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Introduction to Book III

Book III, the final book of this series, covers the history of the new covenant church from the day of Pentecost to the present, and then passing through the present, it attempts to provide a practical insight into the far future as well, as mankind is prepared to enter the eternal ages when time comes to an end.

Some of a strong covenantal bent may argue that the history of the Church began in the Old Testament with the nation of Israel. We find however that in Christ “old things are passed away; behold all things are become new” (2Co.5:17). Just as those who are in Christ are members of a new creation, so it was that God’s people had a new beginning in the new covenant Church. So much so, that the Gentiles that had been excluded under the old covenant as God’s chosen people are now his people — even “the children of the living God” — alongside the redeemed Jew who accepted Jesus as their Messiah (Ro.9:25,26). For that reason, we begin our study with the new covenant Church that Christ through the Holy Spirit called into being on the day of Pentecost.

The history of the living Church is a fascinating story. To see God at work through the leading of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals and nations is awe-inspiring. As in most stories, there is a villain as well — as we see Satan working behind the scenes to thwart the efforts of God and his elect through direct persecution and by the injection of error. We also shall consider the ungodly men who propagate Satan’s lies. Conversely, the heroic efforts of godly men to attain to the high calling in Christ Jesus in the face of persecution and death is a witness to the power of faith and the verity of the Gospel.

From the very beginning, the Church has been in a continuous struggle to define, hone, and retain the true faith delivered by Christ its cornerstone along with the teaching of the apostles who formed its unchangeable foundation. We shall find in this study that the Pauline doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone without any human works being added to it has been at the very center of the conflict from the very beginning. It would appear that sinful human pride and mankind’s lust for authority that is rightfully God’s alone is the motivation behind it all as Satan orchestrates mans’ continuing rebellion against God long after the fall of Adam. Accordingly, the doctrine of the imputation of original sin to the entire human race is erroneously denied as being unworthy of mans’ sophisticated position as captains of their own souls.

We shall see how the central Pauline doctrine of grace was very quickly replaced by sacramentalism in the second century in order to usurp authority from Christ, who was physically absent on earth, and give it over to mortal leaders of the growing temporal church. That same doctrine was later smothered under Pelagianism that sought to replace it with a works salvation that denies grace altogether. Semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism, still so relentless in various so-called reformed church doctrines of today, essentially denies God’s power to exercise his grace as He alone sees fit, giving that authority instead to man who it is thought can lift himself up by his own moral boot straps.

Gnosticism and other false doctrines concerning the person of Christ, his death, and his resurrection essentially sought to deny Christ’s power to reign in order to nullify the redeeming feature of grace in order that mans’ works may prevail. Faith therefore over time became a mere synonym for human effort, not the wondrous gift of God that transforms us spiritually such that we come to believe that which our sin-sick soul could never embrace on its own. The new birth became seen only as acceptance of church dogma and the exercise of moral rectitude, not a spiritual transformation that God unilaterally causes to take place in the hearts and minds of his own that they may embrace the Truth.

Over the centuries, the Church on earth has weathered many trials concerning both error of doctrine and error of practice that centered on the refutation of basic Scriptural truths. Because church history is largely ignored and rarely compared with biblical doctrine, many of those erroneous

teachings repeatedly creep into today's churches as "new" innovations to poison sound doctrine and practice as the temporal church today only replicates the errors of the past.

Therefore, it is very important that we have an understanding of church history if we are to have any hope of sorting out the diverse array of temporal churches and denominations that we see about us today. Second in importance only to Scripture itself, we must understand how our local churches are related to other movements, denominations, and churches both today and in the past in order to assure ourselves that we are allied as closely as possible to the true doctrine of faith. Otherwise, we may find that we have just given in to mindless Churchianity in which one church is much like any other.

The average Christian's view of early church history is mostly limited to that which is found in Scripture, primarily from the book of Acts and a few portions of the epistles. We can be assured that the information regarding the early church has been authenticated by God Himself through the imprint of the Holy Spirit upon Scripture. Even so, a believer's view of the early church is often filtered through the paradigm of their present local church and denominational teachings. Their own church becomes the de facto standard by which they fabricate an understanding of historical events and practices that took place in the early church, when the converse should be true. We shall attempt to avoid that error in this study by taking a broad non-sectarian approach relying instead upon Scripture alone. Rather than starting with today and working our way back to the past, we must start with ancient times and work our way forward into the present.

A major reason for studying medieval church history in some detail in this book is to lay the foundation for understanding the significance of the Reformation Movement that followed it. Protestant denominations can best be understood in the light of the Reformation Movement with a background understanding of the medieval church period that made extensive reform imperative. A large section of this book is devoted to exploring that era that extends into the present day.

As difficult as history often is to verify as factual and the events of the future to interpret from Scripture alone, the events of the near present are often even more difficult to analyze correctly. We are so very close to the events that it is often difficult for us to see how they properly fit into the total continuum. Yet, they must be understood in the light of both the entire flow of history and what Scripture has to say about things that are yet to happen. We must realize that the past, present, and future is a single completed work in the mind of God. In that eternal sense, even present and future events are history since they cannot be altered. While the past makes the present and the future more clear, it can also be said that the future puts both the present and past in the context of the full scope of God's completed work throughout time.

