

The Christian Culture

The creation of the universe involved a burst of power, that has continued to conquer the endless darkness around it, in ever expanding glory.

There was also a burst of power during the dedication of the temple of Solomon. Upon that occasion, there were 120 priests ministering, who were driven out among the people when the glory of God filled the temple.

Many centuries later when the power of God gave birth to the church on Pentecost, 120 believers were also driven out into the streets to carry the glory and gospel into the surrounding world.

On that day, those who were touched by this power were similarly ignited, and experienced this power of creation for themselves. Jesus had spoken of this when he said: "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!"

Unlike the dissipating natural universe, the power in the church continues to increase. This fulfills the kingdom of God as portrayed by a stone cut without hands in Daniel 2. In that illustration God's kingdom grows until it conquers and replaces the kingdoms of this world. When we see God move we are witnessing creation itself taking place.

Jesus said in John that he only did what he saw the Father doing. He was taking what he saw in the heavenly realm and manifesting it into the natural realm. This principle is also available to believers as taught in Matthew 16. Here we see believers given the privilege of binding and loosing on earth that which has already been bound or loosed in heaven. We also see a parallel to this in the Lord's prayer.

On the day of Pentecost the power and exuberance of these initial faithful exploded into an astonished world. The immediate effect was intense and joyful evangelism. This became a flood of love and sharing, in which total strangers began to connect and worship together at every opportunity.

At the outset of the physical creation, the total budget of power that it would ever need was provided. In the case of the church however, more creation power flows as the church continues to expand. As a Biblical correlation, the Bible speaks of the present creation passing away, and a new heaven and earth coming into being. Also, Daniel chapter two speaks of God's kingdom growing, until conquering all else.

The energy released by God in creation immediately began to coalesce into matter. These masses would in turn begin to differentiate to the various elements, compounds, and structures that we see in the world today. Similarly, rudiments of organization began to arise within the church as certain leaders became recognized, and provisions were made to meet the needs of the impoverished among them. Since then, this power has continued to flow and adapt throughout the globe into every culture and language, and into every circumstance of need and blessing.

In 1 Corinthians Chapters 12 and 14, Paul describes a few of the more prominent supernatural gifts that have been provided to guide and nurture believers. In these chapters it is pointed out that the gifts are scattered among the various believers so that everyone has a part to play in the overall organism. Besides pastors and teachers who address congregations, the Bible teaches that all of us are to be engaged in ministering to each other. This is clearly taught in 1 Cor 12, Romans 12:4-8, and in other places.

The foundation

In Matt.16:16-18 we see that the church is built upon the bedrock of revelation from the father. A little caution here: The term Jesus uses as "Peter," means loose stone – building material. The term he

uses for the rock upon which the church is built means bedrock. The context indicated that this bedrock is revelation from the father (not Peter).

Ephesians 2:20 then takes us a step further, when it says: "...having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone." The ministries of apostles and prophets are all about taking the things revealed by God and expressing them into the church and the world. Furthermore Jesus himself is a part of this foundation – albeit the very cornerstone by which the entire structure is aligned.

We find a further differentiation among the ministries in Eph.4:11-12 "And He gave some *as* apostles, some *as* prophets, some *as* evangelists, some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ;"

We all have specialties – both naturally and spiritually, but some become more specialized and proficient in their callings. In these cases, the individuals themselves are gifts to the churches.

God can bestow any gift upon any faithful brother or sister at any time that it is needed. Paul makes this clear in 1Cor. 14 when he says that "all may prophesy." There are a couple of gifts in which I've been used only a couple of times in my life – and that's just fine. Using a hammer once in awhile doesn't make you a carpenter; similarly, being called upon to prophesy once in awhile does not make you a prophet.

The point is to be available and fearless in the face of whatever God calls you to do at any time. The spiritual gifts are only tools, that are available as needed. The ministries on the other hand tend to specialize in certain realms of authority.

As history and circumstances continually change, the power of God maintains a cutting edge of creativity that is never dull. In the miracles recorded in the Bible, there is no record of Jesus ever performing any of them twice in the same way. When Paul is speaking of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12, he names nine categories of spiritual gifts, and five body parts. We have no reason to believe that the list of spiritual gifts is any more complete than the list of body parts.

The variety of churches is endless, but there are certain commonalities. What is important is that we meet to encourage and bless each other through our respective gifts. Heb.10:24-25 is one of the passages that comments on this. "and let's consider how to encourage one another in love and good deeds, not abandoning our own meeting together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

As for the variety of scale, consider the mass evangelistic meetings that took place on the day of Pentecost and following. Contrast this with the words of Jesus in Matt.18:20 "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." As for locations we have the downtown public in Jerusalem, synagogues, various prisons experienced by Paul, and a river bank just outside Philippi.

