THE SEVEN ERAS OF THE TRUE CHURCH OF GOD

A Historical and Prophetic Narrative Through Revelation Chapters 2 and 3

INTRODUCTION

The Unbroken Chain Across Two Thousand Years

From Pentecost to the Return of Jesus Christ

When Jesus Christ walked the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea, He made a solemn and unshakeable promise to His disciples. Speaking of the spiritual body He was about to establish—a body built upon the rock of His own divine identity and truth—He declared that the forces of darkness and death would never succeed in wiping it off the face of the earth.

> *"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* **— Matthew 16:18 (KJV)**

For anyone who opens a standard secular history book, tracing that promise across the last two thousand years can seem confusing. Mainstream religious history focuses almost exclusively on vast imperial institutions, wealthy cathedrals, political popes, and massive state-sponsored councils. Yet, when we look at the pages of the New Testament, the Church that Jesus Christ founded was never meant to be a wealthy, politically dominant superpower in this present evil world. Instead, Christ described His faithful followers as a humble, often persecuted minority—a 'little flock' that stands apart from the customs and compromises of worldly society.

> *"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."* **— Luke 12:32 (KJV)**

So where was that little flock during the long centuries between the death of the original apostles and our modern era? How did the true Church survive the fires of the Roman amphitheaters, the decrees of emperors, the dungeons of the Inquisition, and the spiritual

confusion of the modern age? The answer is preserved right inside the final book of the Bible.

In the first century, around 95 or 96 AD, the aged Apostle John was exiled to the rocky island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea for preaching the word of God. There, in a dramatic vision, the glorified Jesus Christ appeared to him and dictated seven personal letters to seven actual congregations located along a circular mail route in Roman Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey): Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Before dictating these messages, Christ explained that the vision encompassed things present and things yet to come.

> *"Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches."* **— Revelation 1:19–20 (KJV)**

While those seven congregations existed as literal local churches in John's day, students of Bible prophecy have long recognized that Christ arranged them in a specific geographical and chronological order. Together, these seven letters form a panoramic prophetic outline of the entire history of the true Church of God—spanning seven successive historical eras from the Day of Pentecost in 31 AD all the way to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Each era has its own distinct strengths, trials, surrounding world conditions, and spiritual warnings. As we examine the known historical facts alongside the exact words of the King James Bible, the hidden thread of God's faithful people comes vividly into focus.

ERA ONE

The Ephesus Era: The Apostolic Foundation and the First Love

c. 31 AD – c. 100–135 AD

The story of the true Church begins in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost in 31 AD. Following Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the disciples with the sound of a rushing mighty wind. Under the bold preaching of Peter, John, James, and later the Apostle Paul, thousands were baptized, and congregations sprang up across Judea, Samaria, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. This vibrant, foundational period is represented by the first church in Revelation: Ephesus.

> *"Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are*

> *apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted."* — **Revelation 2:1–3 (KJV)**

Doctrinal Purity and the Battle Against False Apostles

Historically, the city of Ephesus was a bustling, wealthy seaport and the commercial hub of Asia Minor, famous for the massive pagan temple of the goddess Diana. The Apostle Paul spent three years laboring in Ephesus, teaching the whole counsel of God so thoroughly that the word of the Lord spread throughout the entire province. In His letter to Ephesus, Christ commends this era for its tireless labor, endurance, and fierce commitment to doctrinal truth. During the first century, the original apostles were still alive to guard the flock, expose counterfeit teachers, and establish the written scriptures.

Even while the apostles were alive, however, a spiritual war was already raging behind the scenes. False teachers—such as Simon Magus, Hymenaeus, Philetus, and a group Christ specifically names as the 'Nicolaitans'—tried to infiltrate the Church. They sought to blend pagan philosophy with the gospel, turning the grace of God into an excuse to disregard God's commandments. The Apostle Paul warned the elders of Ephesus directly before his departure that wolves would rise up from within their own ranks.