The brief analysis of contemporary events presented in this book unavoidably requires speculation based upon sanctified common sense in order to create a working rationale framed within a Christian worldview. Although we make every effort to view recent events from a spiritual and religious Christian perspective, we find that they have unavoidably become political in nature. Politics is the means by which human authority and power is exercised over human society. If that power and authority is exercised by godly men and women, it aids and supports God's will, but if exercised by the ungodly it directly opposes his will such that it must ultimately result in divine judgment. Current political events must be viewed as a snapshot taken of a narrow slice out of the entire continuum of time. From that snapshot, we have struggled to construct future projections based upon recorded human history and prophetic Scripture. Therefore, it cannot be dogmatically claimed that the analysis of current events found within the pages of this book is unfailingly accurate; the finite human mind always falls short of understanding the infinite wisdom of God.

The projections resulting from worsening world and national conditions presented in this book are not very pleasant to contemplate from a human standpoint. A humanist worldview that is based upon supposed progressive human wisdom is diametrically opposed to the Christian worldview, which is fixed and dependent solely upon God's Word contained within Holy Scripture. It has been said that God's will is the hand that works within the glove of history. This analysis is

intended to be an assessment of how God's hand is presently working out his sovereign will within current events to ultimately bring the present world to its preordained end.

The Scriptures do not end with a record of the past, but contain many unfulfilled prophecies that pertain to the far future as well. This work takes an eschatological perspective beyond what most today consider the accepted "reformed" view of Christianity. The early reformers were rightly more concerned with the core doctrines of Christianity that directly affected Soteriology (the doctrine of faith and salvation) and the practices closely associated with it. For that reason they did not explore the doctrines of the last days to any extent. We note for example that John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the New Testament *except* the book of Revelation. Therefore, the re-exploration of prophetic texts undertaken in this work required some expansion of their preliminary views of Eschatology to conform to all of Scripture while still maintaining the essential reformed view of Soteriology that was presented in Book I of this series.

Of the four major interpretative methods of the events contained in the book of Revelation that we shall later discuss, this work takes the Futurist view. That is, it is to be understood that the prophecies of the book of Revelation described in Chapters 4–22 are yet to be fulfilled in the future. The view regarding a millennial age or thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth is considered to be a future and literal one as is required by the Futurist position. Accordingly, it is necessary to assert that Jesus will return to earth at the beginning of the millennial age to rule a tangible earthly Kingdom that He will personally establish upon the debris of mankind's failure. Although that pre-millennial position is firmly held throughout this study, we shall also briefly discuss other perspectives regarding millennialism as well.

The word "rapture" has become a lightning rod to many Covenantalists who oppose any suggestion of the Visible Church avoiding a future time of Great Tribulation or avoiding God's final wrath poured out upon a sin-filled earth prior to a millennial age. Nevertheless, the English word "rapture" is actually derived from the Latin word *rapere* that only refers to the "rapid" transport of the believing Church from the earth to be with Christ in the air, as was clearly described by the Apostle Paul in First Thessalonians 4:17. For that reason, it was decided not to swim against the stream of common usage in this work by attempting to use another word to replace "rapture" just to avoid controversy.

A careful comparative analysis of prophetic Scripture has persuaded this author to depart from the traditional pre-tribulation timing of the rapture, held by so many others — especially Dispensationalists. The rapture will instead be depicted as occurring shortly after Jesus breaks open the sixth seal of the scroll in Heaven (Re.6:12). That analysis is based upon a careful consideration of the appropriate passages in Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, and the Revelation itself, as will be clearly explained.

Every effort has been taken to avoid spiritualizing prophetic texts in the book of Revelation into vague symbolic references outside the understanding of any factual events. It is firmly believed that all of Scripture is given of God to man to be understood and not relegated to the oblivion of vague or useless prose. Because the language of the book of Revelation is highly symbolic, this interpretative approach is to accept a "literal sense" of the verses in both context and prophetic style. It is assumed that various metaphors are being used to build important allegories of *real* future events that would have been difficult or impossible for John to describe to us in any other way.

Introduction to the Third Edition

The Second edition of this book was the first edition ever released for public reading and purchase in late 2008, with very minor revisions, corrections, and additions being included in January of 2009. Since that time, a thorough review and re-editing of the entire book has been undertaken to incorporate various topics that had not been previously included in the first and second editions, but which were ultimately believed to be far too significant to ignore even in this brief

historic overview. While integrating those additional topics into the book, some chapters were re-edited, reorganized, and in some instances rewritten to improve overall flow and clarity of the text. Several new chapters were added where required.

Additionally, it was felt that some early historic subject matter could be made more understandable through the inclusion of simple maps. Additional timelines and other illustrations were also added where it was believed that their inclusion would prove to be helpful to the reader. The general index as well as topical cross-references in the texts were greatly expanded to help locate and connect important events and topics that were historically separated by a span of time together with the goal of making the book more cohesive.

Anyone who has read previous editions will find no drastic changes in the basic tenets of thought expressed in them that would render them obsolete. Nevertheless, it is sincerely hoped that the alterations and additions made to this new expanded edition will aid the reader in following church history with still greater ease and interest. They should then be better able to comprehend the underlying sociopolitical issues that have brought about current conditions on the world scene and their implications for the future. All chapters in the Eschatological section of this book have undergone extensive review, re-editing and clarification wherever possible to aid the reader in his understanding of the complex topics of the apocalyptic end times.