

The Church They Couldn't Destroy

Herbert W Armstrong Jesus prophesied, "I will build my church."

That Church, foretold Jesus, would never be extinguished. "And the gates of hell [the grave] shall not prevail against it" ([Matt. 16:18](#)). Christ's Church is to last through all ages!

It has. It is here today, doing the Work of God!

World looks at the wrong church

Strange to say, almost everyone — for these past 19 centuries — has been looking in the wrong place for the Church Jesus built.

What really happened — after A.D. 70 — to the Church of the Bible? Let's turn back, for a moment, the pages of history. How did the Church Jesus built come to be where it is today?

A great yawning gap — an unbridgeable chasm — lies between the apostolic Church Jesus founded and the earliest beginnings of today's professing Christian churches. Nearly all the writings of that period after A.D. 70 have perished. But Bible prophecy remains — and the slanders of enemies!

Where has the true Church been for these 1,900 years?

Few have realized that within the first three chapters of the book of Revelation is condensed an amazing prophecy revealing more than 1,900 years of Church history!

A prophecy hidden in Revelation

Listed in time order here are the past epochs of God's one true Church, together with an astounding description of the Worldwide Church of God today.

Almost no one understands these prophecies relating to the Church Jesus built. Most churches and their commentaries ignore these prophecies, explain around them or deny they have any prophetic meaning. But why?

Could it be that these prophecies expose counterfeit Christianity?

God's Church is a spiritual body. It is composed of those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, those who obey and teach God's commands ([Rev. 14:12](#)). Revelation 1 to 3 lays bare the whole course of that Church.

God's Church did not grow big and become a powerful organization, exerting powerful influence on the world. It is described in the prophecy of Revelation 12 as a persecuted church.

That visible organization calling itself "Christian" and ruling over the nations during the Middle Ages was not God's Church. It is the church described in Revelation 17 as a fallen woman dominating the political rulers of this world.

The true Church continued, a tiny "little flock," almost unnoticed by the world, almost unknown to later historians.

The Worldwide Church of God has consistently taught through the years that the message for each of the churches is for the whole Church throughout time.

That is, the spiritual state or attitude of each of the seven churches is a lesson for all. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" ([Rev. 2:7](#), [11](#), [17](#), [29](#), [3:6](#), [13](#), [22](#)).

The Worldwide Church of God has also taught that the letters to the seven churches are not dead history, as some scholars have proposed. They are a message for God's Church in every century. A prophetic history of 1,900 years of experience of God's people!

Missing history of Church foretold

The true Church did not die after A.D. 70! It has continued to this day.

The Jerusalem Church of God began as the mother church, the headquarters church. In about A.D. 69 that church and others from Judea arrived in the town of Pella, east of the Jordan River.

The Pella congregation still called itself the Jerusalem church. Its chief elder was still pastor of "Jerusalem," in exile because of the Jewish wars with Rome.

In the first 38 years, as congregations and conversions multiplied, the distant churches had frequently appealed to the authority of the mother church in Jerusalem. But now a period of declining zeal set in for the whole Church. Why? Because Jesus had not returned at the height of the crisis over Jerusalem in A.D. 66 to 70 as many expected. This condition was foretold in the prophetic messages to the seven churches.

Meanwhile, in the Greek world to which the apostle Paul was sent, Antioch became a secondary headquarters.

It was equally accessible from Jerusalem and Syria, as well as from the Greek-speaking area in western Asia Minor. Paul, Barnabas and other leaders continued to work in gentile lands in Asia Minor from Antioch. Even long after apostolic days, Antioch remained a chief center.

But where was Paul's later headquarters when he went to Europe? Ephesus! See [Acts 19:1, 10](#) and [I Corinthians 16:8](#). It was from Ephesus that "of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" ([Acts 20:30](#)).

Ephesus was so important a city on the Aegean Sea that it naturally served as the later headquarters of the Ephesian era, to which it gave its name. It was not coincidence that Christ chose Ephesus ([Rev. 2:1](#)) to represent the first era of the Church.

John, last survivor of the original 12 apostles, and the Philip who had originally been a deacon, both died in Ephesus, according to Greek tradition.

About A.D. 90 Roman Emperor Domitian began the second imperial persecution. John was imprisoned on the isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, where he received the Revelation and the command to write it down. John was finally released.

Jesus Christ highly commended the first (or Ephesian) era of the Church for its labor and patience and goodness ([Rev. 2:2-3](#)). The Ephesian era had early to face false apostles — men seeking to build up a following for themselves.

But Christ also had something against this church era. They had left their first spiritual love (verse 4). Christ threatened to remove the church out of its place!