Pentecost was one of three annual feast periods in Israel on which people came from all over the world to feast and worship. As pointed out above, those who believed began sharing their lives and meals together with new believers from other places. Later on when extreme persecution struck the church locally, believers who had been generous to others had connections all over the world to whom they could flee.

Besides the meals and sharing of earthly goods, creative songs and other forms of worship were a natural part of the celebration. Eph 5:19 declares: "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your hearts to the Lord;" Teaching and encouragement were also natural expressions of the Holy Spirit of God. Col 3:16 "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

There was also an ever-increasing variety of supernatural gifts taking place, as in James 5:14 “Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;”

Finally, consider 1Pet.4:10-11 **“As each one has received a *special gift*, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the multifaceted grace of God. Whoever speaks *is to do so as one who is speaking actual words of God*; whoever serves *is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies*; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”**

Lessons from the seven churches

The Bible declares in Revelation 14:6 “And I saw another angel flying in midheaven with an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation, tribe, language, and people;”

The concept of “eternal gospel” threw me for a moment when I considered that the gospel wasn’t even available until after Jesus, but then I realized: Salvation – the gospel – had always been available in Jesus, but until Jesus had been crucified it was through the ritual of blood sacrifice. It then occurred to me that long before the New Testament was ever written, the pathway to an ever-deepening walk with God had already been described. In this case it was written by the tabernacle that Moses had erected during the Exodus. This portable version of our spiritual journey eventually became cast in stone when Solomon built the temple. Even to this day, and even among the illiterate, this pathway of spiritual growth is illustrated by this model.

Years after the book of acts had been written, John (the last surviving apostle) addressed seven major challenges facing Churches. This work was included as letters written to seven different churches in the book of Revelation. The sequence of these letters is so beautifully woven into the various stages of Christian growth, and the sequence of components in the temple, that it provides a reassuring understanding of how we are to live and grow as Christians.

Since these churches all existed at that time and were within a radius of about 150 miles, they obviously didn’t represent all the nations and cultures of the future. So why were these particular churches selected as examples for us all? Although the towns did not represent a broad cultural sample, their challenges did. Even today the messages in these letters remain important everywhere.

Both individuals and churches are referred to as temples of the Holy Spirit in the Bible, so our understanding is enriched by comparing these letters with corresponding features of the temple.

In an effort to distill the essence of each letter, I do not fully quote each of the actual letters. But I do include the scriptural references, and strongly recommend that these are read while considering the comments on each of them below.

Note that each of these letters begins with a description of Jesus that was mentioned in chapter one. Then, after addressing the particular church’s issue with encouragement or advice, they each conclude with a “he who overcomes” clause. This speaks of the individual opportunity and responsibility that we all have to overcome – no matter what the rest of a church may be doing.

Although there was a sequence that a priest passed through as he approached the presence of God, the entire temple remained relevant the whole time. Similarly, we need to maintain all of these lessons in our hearts as we continue in our spiritual growth.

The church at Ephesus (Rev.2:1-7) is about love, and corresponds to the gate of the temple. Our walk with God begins with our response to the love God has expressed towards us. If a churches’ love goes cold, then regardless of whatever great things the church may be doing, it becomes useless as a

representative of God. In such cases, God's glory and anointing will be withdrawn from it. Because of this, this church represents the gate of the temple, and parallels salvation itself.

I remember being surprised the morning after having told God I wanted to follow him: I found myself feeling sorry for someone who everyone else was laughing at. The day before, I would have been laughing at her like everyone else. This discovery of new love within my heart gave credence to my very tentative and shaky faith.

The church at Smyrna (Rev.2:8-11) Rev.2:8 And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: Jesus identifies himself in this letter as the one who has experienced death and resurrection, and the letter relates to the challenges facing new believers, as they leave the culture of the world and begin their journeys into the kingdom of God.

The first item encountered after entering the temple courtyard was the altar upon which the carcass of the sacrifice that was slain outside the gate was consumed by fire. The very name, Smyrna, comes from a spice used in anointing a body for burial.

Smyrna is encouraged to hold fast during persecutions and betrayal as they departed from their previous culture. For us, this may involve the loss of friends, overcoming sinful habits, and rejection by family members. Only the life (represented by a portion of the blood) continued onwards into the temple.

The church at Pergamum (Rev.2:12-17) had doctrinal issues, and coincides with the bronze basin of water that we encounter next in the temple. This represents cleansing by the Word of God. The Bible is the straight edge by which all valid doctrines may be measured. We need to be constantly studying and applying it in order to maintain our spiritual direction, and to expose false doctrines. Rational understandings are important here. These are represented by the natural light of day in the surrounding courtyard.