> *"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."* — **Acts 20:28–30 (KJV)**

Similarly, the Apostle Jude urged believers to fight fiercely to preserve the original teachings delivered once and for all to the saints, warning that ungodly men had already crept into the congregations unnoticed.

> *"Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ."* — **Jude 1:3–4 (KJV)**

The Loss of the First Love and the Close of the Apostolic Age

As the first century drew toward its close, the original eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ passed away one by one—most dying as martyrs for their faith. The Apostle John was the last surviving member of the original twelve apostles, living until roughly 100 AD. As a new generation of believers grew up who had never walked with Christ or heard the apostles in

person, a subtle spiritual cooling began to set in. While the Ephesian era maintained outward orthodoxy and rejected false apostles, Christ issued a piercing rebuke.

> *"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. 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. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God."* **— Revelation 2:4–7 (KJV)**

The Ephesus era effectively came to an end with the passing of the last original apostles around 100 AD, and the final crushing of Judea by Rome during the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 AD. Following that revolt, the Roman Empire expelled Jews from Jerusalem and aggressively suppressed anything associated with Hebrew biblical customs, including the seventh-day Sabbath and the Passover. The stage was now set for a dramatic and bloody transition into the second era.

ERA TWO

The Smyrna Era: Persecution, Polycarp, and the Quartodeciman Stand

c. 100–135 AD – c. 450 AD

The very name 'Smyrna' comes from the Greek word for myrrh—a fragrant spice that only releases its sweet aroma when it is crushed. Prophetic history confirms that no name could be more fitting for the second era of the true Church. Spanning roughly from the early second century until the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, the Smyrna era was defined by relentless, crushing persecution from both pagan Roman emperors and an emerging counterfeit Christian hierarchy.

> *"And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death."* **— Revelation 2:8–11 (KJV)**

Notice that out of all seven churches, Smyrna is one of only two (alongside Philadelphia) against whom Jesus Christ speaks no word of rebuke. They were stripped of earthly wealth and social standing—living in 'poverty'—yet in the eyes of heaven they were spiritually rich.

Christ also exposes a sharp spiritual deception occurring during this time: 'them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.' Scripture explains that a true spiritual Jew is one whose heart is circumcised by the Spirit of God in obedience to His truth, whereas false professors claimed the covenant heritage of God while abandoning His commandments.

> *"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."* **— Romans 2:28–29 (KJV)**

Polycarp and the Defense of Apostolic Truth

At the forefront of the Smyrna era stood a remarkable leader named Polycarp, who served as the elder and overseer of the congregation in Smyrna during the first half of the second century. According to early historical accounts written by his own student Irenaeus, Polycarp had been personally taught by the Apostle John and had conversed with many others who had seen Jesus Christ in the flesh. Because of this direct link to the apostolic age, Polycarp fiercely guarded the exact doctrines and practices handed down by John.

Around 155 AD, Polycarp traveled to Rome to meet with Anicetus, the bishop of the Roman congregation, regarding a growing division over how to observe the death of Christ. The congregation at Rome had begun abandoning the biblical Passover—which God commanded to be observed once a year at evening on the 14th day of the first Hebrew month (Abib or Nisan)—and replacing it with a Sunday festival called Easter, named after a pagan fertility deity. Polycarp flatly refused to compromise, testifying that he had always observed the 14th of Nisan Passover with John the Apostle and the rest of the apostles, and that he could never change what they had delivered.

Shortly after his return to Smyrna, around 155 or 156 AD, Roman authorities arrested the 86-year-old Polycarp during a wave of imperial persecution. Brought into the crowded stadium before the Roman proconsul, Polycarp was ordered to swear by the fortune of Caesar and curse Christ in order to spare his life. His famous reply echoes down through the centuries as the very spirit of the Smyrna era: 'Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?' Unmoved by threats of wild beasts and fire, Polycarp was burned at the stake, fulfilling Christ's exhortation to 'be faithful unto death.'

