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1 THE TITLE of SECTION I

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MILITANT CHURCH ON EARTH THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

“SURELY I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, TO THE VERY END OF THE AGE” (Matthew 28:20)

Again and again throughout the whole New Testament period Christ establishes his Church (Matthew 16:18).

2 THE DIVISION of SECTION I

The theme of the book of Revelation in chapter 1:5-7 speaks of Christ's first coming to free us from our sins by his blood and of Christ's second coming when every eye will see him. By reading through the book and especially noticing the reduplications, we will see that the visions in the book are divided into seven parallel sections and each section describes the whole New Testament period from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming.

Each of the seven sections of the book of Revelation *begins* with Christ's first coming, is characterised by *a long main period*, is followed by *a short period* of violent persecution and *ends* with the final judgement day (Christ's second coming). Note that Christ's second coming is the final event in salvation history and differs from what the futurist view calls 'Christ's second return', which is not the final event in salvation history.

Section 1 of the book of Revelation consists of chapters 1 to 3 and covers the whole New Testament period between Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming. It contains the introduction to the book of Revelation and the first vision. It reveals Jesus Christ present and active in the midst of his Church in the world.

a. The beginning of the New Testament period (1:9-20)

The New Testament period begins with a description of the enthroned Jesus Christ after his death and resurrection (1:5,18). He reigns as the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5; cf. 3:14; Matthew 28:18). He stands and walks amidst the seven congregations (churches)¹, which represents all the congregations in the world throughout the whole Church history (cf. 2:1; cf. Matthew 28:20). And he rules (2:10; 3:7-8,19-20) and judges (2:5,16,21-23; 3:3).

¹ Greek: εκκλησια. When εκκλησια refers to the one Body of Christ the word 'Church' is used. When it refers to the local church or a house church the word 'congregation' is used. A house church may consist of one to several house fellowships.

b. The long main period (2:1 to 3:22)

The long main period consists of all the congregations in the world and throughout world history living, working, struggling and engaged in spiritual warfare on earth throughout history. The number 7 is the symbol of divine perfection and completeness. Thus, the seven letters to the seven historical congregations mentioned in the book of Revelation are personal letters of Christ to all his congregations in the world and throughout the whole New Testament period. Each letter commands all the churches in the world and in history to hear what the Spirit says to them (2:7 etc.).

The congregations are depicted as lampstands, which means that they are the light bearers in the midst of a dark world (Matthew 5:14-16). Christ stand in the middle of the seven lampstands and this symbolises that Christ is present and active amidst all his congregations in the world from his first coming to his one and only second coming (Matthew 28:20)!

Christ is all the time “coming” to his congregations. He comes again and again to save (2:25; 3:11; 3:20) or to rebuke and to punish his congregations (2:5,16; 3:3). Each individual historical congregation is a type, not of one period in Church history, but rather of conditions which are constantly repeated in the actual life of the various historical congregations in the world. Each letter has seven parts and ends with a promise to those who conquer (overcome), that they will have a share in the final glory at the end of world-history.

c. The short period (3:10)

The short period of violent persecution is alluded to (3:10). It consists of “the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” (3:10). This is a reference to a great tribulation for this historical congregation under the Roman rulers. All historical congregations throughout the whole New Testament period may face such a tribulation. But it is also a reference to the great tribulation at the end of world history (Matthew 24:21-29a).

d. The end of the New Testament period (2:7,11,17,26-29; 3:5-6,12,21-22)

The period ends with Christ’s judgement. Those who overcome will enjoy life in the paradise of God (2:7). Others will suffer the second death (2:11). Each of the seven letters ends with a promise from Christ to those who overcome throughout Church history. These promises will only be realised in the eternal state. Thus, also in eschatological sense Christ is knocking at the door (3:20).

e. The eternal state (2:7,11,17,26-29; 3:5-6,12,21-22)

In the eternal state Christians will have eternal life and never get hurt by eternal damnation. They will possess a new name that expresses their new being, a name that will never be blotted out of the book of life and that identifies them as citizens of the New Jerusalem. They will reign together with Christ forever.

Conclusion

During the whole New Testament period very many congregations (house churches) are established everywhere in the world. These congregations are not perfect and receive correction from Christ. But the New Testament period has a definite end when Christ knocks on the door of each congregation for the final time on the judgement day!

The first section of the book of Revelation consists of Revelation chapters 1 to 3 and covers the whole New Testament period from Christ’s first coming to Christ’s second coming. It also gives insight into the eternal state beyond Christ’s second coming.

3 THE STRUCTURE of SECTION I

a. The introduction of the book of Revelation (1:1-3)

It contains some important principles of interpretation of the book of Revelation (1:1-3)

b. The greetings and doxology (1:4-8)

c. The vision of Jesus Christ (1:9-20)

He is present and active amidst all the congregations in the world

d. The personal letters of Jesus Christ (chapter 2 and 3)

All the letters are directed to all the congregations in the world throughout history.

4 THE MESSAGE of SECTION I

a. The rules for interpreting the book of Revelation

See the keys to interpret the book of Revelation in the Introduction of the Book.

b. Christ is present and active among all the congregations in the world

See Christ amidst the seven lampstands in the introduction to chapter 1.

c. The seven lampstands represent all the congregations in the world

The one Old Testament lampstand. In the Old Testament the one golden lampstand in the tabernacle was a symbol of the congregation of the people of God (cf. Exodus 25:31-40; 40:24-25). In Zechariah 4:1 ff., ‘the lampstand’ represented *God’s people*, ‘the oil’ represented *the Holy Spirit* and ‘the two olive tree-containers’ represented *heaven* from where every ability must come. The message of the symbol was that the Holy Spirit would be with God’s people and his power would level every mountain of opposition. God’s people would derive their ability to build the second temple and their strength to accomplish great things for God from the illumining and never-failing Spirit of God.