This was done physically, in type, even before the prophecy was written, when the Jerusalem headquarters church was transferred to Pella. It was done spiritually when the authority and respect in which this mother church had been held was stripped from it in A.D. 135 after the second major Jewish war with Rome.

At the time John penned these words around A.D. 96, Jesus Christ already knew the performance record of the church at Ephesus. That church congregation was chosen by Christ, the Head of the Church, as a type of the entire Church in apostolic times. Jesus did not use the Jerusalem church for this purpose because John's headquarters was not at Jerusalem or Pella, but Ephesus.

The Ephesus church had let down. It had not continued its work to all nations after A.D. 69 ([Matt. 28:19](#)). It is significant that after his release John trained Polycarp elder of Smyrna, a city near Ephesus in the province of Asia. And according to [Revelation 2:8-11](#), Smyrna follows Ephesus!

Polycarp and Polycrates, elders at Smyrna in the second century, are the last leaders of the Church in this part of the world of which we have any record.

Interestingly, too, the literal city of Ephesus also suffered the stern sentence of the living Christ. "If you will not repent, I will move your candlestick out of its place."

In later years, the site was completely deserted. The local population moved to a higher location more than a mile to the northeast, which is today called Ayassoluk in Turkish. That name itself is a corruption of the Greek words for "John, spokesman for God"!

Leadership shifts to Smyrna

At neighboring Smyrna, Polycarp presided over the Church of God for half a century after John's death. Polycarp stood up boldly for the truth while many fell away and began having fellowship with the Catholic bishops of Rome.

History relates that following the example of Peter, Paul and John, Polycarp wrote many letters to congregations and individuals, though all these have perished, save one in an edited version.

In old age — he was about 85 — Polycarp journeyed to Rome over the matter of Passover. His mission was not a success. The bishop of Rome, Anicetus, observed communion on Sunday. He would not be dissuaded.

The following year Polycarp was burned to death by a mob in Smyrna.

The name Smyrna means "bitter." And bitter, indeed, was the era of the Church that it symbolized!

1,260 years in the wilderness

Christ revealed in His prophetic letter to the Smyrna era that persecution was to come in a specified period of 10 years' duration ([Rev. 2:10](#)). (See the "day for a year" principle in [Numbers 14:34](#).)

This prediction has been completely misunderstood by most people. Most everyone has applied it to the wrong church! Eusebius (Eccl. Hist., VIII, 15, 16) correctly mentions that the 10 years were fulfilled in the last great pre-Constantine persecution (that of Diocletian and Galerius) in 303 to 313. The persecution lasted on Rome only three years. In the eastern Roman Empire it lasted 10 years. And that is where God's people were!

But the true Church was not stamped out of the Roman Empire. That was accomplished when Constantine established "Christianity" as a state religion by the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325, and then issued edicts favoring his brand of Christianity and anathematizing all others.

Eusebius, always a supporter of Constantine, explicitly states that Constantine expelled all other churches from the Roman Empire or exterminated them beginning in A.D. 325.

The next 1,260 years find the Church of God centered in Armenia (the region of eastern Turkey today), and later in Alpine Europe as the churches of Pergamos and Thyatira.

About A.D. 650 God raised up an inspired leader to correct His people and to spread the Gospel. Constantine of Mananali (not to be confused with Emperor Constantine) was a well-educated man. He was given a gift of portions of the Bible.

Upon studying it, he was utterly amazed at the truth he found revealed in it. Soon he was preaching and, with the help of trained evangelists, was ministering to tens of thousands now being converted and put into the true Church.

The world calls these "Pergamos" Christians, whose ancestors had fled to Armenia, Paulicians – just as it called the "Smyrna" Christians Ebionites – and the "Ephesus" Christians Nazarenes and heretics. In its original Armenian, the word Paulicians meant "a follower of wretched little Paul."

After the Arabs began to contest the Byzantine power over Armenia, about A.D. 650, persecution drove some Paulicians to hide in Moslem territory. About 750, the emperor Constantine Copronymus reconquered the upper Euphrates region from Armenia and removed many Paulicians to fill the deserted cities of Thrace.

From here on we can begin to trace the development of the churches of God in Europe.

Because of constant persecution and hiding, it is doubtful if any two of the scattered groups believed exactly the same doctrine. But Christ preserved among these people a germ of His Church in the few who were faithful to His rule over their lives.

Such was the religious situation in western Europe at the time He had chosen to revitalize His Church – to raise up the Thyatira era to do His Work.

Church revitalized-in Europe

In the Middle Ages, the geographical area of southern France, where the Thyatira era was to begin, was the very center of the textile industry of Europe.

Furthermore, the itinerant cloth merchants who carried the woven silks of Byzantium and the east to the eager markets of the west included Paulicians.

