

Doctrine of the Church

Seven Church Ages and Ten Days (Periods?) of Persecution

1. Within the theological system, known as Dispensationalism, is a theory that the seven churches of Revelation set forth a divine plan of the Church Age.

2. According to contemporary authors Gary G. Cohen, and Salem Kirban, the seven Church Ages may be identified.

• Ephesus	Apostolic Church	AD 30 – 100
• Smyrna	Persecuted Church	AD 100 – 313
• Pergamos	State Church	AD 313 – 590
• Thyatira	Papal Church	AD 590 – 1517
• Sardis	Reformed Church	AD 1517 – 1790
• Philadelphia	Missionary Church	AD 1790 – AD 1900
• Laodicea	Apostate Church	AD 1900 to present

3. To their credit, Cohen and Kirban, authors of *Revelation Visualized*, do admit, “Both learned and unlearned Bible scholars and students debate whether this Prophetical Theory is or is not true” (p. 68).

4. This theory should be discussed, and then dismissed, as setting forth any Divine Plan of the Ages, because it is a very arbitrary division of history as can be demonstrated by several examples.

- Item. There were more Christians killed in the 20th century than in the two hundred and thirteen years assigned to the Age of the Persecuted Church, represented by Smyrna.
- Item. The alleged Age of the State Church, thought to be represented by the Church in Pergamos, did not end in AD 590 but survived in Europe during the Reformation, and came to America in the Colonial Period. The Church of England is still recognized as the officially recognized state religion of the British. The Anglican, or Church of England, guided the religion of Maryland, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia. The Puritan, or Congregational Church, was established in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire.
- Item. The Reformation Church, reflected by the Church of Sardis, did not end in 1790 but continues today. One motto of the Reformation leaders was, “Always reforming.”

5. The arbitrary division of church history is reflected by the different schemes that other authors have set forth, such as Clarence Larkin, who wrote a modest work entitled *The Greatest Book on Dispensational Truth Ever Written*.

6. According to Mr. Larkin, the ages predicted by the various letters to the churches may be identified in the following manner.

• Ephesus	The Backslidden Church	AD 70 – 170
• Smyrna	The Backslidden Church to Constantine	AD 170 – 312
• Pergamos	From Constantine to the Crowning of Pope Boniface III as the universal bishop	AD 312 – 606
• Thyatira	From Boniface III to the Reformation	AD 606 – 1520
• Sardis		AD 1520 – 1750
• Philadelphia		AD 1750 – 1900
• Laodicea		AD 1900 to present

7. Perhaps the most tragic practical repercussion of Dispensationalism Church Age Prophetic Scheme is that it shows great disrespect for the church, viewing the church as a corrupt and apostate organization, living in the last days, and thus without any hope for great changes to be made in the church.

- *Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; 26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, 27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

8. Because of a propensity to find “dispensations”, or “periods of time” of prophetic importance, another arbitrary understanding produced by Dispensational Theology, is that the ten days of persecution foretold by John, in Revelation 2:10, anticipated ten periods of persecution. Foxes Book of Martyrs, and Halley’s Bible Handbooks note the following.

“Persecution for ten days (Revelation 2:10). This may mean a persecution of brief duration. Or it may refer to the persecution of Trajan that was about to begin, in which the famous Bishop Ignatius was martyred, and that may have hit Smyrna extra hard. Or the “ten days” may prefigure the 10 imperial persecutions.”

- Nero, AD 64. After the Jews, Emperor Nero was the first persecutor of the church. In AD 64 he needed a scapegoat to take the blame for the burning of Rome (a fire that from the very beginning was generally believed to have been set by Nero himself), so he had Christians accused of arson, and had them killed in cruel ways. Peter and Paul died in this persecution.
- Domitian, AD 95. In AD 95, the Jews had refused to pay a tax levied to support one of the Roman deities. Since Christians were still associated with the Jews, they also suffered the consequences under Emperor Domitian.
- Trajan, AD 108. Christianity then was officially under a state ban that was only loosely enforced until about AD 250. In AD 112 a governor, Pliny, wrote to Emperor Trajan asking for clarification of policy toward Christians. Pliny's approach, when someone informed on a Christian, was to have the Christian brought before a tribunal, and asked

three times if he, or she, were a Christian. If the answer was yes, the Christian was sentenced to death. Trajan wrote that this was indeed correct procedure: Christians were not to be sought out, but they were to be killed if someone informed on them, and they confessed.

- Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, AD 162. "Marcus Aurelius, followed about the year of our Lord 161, a man of nature more stern and severe; and, although in study of philosophy and in civil government no less commendable, yet, toward the Christians sharp and fierce; by whom was moved the fourth persecution.

The cruelties used in this persecution were such that many of the spectators shuddered with horror at the sight, and were astonished at the intrepidity of the sufferers. Some of the martyrs were obliged to pass, with their already wounded feet, over thorns, nails, sharp shells, etc. upon their points, others were scourged until their sinews and veins lay bare, and after suffering the most excruciating tortures that could be devised, they were destroyed by the most terrible deaths.

Germanicus, a young man, but a true Christian, being delivered to the wild beasts on account of his faith, behaved with such astonishing courage that several pagans became converts to a faith which inspired such fortitude.

Polycarp, the venerable bishop of Smyrna, hearing that persons were seeking for him, escaped, but was discovered by a child. After feasting the guards who apprehended him, he desired an hour in prayer, which being allowed, he prayed with such fervency, that his guards repented that they had been instrumental in taking him. He was, however, carried before the proconsul, condemned, and burnt in the market place.

The proconsul then urged him, saying, "Swear, and I will release thee;--reproach Christ."

Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?" At the stake to which he was only tied, but not nailed as usual, as he assured them he should stand immovable, the flames, on their kindling the fagots, encircled his body, like an arch, without touching him; and the executioner, on seeing this, was ordered to pierce him with a sword, when so great a quantity of blood flowed out as extinguished the fire. But his body, at the instigation of the enemies of the Gospel, especially Jews, was ordered to be consumed in the pile, and the request of his friends, who wished to give it Christian burial, rejected. They nevertheless collected his bones and as much of his remains as possible, and caused them to be decently interred.

- Severus, AD 192. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, was born in Greece, and received both a polite and a Christian education. It is generally supposed that the account of the persecutions at Lyons was written by himself. He succeeded the martyr Pothinus as bishop of Lyons, and ruled his diocese with great propriety; he was a zealous opposer of heresies in general, and, about A.D. 187, he wrote a celebrated tract against heresy. Victor, the bishop of Rome, wanting to impose the keeping of Easter there, in preference to other places, it occasioned some disorders among the Christians. In particular, Irenaeus

wrote him a synodical epistle, in the name of the Gallic churches. This zeal, in favor of Christianity, pointed him out as an object of resentment to the emperor; and in A.D. 202, he was beheaded.

The persecutions now extending to Africa, many were martyred in that quarter of the globe; the most particular of whom we shall mention.

Perpetua, a married lady, of about twenty-two years. Those who suffered with her were, Felicitas, a married lady, big with child at the time of her being apprehended, and Revocatus, catechumen of Carthage, and a slave. The names of the other prisoners, destined to suffer upon this occasion, were Saturninus, Secundulus, and Satur. On the day appointed for their execution, they were led to the amphitheater. Satur, Saturninus, and Revocatus were ordered to run the gauntlet between the hunters, or such as had the care of the wild beasts. The hunters being drawn up in two ranks, they ran between, and were severely lashed as they passed. Felicitas and Perpetua were stripped, in order to be thrown to a mad bull, which made his first attack upon Perpetua, and stunned her; he then darted at Felicitas, and gored her dreadfully; but not killing them, the executioner did that office with a sword. Revocatus and Satur were destroyed by wild beasts; Saturninus was beheaded; and Secundulus died in prison. These executions were in the 205, on the eighth day of March.