Melito, Polycrates, and the Imperial Crackdown

Following Polycarp's martyrdom, the torch of the Smyrna era was carried forward by other steadfast leaders in Asia Minor, including Melito of Sardis and Polycrates of Ephesus. In the late second century, when Victor, the bishop of Rome, attempted to excommunicate all

congregations that refused to abandon the biblical Passover for Roman Easter, Polycrates wrote a bold response defending the apostolic faith. He listed the apostles Philip and John, along with Polycarp and Melito, declaring that all of them kept the Passover on the 14th day according to the Gospel, deviating in nothing, and adding the famous apostolic principle: 'We ought to obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29).

During the third and early fourth centuries, Rome unleashed brutal empire-wide persecutions against Christians, culminating in the ten-year Diocletian persecution from 303 to 313 AD—a period many historians link directly to Christ's prophetic warning of 'tribulation ten days' (applying the biblical day-for-a-year principle found in Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6). Countless believers were tortured, thrown to lions, or executed.

Then came a dramatic shift that proved even more dangerous to the true Church than pagan lions. In the fourth century, Emperor Constantine professed Christianity, legalized the Roman church, and convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. At Nicaea, the imperial church officially outlawed the observance of the 14th of Nisan Passover and mandated Sunday Easter across the Roman Empire. Roughly forty years later, around 363 AD, the Council of Laodicea passed Canon 29, declaring that Christians must not 'Judaize' by resting on the seventh-day Sabbath, and ordering them to work on Saturday and honor Sunday instead. Backed by the sword of the Roman state, the false church branded true Sabbath-keeping, Passover-observing believers as heretics, driving the Smyrna remnant underground and out of the major cities.

ERA THREE

The Pergamos Era: Dwelling Where Satan's Seat Is and the Paulicians

c. 450 AD – c. 1050 AD

As the Western Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century and the Middle Ages dawned, the true Church entered its third prophetic phase: the Pergamos era. In ancient times, the city of Pergamos was a grand capital of pagan worship, housing a massive throne-like altar dedicated to Zeus, temples to emperor worship, and the headquarters of the Babylonian mystery priesthood after it fled Babylon. Christ's letter to Pergamos reflects a Church surviving in the very shadow of entrenched religious and political tyranny.

> *"And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac*

> *to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”* — **Revelation 2:12–17 (KJV)**

The Rise of the Paulicians in Armenia and Asia Minor

During the Dark Ages, as the papacy in Rome and the imperial church in Constantinople consolidated immense political power, enforced image worship, and buried the scriptures in dead languages, a resilient group of believers flourished in the rugged mountains of Armenia and eastern Asia Minor. Secular and church historians refer to them as the Paulicians. While their enemies claimed they were named after a supposed founder, historical evidence indicates they called themselves simply 'Christians' and took the name Paulicians because of their deep devotion to the writings and teachings of the Apostle Paul.

Around 657 AD, a man named Constantine of Mananalis—who adopted the apostolic name Silvanus after Paul's traveling companion—received a handwritten copy of the four Gospels and the Epistles of Paul from a deacon returning from captivity in Syria. Reading the plain words of scripture for himself, Constantine-Silvanus began preaching and organizing congregations across Armenia and Asia Minor, establishing communities named after Paul's original churches, such as Macedonia, Achaia, and Philippi.

What the Paulicians Believed and Practiced

Because nearly all surviving records about the Paulicians were written by their bitterest enemies—Byzantine inquisitors and imperial chroniclers—historians must carefully sift through hostile accusations to uncover the truth. Even through the bias of their persecutors, the historical facts about the Paulicians reveal a striking portrait of apostolic Christianity:

First, the Paulicians held strictly to the authority of the written Bible as the sole rule of faith, actively encouraging ordinary men and women—not just priests—to read and study the scriptures for themselves. Second, they completely rejected the worship of icons, statues, relics, and the veneration of Mary and the saints, viewing such practices as blatant idolatry forbidden by the Second Commandment. Third, they refused to bow down to the physical symbol of the cross, viewing it as an instrument of torture upon which Christ was murdered rather than an object of worship. Fourth, they rejected infant baptism, insisting that baptism was only for repentant, believing adults who followed Christ's example of full immersion in water. Fifth, they rejected the priesthood, monasticism, and the hierarchical authority of Rome and Constantinople, recognizing Jesus Christ alone as the Head and High

Priest of the Church. Finally, historical accounts note that branches among them observed the seventh-day Sabbath and kept the biblical Passover rather than Roman traditions.

