great treasures, while the last speaks about a great harvest. These parables are prophetic of the Church's development: it started small, grew to become the largest religion in the world, gained the treasures of Christ, and will end with a great harvest of souls. Indeed, Christ even clearly explained some of the prophetic significance of His parables. He declared that the culmination of these parables, the harvest, would be at "*the end of the age,*" followed by the judgment of the wicked and the establishing of His millennial kingdom, Mt.13:38-43 & 49-50. The Lord Jesus was clearly teaching that the growth of the kingdom of God would progress through the Church until the second coming of Christ.

We can also study how Christ's seven letters to the churches of Asia in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 have prophetic significance. While these letters were written to churches that then existed in the Roman province of Asia Minor, they are also prophetic of church history. In this way the Holy Spirit could illumine these chapters as "*a lamp to our feet*" to presently guide the churches it was addressed to, as well as to be a "*light to our path*" to guide the future Church down through the path of history, Ps.119:105. This could be one reason why the Lord Jesus repeatedly said throughout these chapters, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,*" Rev.2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, & 3:22. These words caution us that our Lord was saying more to the churches than would be simply understood. In a similar manner, most of the times when

our Lord declared in the Gospels “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear,*” it was concerning the seven parables of the kingdom, Mt.13:9 & 43, Mk.4:9, Lk.8:8. Do we have ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches? If so, we will find that He has a lot to say!

As we will study in detail in this series of articles, these seven parables and letters give us a clear outline of church history. Since we now live near the end of the Church Age, we can look back through history past and see the fulfillment of these prophetic words of Christ. We will see that the Church has progressed through seven stages of development. In this series we will study the Scriptures more than the writings of man so that we can clearly understand the significance of the development of church history. We do not have to be left to our own human powers of analysis to interpret church history. This is because our Lord Jesus Christ has already done it for us, “*declaring the end from the beginning.*” In this way we can study Church history through the eyes of Christ; to see how He, like Moses, prophetically looked ahead through the centuries to see the future and the end of His people.

Chapter 2

SEVEN STAGES OF CHURCH HISTORY

In this chapter we want to have a quick overview of the seven stages of church history. We will see them through the perspective of three sources or witnesses: the seven parables of Matthew 13, the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3, and the records of church history. These three witnesses are recorded in the chart on the next page. The chart’s three columns give us the essence of their teachings.

The word of God tells us that, “*By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established,*” 2 Cor.13:1. Having several witnesses gives confirmation, balance, and perspective. These are some of the reasons why God gave us each two eyes, two ears, and two feet!

Two of these witnesses about church history are the testimonies of our Lord Jesus. The first one He gave during His ministry on the earth. We can read in Matthew 13:2 that He began to teach His seven Parables of the Kingdom to the multitudes who followed him. As we will see, this perspective He gave was what the people of the earth would perceive concerning the growth of the kingdom through church history.

The other prophetic testimony given to us by the Lord was after He was already the resurrected Christ in heaven. Then He was not trying to show the multitudes of the people how *they* would view the Church. In the seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3, the glorified Christ- with eyes as a flame of fire- gave *His* heavenly view of the true condition of the churches. Through Christ’s earthly and heavenly views of the Church we can gain the needed balance and perspective to properly evaluate our third witness,

which will be the collected writings of the church historians. Together these three witnesses give us both a spiritual and accurate account of church history.

THE SEVEN PARABLES OF MATTHEW 13

The first column of the chart records the seven parables of Matthew 13 along with their basic spiritual interpretation. The first parable of the sower tells us about the beginning of the Church. Christ and His apostles went forth sowing the seed of the word of God. While their ministries had varying results in different places, the basic message of this parable is that the Church began to grow and become fruitful. This message corresponds with the first period of church history, which is almost universally recognized by historians as the *Apostolic Church*.

The second parable about the wheat and tares adds another element into the story of the growing church. An enemy (whom Christ reveals is the devil, v.39) scatters his tares (or, Satan’s corrupt disciples) within the Church. This gives us the basic spiritual message that the growing Church became filled with mixture. This corresponds with the second stage of church history, during which the Church became full of mixture with many corrupt doctrines and false believers. This happened during the period which most historians call the *Post-Apostolic Early Church*.

SEVEN STAGES OF CHURCH HISTORY

by the testimony of three witnesses:

7 PARABLES of Matthew 13 parable & meaning	7 CHURCHES of Revelation 2 & 3 name, interpretation, & spiritual condition	CHURCH HISTORY with approximate dates
1. THE SOWER (FRUITFUL)	EPHESUS “DESIRABLE” PURE	1. THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH 30 - 100 A.D.
2. WHEAT & TARES (MIXTURE)	SMYRNA “MYRRH” PERSECUTED	2. THE POST-APOSTOLIC EARLY CHURCH 100-313 A.D.

3. MUSTARD SEED (SUCCESSFUL)	PERGAMUM “EXALTED” BACKSLIDING	3. THE ‘CHRISTIAN’ ROMAN EMPIRE 313-732 A.D.
4. LEAVENED DOUGH (CORRUPTED)	THYATIRA “CONTINUAL SACRIFICE” BACKSLIDDEN	4. THE EARLY ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH 732-1054 A.D.
5. HIDDEN TREASURE (THE GOSPEL)	SARDIS “REMNANT” DEAD	5. THE POWERFUL R. C. CHURCH 1054-1517 A.D.
6. MERCHANT SEEKING PEARLS (TRUTHS RESTORED)	PHILADELPHIA “BROTHERLY LOVE” REVIVED	6. THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION 1517-1792 A.D.
7. NET CAST IN THE SEA (WORLD EVANGELISM)	LAODICEA “JUDGING of the PEOPLE” LUKEWARM	7. THE END OF THE AGE 1792- 2000+ A.D.

