

STARTING WORDS

I grew up feeling quite afraid of the last book in the Bible. It was a frightening, perplexing, and mysterious part of the Bible into which I rarely ventured. When Revelation was taught, it was usually in the context of end times revivalist sermons or dramatizations in film. What both of these approaches had in common was their ability (and intent?) to stir up fear and a sense of impending doom. The result was that we were never quite sure what to make of it, so we usually ended up keeping our distance.

At the same time both fascinating and terrifying, Revelation has been the source of inspiration, controversy, comfort, and argument for millions of Christians throughout the centuries since it was written. This series of lectures is an effort to see Revelation not as terrifying and unapproachable, but comprehensible and indispensable to the shaping of faithful living for the church.

Before we begin, it may be helpful to identify a few important words with which you may or may not be familiar. The first will surely come up occasionally in these lectures: *eschatology*. Eschatology might literally be defined as “words about the end.” It is usually thought of in terms of the end of the world and what people believe will take place. I will be addressing eschatology in terms of the goal or target of human history. When we talk about the end of the world, we ought to think of it in the way we think of “ends and means” rather than as a termination point.

Another idea that will be helpful to understand early on is in the very title of the book: *Revelation*. The Greek word, *Apokalypsis*, gives us the word Apocalypse. This word has been made nearly synonymous in popular culture with the idea of “the end of the world.” The word actually means, “disclosure,” or “unveiling.” Apocalyptic literature was well known in the first century Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. It was used to infuse its readers with a fresh imagination about their present and impending situations: to disclose to them realities that humans could not perceive from the world around them.

We All Bring Something

We all come to this book with questions that reveal our assumptions about this book. To ask, “When will all of this happen?” reveals an assumption that the events in the book have not yet taken place. To ask, “Where are we in this book?” reveals an assumption that the events in this book are taking place. To ask either of those questions also reveals assumptions about the nature of the book as a collection of predictions of future events—like a history book in advance. Such questions are not silly or unimportant. In fact, they represent the fact that the Bible is being taken seriously. The point, however, is that we all come to this book with assumptions; frameworks of interpretation and imagination that shape the way we hear the message of this book.

Frameworks of Interpretation

Over the years there have been four general frameworks of interpretation that have been used by people interpreting Revelation: the 'idealist' approach, the 'Church-historical' approach, the 'futurist' approach, and the 'preterist' approach.

Idealist Approach: Revelation is not about historical events, but is about the timeless struggle between good and evil. Its images and messages are entirely symbolic and without any real reference to actual historical figures or events in the past, present or future.

Historicist Approach: Revelation is understood to be a detailed forecast of actual events throughout human history from the time of the early church to the time of the interpreter. Its images and messages are understood to be referring to actual events occurring in the time of the readers. In this view, the book would have had little meaning to its first recipients.

Futurist Approach: Revelation is understood to be only about events at the consummation of world history. In this view, the seven churches in chapters 2-3 are understood allegorically as seven periods of church history, while chapters 4-22 are understood to refer to things that are to happen in the last years of world history.

Preterist Approach: Revelation is understood to be solely or primarily as a message to the first recipients of the letter. In the more strict form, the preterist view

is that the book has no meaning for anyone other than the first intended recipients. In a more moderate form, the approach suggests that to understand Revelation properly (and thereby to understand its message for the contemporary reader), one must first understand how it would likely have been heard and understood by its first readers.

Other Assumptions in the Mix

While we might find that we identify with one of the above approaches, most of us don't tend to think of ourselves in those terms. You might get some pretty strange looks if you said to someone, "I'm a moderate preterist!" Most people come to Revelation with some more basic assumptions.

Taking It Literally. Reading Revelation literally is quite a challenge. While I respect the motivation of anyone to take the Bible seriously, Revelation is quite incomprehensible when one attempts to read it literally. Revelation was not written to be taken literally, so imposing a strict literalism upon it usually results in greater confusion and fear. Revelation then becomes 'that crazy part of the Bible' that is best left alone—and so it often is. For many who decide to leave it alone, the fallback line might be, "We win. That's all I need to know."

Finding the Analogy. Many people who start out trying to read Revelation literally end up reading it analogically—looking for the 'real' person or event that is symbolized in Revelation. Analogy tries to make some sense of the strange symbols and images by looking for the 'real' referent in one's

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own time. This approach usually assumes a misunderstanding of the nature of biblical prophecy, which is taken to be ‘history reported in advance’—only here the history is encoded.

Taking what You Get. I have a hunch that most people have approached Revelation with the attitude of keeping what makes sense to them and avoiding the strange, scary parts altogether. This approach is understandable, but leaves little hope for getting much out of Revelation at all.

Taking It Literarily. If someone wants to take Revelation seriously, I believe it is essential to pay attention to the kind of writing it is. We bring different expectations to different kinds of writing all the time. Think about the newspaper. We have very different expectations for the comics than we do for the news items on the front page. Think about books. We have very different expectations for novels than we do for chemistry textbooks. All these are examples of different types of literature, or *genres*.

To read Revelation *literarily*, is to respect the genres and to bring the proper expectations to it. We’ll explore the genres employed in Revelation later, but here it is important to recognize that attention to the kind of literature Revelation is will help us greatly in making sense of the book.

In addition to genre, taking Revelation *literarily* means that we need to understand it in its contexts: historical and textual/scriptural. The historical situation of the author and first readers helps to shed a great

deal of light on otherwise incomprehensible symbols. For example, knowing that Rome had a sustained fear of invasion from the Persians (or Parthians) explains John’s language (in 9:14) of destroying agents being held at bay at the Euphrates River (the eastern border of the Roman Empire), as well as the mention of the drying up of the Euphrates (in 16:12). Learning that the Persians had the only mounted archers in the first century sheds light on John’s mention of a rider with a bow (6:2). Historical context such as this can help us make some sense of otherwise cryptic passages.