Rev.2:17 "...To the one who overcomes, I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows except the one who receives *it*."

Manna was the bread that came down from heaven and fed the Israelites during their journey through the wilderness. Being hidden, would suggest that these understandings may not be available through rational scholarship. As you go on into the holy place (hidden from the courtyard) the first thing you encounter is the showbread.

Consider also, that a stone is building material, and the name is a personal secret between you and Jesus that relates to your place in the body of Christ. Nobody but you and Jesus will really understand how you fit in to the body of Christ.

The church at Thyatira (Rev.2:18-29) relates to bread baked fresh daily and displayed inside the first room of the temple. This area was illuminated by the oil in the menorah, which represented the lighting of the Holy Spirit. This is a realm of supernatural insights, gifts, warnings and understandings that are not derived directly through scholarship or rationality.

Rev.2:20 "But I have *this* against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols."

Be aware that not all spiritual phenomenon are Godly. Even within the church we must discern and confront performances that are clothed in spirituality, but are in fact of fleshly – or even demonic origin.

Rev.2:24 "But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say; I cast upon you none other burden."

We need to be careful to not become fascinated with occultic mysteries, nor impressed by great showmanship, as is presented by some ministries.

12:26 And he that overcometh, and he that keeps my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations:

Although in Psalms 2:8, this authority is generally assumed to be referring to Jesus, it becomes clear in Rev.2:26-27 that this authority also applies to believers who overcome in the spiritual realm.

There is indeed spiritual authority that comes with godly spiritual gifts when they are properly deployed. So listen to, ask, and obey God carefully, and he in turn will provide you with the spiritual backup to empower you in anything he directs you to do.

Sardis

Revelation 3:1 says “...He who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, and yet you are dead.’”

Sardis corresponds with the seven lamps on the menorah that gave light to the holy place. Many popular churches focus upon fellowship, and reassure their congregations of salvation well.

But as Christians we are called to go beyond these necessities and into more perilous territory. Hebrews 6:1-2 puts it this way: “Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about baptisms and laying on of hands, and about the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.”

In Revelation 3:3 they are warned to “Remember therefore how thou hast received and didst hear; and keep *it*, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.” We are in fact to actively live as lights and ambassadors of the kingdom of God within the dark and crumbling world around us.

In Revelation 3:5, Jesus declares “He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.” This is extremely serious. Can we get around the suggestion that those who do not overcome might have their names blotted out of the book of life?

Philadelphia

Revelation 3:8 “I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have followed My word, and have not denied My name.”

Philadelphia related to the altar of incense that was just before the veil that separated the holy place from the ark of the covenant. This veil was ripped from top to bottom upon the crucifixion of Jesus.

God provides additional opportunity to those who use the spiritual gifts that He has already given them (power), are obedient to his words, and who are unafraid of being known as Christians.

In verse 10, Jesus promises: “Because you have kept My word of perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of the testing, that *hour* which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth.”

Believers who have remained faithful in their testimony and service to God will have already proven themselves, and will receive protection from the times of testing that will come upon the world. God gives us supernatural guidance and protection as increasing mayhem and disasters continue to stress the world around us. This will also have its prophetic fulfillment in the part of the church that will be protected in the wilderness during the final 3-1/2 years in chapter 12, while “the rest of her seed” in 12:17 remain available to persecution by the dragon’s people.

Laodicea

Rev.3:15-17 says “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth. Because you say, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked:”

Perhaps the worst state a Christian can be in is idle and satisfied with their spiritual walk. The church at Sardis thought that they were alive when they were dead. This one thinks they are rich when they are poor. The fact is, that neither of these churches knew the truth. The common root problem is to evaluate ourselves by anything besides knowing and obeying the word of God.

God provides us with a little help in this in verse 19, where he says “ Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.” Believe me: We are far better off to repent voluntarily, than to require his loving discipline.

Finally, in verses 20 and 21 we read: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. 21 The one who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat with My Father on His throne.”

Even when we feel we have done everything we can possibly do, the door before us is the one to our innermost hearts. This is one only we can open. We must invite Jesus in to view and cleanse the innermost crevasses of our thinking, emotions, and hidden preferences. Three verses later in Rev.4:1 John sees a door standing open in heaven – we open the door to our hearts, and then Jesus opens the door to his throne room!

To summarize:

Lessons taught on spiritual growth by the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, and by the corresponding stations of the Tabernacle:

1. We are awakened to love, and to the opportunity for a meaningful and eternal life.
2. We endure major challenges as we move from earthly priorities and interests into Godly ones.
3. We become equipped rationally by pursuing Godly knowledge through the Bible.
4. We receive supernatural insights and gifts as needed for our daily lives.
5. We are to evangelize and impact the world around us.
6. We pursue greater territory and levels of ministry.
7. We invite Jesus to expose and refine the thoughts and desires of our innermost beings.