- Decius, AD 249. However, in AD 250, Emperor Decius issued an edict that demanded an annual offering of sacrifices to the gods and the emperor. After offering a sacrifice, one received a certificate of compliance. Christians generally refused to do this, and Christianity now became illegal.
- Valerian, AD 257. In A.D. 250, Cyprian was publicly proscribed by the emperor Decius, under the appellation of Coecilius Cyprian, bishop of the Christians; and the universal cry of the pagans was, "Cyprian to the lions, Cyprian to the beasts." The bishop, however, withdrew from the rage of the populace, and his effects were immediately confiscated. During his retirement, he wrote thirty pious and elegant letters to his flock; but several schisms that then crept into the Church, gave him great uneasiness. The rigor of the persecution abating, he returned to Carthage, and did everything in his power to expunge erroneous opinions. A terrible plague breaking out in Carthage, it was as usual, laid to the charge of the Christians; and the magistrates began to persecute accordingly, which occasioned an epistle from them to Cyprian, in answer to which he vindicates the cause of Christianity. A.D. 257, Cyprian was brought before the proconsul Aspasius Paturnus, who exiled him to a little city on the Lybian sea. On the death of this proconsul, he returned to Carthage, but was soon after seized, and carried before the new governor, who condemned him to be beheaded; which sentence was executed on the fourteenth of September, A.D. 258.
- Aurelian, AD 274. In the year of Christ 286, a most remarkable affair occurred; a legion of soldiers, consisting of six thousand six hundred and sixty-six men, contained none but Christians. This legion was called the Theban Legion, because the men had been raised in Thebes: they were quartered in the east until the emperor Maximian ordered them to march to Gaul, to assist him against the rebels of Burgundy.

They passed the Alps into Gaul, under the command of Mauritius, Candidus, and Exuperis, their worthy commanders, and at length joined the emperor.

Maximian, about this time, ordered a general sacrifice, at which the whole army was to assist; and likewise he commanded that they should take the oath of allegiance and swear, at the same time, to assist in the extirpation of Christianity in Gaul. Alarmed at these orders, each individual of the Theban Legion absolutely refused either to sacrifice or take the oaths prescribed.

This so greatly enraged Maximian, that he ordered the legion to be decimated, that is, every tenth man to be selected from the rest, and put to the sword. This bloody order having been put in execution, those who remained alive were still inflexible, when a second decimation took place, and every tenth man of those living was put to death.

This second severity made no more impression than the first had done; the soldiers preserved their fortitude and their principles, but by the advice of their officers they drew up a loyal remonstrance to the emperor. This, it might have been presumed, would have softened the emperor, but it had a contrary effect: for, enraged at their perseverance and unanimity, he commanded that the whole legion should be put to death, which was accordingly executed by the other troops, who cut them to pieces with their swords, September 22, 286.

- Diocletian, AD 303. Decius was followed by Emperor Diocletian, who faced a deteriorating empire. He believed that a strong monarchy supported by a strong military could save the empire, and he saw the refusal of the Christians to support the state religion as a threat to what remained of the empire's stability. In AD 303, he issued the first edicts for the active persecution of Christians, who by now numbered 50–75 million, or as much as 15 percent of the total population of the empire. They were now to be sought out and imprisoned if they persisted in loyalty to Christ and killed if they refused to sacrifice to the emperor. Scriptures were confiscated and burned. Prisons became so crowded with Christians that there was no room for criminals, so Christians were exiled, stripped of property, killed by sword or wild beasts, or sent to labor camps where they were worked to death.
9. The temptation comes to some to say ten historical persecutions by Rome are the fulfillment of Revelation 2:10-11, but that is totally speculative.

The text does not say that there will be ten days spanning more than 300 of history by the Romans.

Nor does the text say that the persecution will be at the hands of the Romans. What if the persecution was a ten literal day of persecution at the hands of the Jews? Why not speculate on that?

And why limit the persecution of the church to the Jews and the Romans? Official state persecution of Christians came from other sources besides Rome.

“East of the Euphrates the repercussions to Constantine's conversion were immediate. Hitherto the Sassanid rulers of the Persian Empire in Mesopotamia-Iran had usually tolerated Christians. Henceforth the followers of Christ would be regarded as allies of Persia's ancient enemy. Persecutions began. Shapur II wrote to his generals:

‘You will arrest Simon, chief of the Christians. You will keep him till he signs this document and consents to collect for us a double tax and double tribute from the Christians . . . for we Gods have all the trials of war and they have nothing but repose and pleasure. They inhabit our territory and agree with Caesar, our enemy.’