The pope in 1096 described the Valley Louise in Duaphiny, France, as infested with "heresy." It was a result of Paulician evangelization of the Alpine regions. About 1104, a man from this valley, called Peter of Bruys, began at Embrun to preach repentance throughout Languedoc and Provence.

Later we hear of Peter Valdez or Peter Waldo.

Waldo brought the same practical common sense that had made him successful as a businessman to the organization and Work of the Church. He had the education and experience that so few in God's Church had ([1 Cor. 1:26](#)). Jesus Christ had probably guided that experience, unknown to Waldo, long before his conversion.

As he preached, others added their efforts to his. They became, as it is said, "as many co-workers for him."

They dedicated their lives and their property to spreading Christ's Gospel. The world called them – and other groups, too — by the name Waldensians.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, Waldensians had become known by their enemies as Lollards — from a Flemish word, *lollen* or *fullen*, meaning to sing or speak softly, or to mumble — because of their practice of memorizing Scripture, in the vernacular, by mumbling it to themselves or repeating it to one another.

These "wandering and hypocritical fellows" (as their enemies called them) were noted in Holland as early as 1309.

In 1315, one Walter the Lollard, a chief Waldensian minister, with his brother Raymond, carried the Gospel of Christ to England.

He is said to have spread the Waldensian doctrine all over England before he himself was seized and burned in Cologne, Germany, in 1322 (Par Bresse, *Authentic Details of the Waldenses*; Orchard, *A Concise History of Foreign Baptists*).

And from here begins the story of the Sardis era of the Church of God in England and America. The Church Jesus built was to be brought down until it was practically nonexistent — all but dead — at the end of 1,260 years of the tribulation of the Middle Ages. It could never totally die, for Christ had said, "the gates of hell [the grave] shall not prevail against it" ([Matt. 16:18](#)).

This period of 1,260 years of flight from Satan's anger is not to be confused with another 1,260-year period — A.D. 554 to 1814 — during which revivals of the old Roman Empire were dominated politically by the papacy ([Rev. 13:5](#)).

Waldensians and others during the Middle Ages were in unanimous agreement in stating the time God's true Church became an outcast and fled to the wilderness. They began it with the agreement between Emperor Constantine and Pope Sylvester. There is no mistaking this time.

From Constantine's decree in A.D. 325 and the consequent initiation of persecution on non-Catholics, 1,260 years brings us to the time immediately following 1585.

At this time, the hand of God is again clearly seen in events. The living Jesus Christ moved to make it possible for His Church to grow again, and for His Work to be done!

In 1586-87, conviction and execution for conspiracy of Mary, Queen of Scots, removed for the last time the possibility of a Catholic domination of the English throne.

And the following year, as the supposed "invincible" Spanish Armada approached Britain to attack, it was utterly overwhelmed by a great storm at sea, a miraculous intervention in the weather!

And what a miracle it was!

In that day, it was on the lips of every Englishman and even on those of Continentals that this could not have been other than a great miracle from God. Not only was England enabled to remain politically free, she was encouraged to stay non-Catholic.

The magnitude of this defeat made Europe's strongest Catholic power second rate. Israelite Britain was now supreme, and in the political and moral climate of a freedom-loving and Protestant Britain, God's Work could again develop.

But it took the Church that had been brought down to almost nothing centuries to revive and again become significant.

The name of the Church

About 1585, almost immediately after the end of her 1,260 years in the wilderness, God's Church began to revive — this time in England.

In the reign of Elizabeth (1558 to 1603), states Chambers' Encyclopedia, article "Sabbath," "Many conscientious and independent thinkers" advocated the seventh day. Sabbath keepers now commonly came into historical view. Books were published urging the keeping of the seventh day.

Almost as early as local congregations are known to have existed in England, the Church of God in the Sardis era spread to America.

In 1664, Stephen Mumford was sent from the "Bell Lane" Church of God in London, England, to Newport, R.I. For a while he associated with the members of a Sunday Baptist church, and persuaded several of them to embrace his views.

After seven years, a seventh-day congregation of seven members was raised up from these people. They identified it as (a part of) the Church of God (Seventh-day Baptist Memorial, Vol. I, p. 36).

The Church in Rhode Island became the mother church in the United States. It grew slowly for about 30 years. Then in 1708, the enlarged and geographically widespread Newport congregation was officially constituted into two congregations.

The "Westerly" or "Hopkinton" congregation retained the original records — being recognized as the leading or headquarters location.

One of the most important local congregations was founded at Piscataway, N.J., in 1705. The record of its founding uses the name "the Church of God." The connection of this name and this local congregation with the Rhode Island headquarters is also clearly demonstrated by the fact that its minister was sent to Westerly for ordination (Seventh-day Baptist Memorial, Vol. 2, No.3, p. 121).