“By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established,” 2 Cor.13:1

The third parable of Matthew 13 is about the mustard seed that grew to become the greatest of the herbs. The basic message is about the success of the mustard tree, and it speaks of the success that the Church had over all the other religions when the Roman Empire became officially Christian. This third period we have titled *the ‘Christian’ Roman Empire*.

The fourth parable about the leavened dough tells us the message that this triumphant church then became full of corruption. While Christ did not directly interpret this parable, we will study soon how the Scriptures always give the interpretation for leaven as being false doctrine, sin, and corruption. This was the leaven that filled *the Early Roman Catholic Church* (as well as the other smaller denominations of that time) as their prosperity and power encouraged carnality and corruption.

The fifth parable concerns a treasure hidden in the field. Christ said that the field is the world (v.38), and Christ Himself is the treasure, 2 Cor.4:7. However, by this time in history the Lord could not easily be found in the worldwide Church. Christ and His salvation were hidden by all the errors and traditions of the churches such as salvation by works, prayer to Mary and the saints, icons and idols, indulgences, holy relics, infant baptism, transubstantiation, and the pope and priests forgiving sins. Yet even in these Dark Ages there were still a few who stumbled upon the hidden treasure of Christ, and these men (such as Wycliffe in England and Huss in Bohemia) often started great revivals until they were suppressed and buried by the traditional church. This was the period we

call *the Powerful Roman Catholic Church*, where the traditional church strongly controlled the nations of Europe by holy wars, the threat of excommunication, and by the Inquisition.

The sixth parable is about the merchant who was seeking costly pearls. Here we find that the treasure is not hidden and accidentally discovered, as in the last parable. Instead it is openly sought for, and found. This depicts the Church during the period of *the Protestant Reformation*, when reformers gained more of the riches of Christ and then started many revivals and denominations.

The last parable about the net cast into the sea was interpreted by our Lord Jesus. He declared that this would take place at *the End of the Age* in verse 49. The net with its great harvest of fish speaks of world evangelism, a theme that has only motivated the worldwide Church for the past two centuries. When the Church soon fulfills the Great Commission the Church Age will be completed, and our Lord Jesus Christ will return to establish His millennial kingdom upon the earth.

Throughout these seven parables we can see an accurate prophetic depiction of the flow of church history. The Church begun by Christ and His apostles grew rapidly but then had mixture added in. As the Church continued to grow it became the world's largest religion, yet it also became filled with corruption. But reform could not be suppressed forever, and the Church again arose to reform itself and focus in on completing the Great Commission. This is what Christ taught the people when He was on earth, and it is a perspective on church history that both the multitudes and church historians can easily grasp.

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION 2 & 3

On the other hand, the letters that Christ gave to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 show church history from a much different perspective. Jesus had begun to teach the parables of Matthew 13 to the multitudes while they sat at the sea. However, the seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3 were spoken by the glorified Christ in heaven, and were addressed only to the 'angels' of the churches. These letters prophetically reveal not how church history would be seen by people, but how the Lord Himself saw and judged the Church's true condition through its stages of development.

The first church addressed is the church of Ephesus. They were spiritually pure, a model New Testament church. As such they were typical of the good example that the entire *Apostolic Church* gave to history. "Ephesus" translates into English as "desirable" or "chief," which aptly describes how the early Apostolic Church was a desirable model or leader to the future centuries of the Church.

The second church was the church of Smyrna. As we will see, they were a church that would shortly suffer great persecutions and have many martyrs under the era of the *Post-Apostolic Early Church*. As such they became a good representative of the general condition of the Church of that second period. Their calling and testimony is even

suggested by their name, which comes from the spice, “myrrh.” As we will see, myrrh scripturally speaks of suffering and death.

Pergamum was then warned by Christ because of their idolatry and immorality. This prophetically showed what then began to happen during *the Church of the Roman Empire*, when the Church triumphed over the pagan religions only to begin backsliding in its popularity and prosperity. The interpretation of their name, “exalted,” speaks of their exaltation above the pagan religions, just as the mustard seed of the third parable also grew greater than all the other herbs.

The fourth church, Thyatira, was rebuked for their backslidden condition. A woman had brought great corruption into the church, just as a woman had put the corrupting leaven into the dough in the fourth parable. Christ called the woman ‘Jezebel’ after the great corrupter of the nation of Israel. However, we will also study how this woman is prophetic of the apocalyptic mother of harlots, Babylon the Great, who began to corrupt the Church during the time of *the Early Roman Catholic Church*.

The Lord told the fifth church, Sardis, that while they were a church of many works, they were spiritually dead. This is prophetic of the time of *the Powerful Roman Catholic Church*, which was spiritually dead although they multiplied religious works such as pilgrimages, crusades, penances, and vows. Yet Christ also encouraged the few true believers remaining in Sardis, which is suggested by their name which means “remnant.” During this period of church history we will see that there were still a few true believers who overcame corruption, false doctrine, and persecutions to walk with the Lord.

Philadelphia was the sixth church that Christ addressed. He found much to praise in this church, and offered them no warning or rebuke. This church named “brotherly love” was prophetic of the Church during the time of *the Protestant Reformation*.

The last church was the Laodicean church. While they said that they were rich and needed nothing, Christ declared that they were poor, blind, and naked. This is indicative of the spiritually lukewarm condition of most of the worldwide church now at *the End of the Age*. And just as the name ‘Laodicea’ means “the judging of the people,” such will be the end of the Church Age when Christ returns as the King and Judge of all the earth.

In our future articles in this series will now study these seven parables and letters in depth while looking at the major events of church history. If we understand the framework and teaching they give us, we will gain prophetic clarity with which to understand the unfolding events. Then we will truly be able to understand church history through the eyes of Christ.