It was not an unreasonable demand in the circumstances. The Sassanids were again at war with Rome. Christians were suspected of cheering the Romans on. As one Zoroastrian magus pointed out, the Christians offended good Zoroastrians in many ways: they taught their people not to worship sun or fire, they defiled water with their washings, they refrained from marriage and procreation of children, they buried human corpses (instead of exposing them to the sun in towers).

Simon, however, objected that his flock was too poor to pay double the usual tax. Moreover, it was not the function of a bishop to collect taxes. He also refused to prostrate himself before the king or to worship the sun. Shapur had him executed on Good Friday, 339. He forced Simon to watch the killing of more than a hundred other Christian clerics before his own head was cut off. Massacres of Christians (especially of monks and nuns), destruction of churches, and confiscation of their treasure continued, with varying intensity, during the rest of Shapur's reign – another forty years.”

10. Dispensation Theology prides itself on interpreting the Bible literally, until something comes along that does not fit into The System, such as Revelation 2:10-11. Suddenly, ten days are not literal days, but ten long periods of persecution stretching more than 300 years.
11. If the normal language of the text is going to be abandoned, if other Scripture is going to be ignored, if speculative thinking is going to be engaged, if a historical allusion is to be sought, why not image that ten days means ten thousand years? After all, one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, according to Peter.
12. Why not teach that John was foretelling ten thousand years of persecution for the church? Two thousand years have passed, and the church has suffered in each century, and is still suffering in the world by state sponsored hatred, reflected by the persecution of Christians in Iran.
13. It is important to keep in mind the following facts.
 - Fact. John was writing to the church of Smyrna. He had a specific message from the Lord, and that included the announcement they would have an impending time of persecution that would last for ten days.

- Fact. The phrase, “ten days”, is used elsewhere in Scripture and where it is used elsewhere it means, “ten days”.

Genesis 50:3 And forty days were fulfilled for him; for so are fulfilled the days of those which are embalmed: and the Egyptians mourned for him threescore and ten days.

Numbers 11:19 Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days;

1 Samuel 25:38 And it came to pass about ten days after, that the Lord smote Nabal, that he died.

2 Chronicles 36:9 Jehoiachin was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months and ten days in Jerusalem: and he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord.

Nehemiah 5:18 Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people.

Jeremiah 42:7 And it came to pass after ten days, that the word of the Lord came unto Jeremiah.

Daniel 1:12 Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.

Daniel 1:14 So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.

Daniel 1:15 And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.

Acts 25:6 And when he had tarried among them more than ten days, he went down unto Caesarea; and the next day sitting on the judgment seat commanded Paul to be brought.

- Fact. Other time periods are given in Scripture, and each time the days are understood by the context.

In forty days Nineveh was to be destroyed if it did not repent. *Jonah 3:4 And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*

Jesus would be three days in the grave as Jonah was three days in the belly of the great fish. *Matthew 12:40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

- Fact. The specific form of persecution for the Church of Smyrna is cited. Some were to be cast into prison, and die. Those who were faithful would receive the crown of life. *Revelation 2:10 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.*
14. Before modern prophetic teachers begin to interpret a Biblical passage, and unite it with extra-biblical events, care must be taken before saying, “this is that”. Things which may be similar, are not of necessity the same.
 15. Care must be taken to press a theological system too far in trying to interpret the Bible. We are not to read into the text, words, and ideas, that are not there.
 16. It has been suggested by some commentators that the phrase “ten days” means a “short period of time”.
 17. Well, ten days could also mean ten days. John knew the difficult situations the various churches were having. Being inspired by God, he could have been given a prophetic word that the church of Smyrna would soon endure ten days of persecution. He was preparing them for the suffering to come.
 18. There is no compelling reason to understand the ten day period in Revelation 2:10 in any other way than ten days of persecution.