> *"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;"* **— 1 Timothy 2:5 (KJV)**

Imperial Slaughter and Compromise Under Pressure

The Byzantine emperors viewed the Paulicians as a grave threat to the unity of the empire. Constantine-Silvanus labored faithfully for twenty-seven years until an imperial officer named Simeon arrested him and ordered his own disciples to stone him to death. Remarkably, Simeon was so moved by the faith and character of the Paulicians that he converted to their faith himself, took the name Titus, and eventually died at the stake as a martyr alongside the very people he had been sent to destroy.

Later leaders, such as Sergius-Tychicus in the early ninth century, traveled tirelessly across Asia Minor for thirty-four years preaching the gospel. However, the Byzantine state responded with horrifying brutality. In the mid-ninth century, Empress Theodora launched a massive military campaign to exterminate the Paulicians, slaughtering an estimated 100,000 men, women, and children by sword, fire, and drowning.

Under this relentless pressure, some Paulicians made a fateful compromise. Instead of trusting solely in God for protection, a portion of the community took up military arms, fortified mountain strongholds like Tephrike, and allied themselves with neighboring Saracen (Muslim) forces to fight back against the Byzantine Empire. This turn toward worldly alliances and compromises mirrors Christ's warning to Pergamos regarding the 'doctrine of Balaam'—compromise with the surrounding world—and the lingering influence of the Nicolaitans. Eventually, the Byzantine emperors defeated their fortresses and forcibly deported tens of thousands of Paulicians westward into Thrace and the Balkans. Unknowingly, the empire scattered the seeds of truth directly into Europe.

ERA FOUR

The Thyatira Era: The Middle Ages, the Inquisition, and the Waldensians

c. 1050 AD – c. 1600 AD

As the transplanted Paulicians settled in the Balkans, their teachings spread like wildfire along trade routes into Bulgaria, northern Italy, southern France, and the Alpine valleys. Out of this movement emerged groups known to history as the Bogomils in Bulgaria, the Albigensians or Cathars in southern France, and most famously, the Waldensians (also called Vaudois) in the rugged valleys of the Cottian Alps between Italy and France. This

brings us to the fourth era of the true Church: Thyatira—the longest of the seven eras, spanning the height of the Middle Ages and the darkest centuries of the Papal Inquisition.

> *"And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass; I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works."* **— Revelation 2:18–23 (KJV)**

The Waldensians and the Passagini: Keepers of the Ancient Faith

Mainstream religious histories often claim that the Waldensians began around 1170 AD with a wealthy merchant named Peter Waldo of Lyons, France, who gave away his fortune and had the scriptures translated into the common language. However, the Waldensians' own ancient manuscripts—such as 'The Noble Lesson' (La Nobla Leyczon)—as well as the testimony of Roman Catholic inquisitors themselves tell a very different story. Inquisitors like Reinerius Saccho admitted in the thirteenth century that the sect of the 'Poor Men of Lyons' or Waldensians was far older than Peter Waldo, tracing their unbroken lineage back to the days of Pope Sylvester in the fourth century and even to the apostles themselves. When Peter Waldo began preaching in France, he simply joined forces with an ancient, pre-existing alpine church.

Among the Waldensians and related groups in northern Italy was a distinct branch recorded by medieval chroniclers under the name 'Passagini' (or Passagians). Historical records preserved by Catholic writers such as Bonacursus and Gregory of Bergamo explicitly document what the Passagini taught and practiced. They taught that the law of God—specifically the Ten Commandments—remained binding on Christians; they observed the literal seventh-day Sabbath (Saturday) instead of Sunday; they kept the biblical Passover rather than Easter; they abstained from unclean meats forbidden in Leviticus 11; and they rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, affirming that the Father is supreme and that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

The Waldensians were renowned across Europe for their extraordinary knowledge of the Bible. Trained missionaries—called 'Barbes' (meaning 'Uncles')—traveled two by two disguised as humble peddlers selling silks, jewelry, and goods. Once inside a household, they would quietly pull out handwritten portions of the Gospels and Epistles sewn into the

linings of their coats, sharing the word of God with hungry souls. Many Waldensian believers memorized entire books of the New Testament by heart so that even if inquisitors burned their manuscripts, the scripture remained locked inside their minds.