The teachings and practices of the Tabernacle established a culture that would guide the children of Israel as they entered the promised land and conquered it. These practices then provided an identity that has endured to this day. The principles and lessons cast in the Tabernacle continue to guide us as well.

The values and commands of the above letters have not changed – nor will they until God calls us to himself. Meanwhile, He has given us all the instructions and Holy Spirit access we will need to guide us and protect us through the conquests and testings that will take place in the coming times.

What is the relevance today of prophecies that may or may not be fulfilled within our lifetimes? Two millennia of expectancy have come and gone since the book of Revelation was written, and here we are, still waiting. But during those years there have been examples of almost everything you could do to a person having happened to believers. These believers have stood and defied the worst that Satan could throw at them. We have little to fear that has not already been defeated.

Indeed, as a result of persecuting Christians, the world will be beset with judgments like they have never seen before. Like the plagues of Egypt, these judgments will be selective upon those who defy

God. The historic Biblical and prophetic patterns alike, demonstrate that God's judgments bring freedom to God's people.

Revelation 12 even parallels the pattern of the Red Sea crossing, in which believers are given places of safety and God's provision. We see in this case that Satan's attempt at pursuit will be swallowed by the Earth itself.

As believers we need to face the fact that some levels of persecution are inevitable, and that we are to respond with love, wisdom, and intercession no matter what.

Prophetic Overview

The Empire Age

As mankind began to multiply, a population was reached where casualties from regional conflicts began to slow its growth. At this point, God ordained a sequence of five global governments to reduce these conflicts. Daniel chapter two describes this prophecy as a statue of gold, silver, brass, iron and a mixture of iron and clay. By today, four of these empires have come and gone (Babylon, Medes and Persians, Greece, and Rome), so now we are awaiting the rise of the fifth and final world government.

This prophecy also spoke of the kingdom of God growing during the period of these five empires. God's kingdom will eventually overpower the earthly governments and replace them.

As we navigate these current and future times we can be reassured that God has ordained them and that he remains in control. So the promises of provision, protection, and purpose remain active as we choose to love God and follow his leading during these terrifying times that we will face.

But there will come a time when God withdraws his hand from the protective governments that he has provided. We see this prophesied in Daniel chapter seven, and also in Revelation chapter six. It will start with a rebellion against this final God-ordained kingdom.

In Daniel chapter two, this final empire is described as divided, and in chapter seven it is described as very brutal and oppressive in conquest. But chapter seven also describes an insurrection within it, wherein three of the ten regions involved will rebel against this final kingdom.

The kingdom itself is mentioned in Revelation six as a conquering rider on a white horse. This rider is followed by a rider on a red horse, who ignites rebellion throughout the world. The bloodshed from the resulting civil war, along with the famine and disease that follow, will decimate the global population by twenty five percent. This will be the result of no more than God unleashing what people will do to each other.

During that period, Christians will become increasingly targeted. Then Revelation speaks of a second phase of disasters that will respond to the cries of the saints to deliver them, and rescue them from those persecuting them. The form of these judgments will be convulsions of the earth itself, plus massive strikes entering through the atmosphere.

A third wave of catastrophe will originate from the spiritual realm and specifically target only the oppressors. The selectivity of these two judgment periods will mirror the plagues that delivered the Israelites from Egypt.

The death toll for phases two and three will be one third of the remaining population. Together, the total decline in human population due to human behavior and God's judgments, will be half of those who were alive before the red horse of Revelation six.

There will then be a pause in chapter ten of Revelation, as creation takes a breather and prepares for a final three and one half years."

Prophetic accounts of a final period of three and one half years are described in chapters eleven, twelve, and thirteen in Revelation, these focus upon different categories of detail.

Remember that the church has repeatedly been called the temple of God in the New Testament, as we consider John measuring it in chapter eleven. But he is told to leave out the courtyard, since it will be trampled under foot by the gentiles for three and one half years.

We would then expect to see two parts of the temple remaining, but remember that the veil separating the two indoor rooms was torn from top to bottom by God himself upon the crucifixion of Jesus.

In Revelation twelve we see the church clothed (as opposed to exposed) by the light of the sun. In Matthew twelve we see that the church is built upon the bedrock of revelation from the father. In Revelation twelve we see the woman standing on the moon, which is revealed by light from the sun.

When Satan is cast out of the spiritual realm in this chapter, he goes after the woman on earth. But she is evacuated out of reach for three and one half years. So then he goes after the rest of her children – the courtyard Christians, the five foolish virgins.

As indicated in Revelation chapters twelve and thirteen, Christ returns three and a half years after this persecution begins.