During the Old Testament period the seven lamps were united in one lampstand, which symbolised the national and organisational unity of God’s Old Testament people in the nation-state of Israel.

The seven New Testament lampstands. In the New Testament the seven lampstands are symbols of *seven independent congregations bound together in Christ* (1:20). Each congregation is represented by one lampstand. During the New Testament period the seven lamps were standing independently by themselves in a circle around Jesus Christ, which symbolised the spiritual unity of God’s New Testament people in the one Body of Christ (the Church). The national and the organisational unity of the Old Testament people of God was abandoned to make place for the international (non-national)(Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 3:11) and spiritual (non-denominational)(1 Corinthians 3:3-4; 12:13) unity of the New Testament people of God! Every congregation in the world, led by its council of elders, stands directly under Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:17)! In the New Testament there are no intermediary bodies like national synods or international councils or other offices like bishops and patriarchs, etc. between a local congregation and Jesus Christ.

The seven lampstands represent all the congregations in the world throughout world history.

There are several reasons why the seven lampstands are a symbol, not only of the seven historical congregations in the first century A.D., but also of all the congregations in the world throughout the New Testament period:

First. Throughout the Bible the number 7 is the number of divine perfection (see: The symbolism of numbers’ in supplement 2). The seven lampstands with Christ in their midst (1:12) symbolise seven congregations (1:20), which have a divine origin, have Christ as head and are intended to share in God’s perfection. This is true of all congregations in the world (cf. Matthew 16:18).

Second. Revelation 2:7 literally says: “He who has ears (and all people have ears) *must* hear what the Spirit *continuously* says to the churches (congregations)!” Note the words: *must*, *continually* and *churches* (congregations). The word ‘congregations’ is in the plural. Each letter of Christ *must* be read in *all the congregations* and they should be read *again and again*, because *the Spirit keeps on and on speaking* to the congregations through them! Christ intends his seven letters to the seven historical congregations to be messages to all the congregations, not just all the seven historical congregations, but all the congregations in

the world throughout the whole New Testament period. The Holy Spirit keeps on speaking through these letters to the congregations. The book of Revelation is intended to be a message to all who read it (cf. 1:3 and 22:7).

Third. The promises given to the conquerors in the seven letters to the seven historical congregations are also found in the rest of the book of Revelation. Thus they are promises given to all conquerors in all the congregations in the world and throughout the whole New Testament period. See: Introduction to Revelation 2 (3d) (cf. 1:3; 22:7).

Fourth. The best reading in the original of Revelation 1:20 does not say that the seven lampstands “are *the* seven congregations” mentioned in Revelation 1:11, but simply “are seven congregations”.

The seven lampstands therefore represent all the congregations in the world throughout the New Testament period, working, struggling and engaged in spiritual warfare. Each individual historical congregation is also *a type*, not of one period in Church history, but rather of conditions which are constantly repeated in the actual life of the various historical congregations in the world throughout the whole New Testament period. Each congregation in the world goes through similar circumstances at different times of its existence. Christ intends the seven letters to be messages to all congregations in the world throughout the whole New Testament period (cf. 1:3; 22:7).

d. All the congregations in the world have similar conditions and circumstances

The different conditions of the seven historical congregations really existed in different congregations during the first century A.D.

Similar conditions occur in each congregation throughout the whole New Testament period. The seven letters do *not* represent seven periods within Church history since Christ’s first coming until the present time, because then the book of Revelation would not be a message to each congregation in history. We also do *not* live within the so-called seventh (Laodicean) period of Church history as if Christ’s second coming is ‘imminent’. No one can predict whether Christ’s second coming is imminent (Matthew 24:36) or whether Christ is still patient with this world because he wants many more people to repent (2 Peter 3:9-13). Every individual has only a very short time to live on this earth before Christ’s second coming (Psalm 90:10,12). The physical death of each individual is for him ‘his time to meet Christ’! Therefore, every individual must make most of his opportunities in the short time God allotted to him in the history of the world.

Christ sees and knows everything that happens in each congregation on earth. He wrote seven letters which he intended to be read by all his congregations on earth throughout the whole New Testament period. In these letters he rebukes, encourages and warns them, but also makes promises to them. Finally Christ stands at the door of each congregation and knocks (3:20). Just when we expect the realization of his promises, the vision ends.

e. The application for your congregation

The challenge: Will your congregation remain faithful to Christ and to the task he entrusted to your congregation?

Will your congregation be a lamp stand that spreads the light of Christ through the proclamation of the gospel in the Bible?

The warning: Throughout the whole New Testament period Christ holds each congregation on earth responsible for the task he entrusted to them. Through his Spirit Christ is coming all the time! He comes again and again to save (2:25; 3:11; 3:20) or to rebuke and to punish the congregation (2:5,16; 3:3).

The seven letters are very relevant to your congregation.

Christ will suddenly and unexpectedly come to your congregation in order to bring into the light what you have been doing!

The promise: Christ promised that he is standing in the midst of all his congregations in the world. No one and nothing can separate genuine congregations and true Christians from his love, protection and ultimate complete victory (17:14; cf. Romans 8:31-39)!

Will your congregation claim this promise?