> *"Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee."* **— Psalm 119:11 (KJV)**

Jezebel, the Inquisition, and the Promise to the Faithful

In His message to Thyatira, Christ commends the faithful for their growing love, service, faith, and endurance ('the last to be more than the first'). At the same time, He warns against tolerating 'that woman Jezebel'—a prophetic symbol of a corrupt, dominating religious system that seduced believers into spiritual idolatry and compromise. During this era, the Roman papacy reached the zenith of its political and religious dominance, establishing the Inquisition to hunt down, torture, and burn anyone who dared to read the Bible in their own language or reject papal decrees.

Crusade after crusade was launched against the peaceful valleys of the Waldensians. Families were driven into freezing mountain caves, suffocated with smoke, thrown from cliffs, and burned at the stake. Yet, despite centuries of bloodshed, the true Church refused to surrender the core truths of God. To those who refused to bow to the false system, Christ gave a comforting promise.

> *"But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."* **— Revelation 2:24–29 (KJV)**

When the Protestant Reformation erupted in the sixteenth century, many Waldensians in the Swiss and Italian valleys were eventually persuaded by Protestant reformers to merge with the Calvinist and Reformed churches—abandoning several of their historic distinctives in exchange for political protection. Yet a faithful remnant held fast, carrying the baton of truth into the fifth era.

ERA FIVE

The Sardis Era: The Reformation Remnant and the Church of God (Seventh Day)

c. 1600 AD – 1933 AD

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century shattered the absolute monopoly of the medieval papacy and put printed Bibles into the hands of ordinary people. Many reformers bravely challenged indulgences, purgatory, and papal supremacy. However, they stopped short of returning to the full apostolic faith, retaining Sunday worship, Christmas, Easter, the immortality of the soul, and state-church alliances. Out of the turmoil of the Reformation, scattered groups of believers read their newly printed Bibles and rediscovered the seventh-day Sabbath. This marks the beginning of the fifth era: Sardis.

> *"And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."* **— Revelation 3:1–6 (KJV)**

Sabbath-Keepers in England and Early America

In ancient times, Sardis was a wealthy, complacent city that trusted in its steep cliffs for protection and twice fell to enemies because its watchmen failed to stay awake. Spiritually, the Sardis era had a 'name'—literally bearing the biblical name 'Church of God'—yet lacked spiritual vitality, power, and growth, with its remaining truths dangerously close to dying out.

During the 1600s in England, brave men like John Traske, Theophilus Brabourne, and Dr. Peter Chamberlen (who served as royal physician to King James I and King Charles I) openly preached and wrote books defending the seventh-day Sabbath. Many were imprisoned in London's Fleet Prison for refusing to conform to the Church of England. In 1664, a Sabbath-keeping believer named Stephen Mumford emigrated from London to Newport, Rhode Island—a colony founded on religious freedom. In December 1671, Mumford and a small group of believers established the first Sabbath-keeping congregation in North America.

Over the next two centuries, Sabbath-keeping congregations spread quietly westward across New York, Michigan, Iowa, Missouri, and Oregon. In the 1840s, the preaching of William Miller sparked intense interest in Bible prophecy across North America. Following the 'Great Disappointment' of 1844—when Christ did not return on the date Miller predicted—various groups re-examined the scriptures. While one branch followed Ellen G. White to form the Seventh-day Adventist Church, another group rejected her prophetic visions and extra-biblical writings, insisting on the Bible alone and organizing under the scriptural name 'Church of God' (later known as the Church of God, Seventh Day).