At Shrewsbury, N.J., also, the record plainly speaks of "the Church of God dwelling at Shrewsbury" (Seventh-day Baptist Memorial, Vol. 2, No.4, p. 160; Randolph, A History of the Seventh-day Baptists in West Virginia. pp. 19-20).

A few remain faithful

By 1800, Protestant doctrines were prevalent in the Sabbath-keeping congregations. Many began to form a denomination. This group officially adopted the name "Seventh-day Baptist" in 1818.

Ten or 12 congregations — in the Pennsylvania to Rhode Island area alone — would not at first affiliate with this denomination of men. Even as late as 1828, only 16 to 20 congregations were being represented at the Seventh-day Baptist Conference meetings, while they spoke disparagingly of other "fanatical and unworthy" Sabbath keepers (The Seventh-day Baptists in Europe and America. pp. 153,175).

As always, the few had refused to go along, and had remained faithful to the name and doctrine of the Church of God!

In the middle of the century these remnants of God's people are found in fellowship with Sabbath-keeping people who were part of a great Advent movement.

When the Adventists organized themselves as a denomination in 1860, only a few — mostly in the states of Ohio, Iowa and Missouri — did not go along. The printing plant and the magazine formerly published in the name of the Church of God were taken over by the Adventists.

But a group of the faithful in 1861 began the publication of a new monthly paper called The Remnant of Israel, later changed to The Sabbath Advocate and finally to The Bible Advocate.

Certain strong families provided the Church of God a tenuous continuity. These came to be located mainly in Missouri, Oklahoma and Oregon. Some few retained a knowledge of God's Holy Days and the identity of modern Israel.

Church of God ministers began work in Mexico, Chile, Argentina, the Philippines. A few thousand of their converts and/or their descendants remain throughout Latin America to this day. Spanish-speaking congregations in Chile and Argentina kept the Holy Days continuously from their beginning in the 1890s until the middle of the 20th century.

But for 70 years after the departure of the Adventists, the Church of God (Seventh Day) in the United States remained spiritually powerless.

These were the people Herbert W. Armstrong came in contact with in 1927.

Philadelphia era of God's Church begins

Mr. Armstrong had been very successful in business as a younger man. But more than once God had swept his business away in order to humble him. Then God called and converted him.

Mr. Armstrong began to search for the one true Church he knew must exist. Somewhere there had to be the Church Jesus Christ said He would build ([Matt. 16:18](#)).

These Church of God people in Oregon seemed to have the truth — certainly they were the closest of any. But something was wrong. They were spiritually dead!

Consequently, Mr. Armstrong never "joined" their organization. But he began to fellowship with the people. He was asked to speak to them, and was finally ordained by the Oregon Conference of the Church of God in June, 1931.

God revealed the true identity of the modern house of Israel to Mr. Armstrong. Mr. Armstrong also came to see that God's annual festivals were commanded to be kept today along with the weekly Sabbath. He began to understand their meaning. But it was seven years before any others in Oregon kept God's annual Sabbaths with Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong.

The world did not notice the Sardis era of God's Church because it did not proclaim the Gospel with power. It did not exploit the possibilities opened to it by the development of printing.

At the critical moment when the Church of God (Seventh Day) was breaking up, the living Jesus Christ separated a mere handful of people in Oregon to begin the present "Philadelphia" era of His Church ([Rev. 3:7-13](#)).

He began to use Herbert W. Armstrong, and the small group He had called to assist as co-workers, to reach the world with the good news of the coming Kingdom of God.

Christ set before them an "open door" (verse 8). This "door" is an opportunity to disseminate Christ's Gospel ([1 Cor. 16:9](#), [Col. 4:3](#)).

Christ opened the door of radio to the Philadelphia era of His Church. Since the first Sunday in January, 1934, The World Tomorrow broadcast has not missed a week on the air. And now the message goes out also on television — an even greater door.

This church era has "[only] a little strength" of itself ([Rev. 3:8](#)), but it is magnified greatly through the modern "doors" of radio, television, the printing press and personal appearances of Mr. Armstrong before world leaders — and, most important of all, through the power of the Holy Spirit!

Philadelphia means "brotherly love" or "those who love their fellowmen as brothers." It expresses the characteristic that is the motivating zeal of the Philadelphia era of God's Church.

The Worldwide Church of God shows love to mankind by carrying out God's commission — that of warning the world of impending destruction. It is revealing how Jesus Christ will soon rescue humanity from cosmocide and teach man the way of peace, happiness and prosperity.

The goal of the Philadelphia church is the ultimate salvation of all mankind!

And this brings us to where we are today in this amazing prophecy in Revelation 1 to 3 of the seven churches.

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