Strengthening the Things That Remain

By the early twentieth century, the Sardis era preserved vital foundational doctrines: the seventh-day Sabbath, the biblical name of the Church, the mortality of the soul (that the dead sleep in the grave until the resurrection rather than going immediately to heaven or hell), and the literal reign of Christ on earth. However, the movement was small, divided over administrative disputes, lacking strong evangelistic outreach, and blind to several key prophetic truths—including the annual Holy Days of Leviticus 23 and the true identity of modern nations in Bible prophecy. As Christ warned, the things that remained were weak and ready to die. Yet, faithful individuals within Sardis kept their garments undefiled, preparing the way for a powerful spiritual revival.

ERA SIX

The Philadelphia Era: The Open Door and the Worldwide Proclamation

1933 AD – 1986 AD

In the autumn of 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, a remarkable transformation began in a small rural schoolhouse near Eugene, Oregon. A former advertising executive named Herbert W. Armstrong—who had been led to study the Bible intensely in 1926 after being challenged on the seventh-day Sabbath and the theory of evolution—was ordained by the Oregon Conference of the Church of God (Seventh Day). As Armstrong studied deeper into the scriptures, he began restoring truths that had been lost for centuries, including the observance of God's seven annual Holy Days, tithing, and the true gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. When the established Sardis leadership resisted these restored truths, God opened an unprecedented door for a new era: Philadelphia, the church of 'brotherly love.'

> *"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, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them 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. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."* **— Revelation 3:7–13 (KJV)**

The Open Door of Mass Media

Like Smyrna, the Philadelphia era received no condemnation from Jesus Christ. Notice how Christ describes this era: it possessed only 'a little strength'—meaning it was never a massive, politically dominant mega-church—yet it faithfully kept God's word, refused to deny His name, and walked through an 'open door' that no human power could shut. That open door was the proclamation of the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the entire world as a witness using modern twentieth-century mass media, fulfilling Christ's own prophecy in the Olivet Discourse.

> *"And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come."* **— Matthew 24:14 (KJV)**

Beginning in January 1934 with a tiny local radio broadcast in Eugene, Oregon, and the first mimeographed issue of 'The Plain Truth' magazine in February 1934, the work of the Radio Church of God (later renamed the Worldwide Church of God) expanded steadily across the globe. Over the next five decades, the broadcast was heard on hundreds of radio and television stations worldwide, while 'The Plain Truth' reached a free circulation of over eight million copies in multiple languages. Ambassador College was founded in Pasadena, California, in 1947 (with additional campuses later established in Texas and England) to train ministers and lay members in the unified teachings of scripture.

Restoring All Things and the Promise of Protection

During the Philadelphia era, a coherent body of biblical truth was restored and proclaimed with clarity and boldness. This included the literal seven-thousand-year plan of God pictured by the weekly Sabbath and the seven annual festivals (Passover, Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles, and the Last Great Day); the understanding that human beings are mortal and must be born again into the literal divine Family of God at the resurrection; the true prophetic identity of the modern nations of Israel; and the warning of coming world trouble followed by the glorious return of Jesus Christ to rule all nations.

To those who faithfully hold fast to the truths restored during this era, Christ gave an extraordinary promise: protection from the coming 'hour of temptation'—the Great Tribulation that will test every inhabitant of the earth—as well as a permanent place as a pillar in the Temple of God in New Jerusalem. In January 1986, Herbert W. Armstrong died at the age of ninety-three, marking the close of the Philadelphia era's unified global work.

ERA SEVEN

The Laodicea Era: Spiritual Lukewarmness and the Final Warning

1986 AD – Present Day / Return of Christ

Following the death of Herbert W. Armstrong in 1986, a stunning and tragic upheaval unfolded within the Worldwide Church of God. Within just a few short years, the new leadership dismantled nearly every core biblical doctrine that had defined the Church for fifty years—abolishing the seventh-day Sabbath, rejecting God's annual Holy Days, abandoning the distinction between clean and unclean meats, adopting traditional mainstream Sunday worship, and embracing the doctrines of the world. Tens of thousands of members scattered, fracturing into hundreds of independent congregations and offshoot fellowships around the world.

This dramatic collapse ushered in the seventh and final prophetic era of the Church before Christ's return: Laodicea.

> *"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. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."* **— Revelation 3:14–22 (KJV)**

The Danger of Lukewarm Complacency

In ancient times, the city of Laodicea was a wealthy banking center, famous for its glossy black wool textiles and a renowned medical school that produced a special eye salve.

However, Laodicea had one major flaw: it lacked its own natural water supply. Water had to be piped in from hot springs miles away, so by the time it arrived in the city, it was neither refreshingly cold nor medicinally hot—it was sickeningly lukewarm.

Jesus Christ uses that exact local reality to describe the spiritual condition of His people in the final days before His return. Unlike Smyrna and Philadelphia, Laodicea receives no praise whatsoever. Having inherited vast doctrinal knowledge, books, recordings, and material prosperity from the Philadelphia era, Laodicean Christians boast internally that they are 'rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.' They know the Sabbath, they know the Holy Days, and they know the prophetic timeline—yet their spiritual zeal has grown cold. They are distracted by materialism, divided by internal politics, complacent in their prayer and Bible study, and blind to their own spiritual poverty.

> *"And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved."* **— Matthew 24:12–13 (KJV)**

The Personal Call at the Door

Yet even in this sobering final warning, the mercy and love of Jesus Christ shine brightly. Notice that Christ does not abandon the Laodiceans; instead, He says, 'As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.' Furthermore, notice how Christ addresses this era on an intensely personal, individual level: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.'

In a time when organizational unity has fractured and spiritual lukewarmness surrounds God's people on every side, salvation is not determined by membership in a corporate organization, but by each individual believer waking up, seeking 'gold tried in the fire' (true faith tested through trials), putting on 'white raiment' (the righteousness of Christ), applying spiritual 'eyesalve' (humble repentance and the guidance of the Holy Spirit), and personally opening the door to Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

He That Hath an Ear, Let Him Hear

The Unified Message for Every Believer Today

Across all seven letters in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, Jesus Christ repeats one unmistakable command seven times: 'He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.' While these seven eras trace the dramatic two-thousand-year journey of the true Church—from the apostolic zeal of Ephesus, through the bloody arenas of Smyrna, the mountain strongholds of the Paulicians in Pergamos, the alpine valleys of the Waldensians in Thyatira, the quiet endurance of Sardis, and the global broadcast of

Philadelphia, down to the lukewarmness of Laodicea—their lessons apply to every believer living at the end of the age.

Each era leaves us with a vital spiritual truth to guard in our own walk with God:

• From Ephesus: Never lose your 'first love'—keep your passion for God's truth and love for the brethren vibrant and alive.

• From Smyrna: Be faithful unto death, knowing that earthly poverty and persecution are temporary compared to the crown of eternal life.

• From Pergamos: Refuse to compromise with the false religions and worldly alliances of 'Satan's seat,' even when surrounded by hostility.

• From Thyatira: Hold fast to the plain word of God and reject every trace of 'Jezebel's' counterfeit traditions.

• From Sardis: Stay spiritually awake and watch, strengthening the truths of God so they never grow stagnant or die.

• From Philadelphia: Walk through every open door to support the preaching of the Kingdom of God, holding fast so no man takes your crown.

• From Laodicea: Reject lukewarm self-satisfaction, repent with genuine zeal, and open the door of your heart daily to Jesus Christ.

The true Church of God has never been the largest, richest, or most popular institution on earth. Yet, true to Christ's promise, the gates of hell have never prevailed against it. From the first century to the twenty-first, an unbroken chain of faithful men and women has guarded the Sabbath, the Passover, the Holy Days, and the commandments of God. Soon, the seventh era will come to its dramatic conclusion, the seventh trumpet will sound, and the overcomers from all seven eras will stand together in the Kingdom of God.

> *"Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus."* **— Revelation 14:12 (KJV)**
>
> *"And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city."* **— Revelation 22:12–14 (KJV)**