In addition to historical context, we must pay attention to Revelation’s textual and scriptural context. Revelation contains over 500 allusions to Old Testament passages as well as allusions to other Jewish apocalyptic works, but not once does John directly quote a passage from them. With so many allusions, Revelation is clearly an *intertextual text*—and therefore demands that we understand it in its relationship to those texts. John relies heavily on scriptures such as Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Joel. Paying attention to how John uses these allusions (sometimes nearly quoting them word for word, and other times putting a new spin on them) can be helpful for identifying the point he was trying to make.

Looking to the Future

Our view of the future shapes how we live today. That is to say that our assumptions about human purpose and the goal

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of human history shape our present engagement with the world. Someone who believes that human beings really have no purpose determined by a supernatural being (or beings), and therefore that there is no future goal or particular direction of human history, will have a very different approach to life in the present than someone who does assume meaning and purpose for human life.

As Christians, we believe that history is headed somewhere. We believe that there is real purpose for humans in general and for us in particular. Within that belief, however, there are still different attitudes toward the nature of the future of human history. While we do not have time or intention to examine all of the different views, we might simply identify a few general attitudes and how they impact present life and engagement with the world.

Pessimism toward the Future

Many people have a generally pessimistic view of the future. They think that things just continually get worse and worse right up to the end. Tragedies and atrocities reported in the news become confirmation of this conviction. Romanticism toward the past (“the good old days”) reinforces negative feelings toward the present and pessimism toward the future. The result is an understandable desire for escape from a world that grows increasingly dangerous and dark.

Such pessimism, brought to a reading of the cataclysmic events in John’s vision become a recipe for fearfulness and escapism. Who

would want to stay around when such terrible things are happening? The dark language of judgment and destruction in Revelation become amplified as they resonate with the bad news of the day, while the language of hope fades away as background noise. What often results is the impression that the best thing that could happen would be for God to take us away from this bad world, and once we’re safely away, to get rid of this bad world altogether.

Optimism toward the Future

Prior to the middle of the 20th Century, there were many people who had a strong optimism about the future. They thought things would just continually get better and better. Advances in science, medicine, technology, and the adoption of democratic ideals became confirmation that humanity was on the way to making heaven on earth. With respect to readings of Revelation, confidence in the idea of progress dismissed the language of judgment and destruction as applying to the past, or to a destiny that had been averted.

Such positivism, however, was dealt a severe blow as the advances in technology brought new and more horrible ways for people to kill each other (i.e., genocides, nuclear weaponry, etc.). Even so, many people today have a basic trust in the idea that human life is headed in the direction of progress: “We will find a cure for cancer.” “We will end war when democracy is established everywhere.” The form such optimism generally takes often has little use for Revelation primarily due

to the assumption that humans are the ones who will make their own progress. It usually betrays a confidence in humanity or civilization, and God has little to do with it.

Confidence toward the God Who Brings His Future

There is another view toward the future that has a rich theological history going back to the Jewish prophetic writings, and back to the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. This view sees the world as a place of turmoil resulting from sin in all its corporate and personal forms. The prophets looked ahead to the Day of the Lord, when Israel's God would return and reign as the sovereign of the whole world. The creation would be made whole, humanity would worship the One True God, and evil and its results of alienation, destruction, and death would be eliminated. History, for first century Jews was divided into two: the Present Age, and the Age to Come. The Age to Come, or the Life of the Eternal, was also referred to as the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. It meant, "the world under the reign of God."

The Age to Come, or the Kingdom of God, was understood by many first century Jews as arriving all at once with the judgment of the enemies of God and the vindication of the people of God. What the early disciples of Jesus came to understand was that this Age to Come had actually already broken into the Present Age, but only in part. They understood the long-awaited reign of God to have been initiated in the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus had then sent the

Spirit as the firstfruits (*Gk., aparche*) and deposit (*Gk., arrabon*) of the Age to Come. The early Christians viewed the future as "the future that God is bringing to the creation."

To say that God's future for the world had arrived in part was to say that: 1) the Age to Come *would* arrive completely (that is the point of saying the Spirit is the 'deposit'), and 2) evil, though it will be eliminated, is still a clear and present danger in the world. The church understood its mission as one of *embodying* the life of the Age to Come, acting as *agents* of God's restorative future (doing good works, healing, casting out demons, etc.), and *announcing* the good news about the arrival of the reign of God (which involved both proclamation and invitation).

It is my suggestion that only this view of the present and future will help us make sense of John's Revelation. John's confidence is not in the fact of a predetermined set of future events, but in God, Whose intention for the world is renewal and return, healing and wholeness, and the reunion of heaven and earth. I believe that John's view of the future is one of both possibility and promise: there is the possibility of either destruction (see 14:9-10; 20:11-15) or salvation for the whole world (see 1:7; 5:13; 14:6-7; 15:3-4; 21:3; 21:24-27), but also the promise that evil will be annihilated and God will no longer be separated in any way from the creation (21:3-4, 22-23; 22:3-5).

Revelation's language of both judgment and salvation of the nations does not suggest

either determinism (i.e., people are *destined by God* for destruction and some for glory) or universalism (i.e., everyone will be saved after all, regardless of their choices), but rather openness to what could be. The outcome for humanity and for individual people depends upon the free agency of human beings and how they respond to the call of God.

Revelation's waves of judgment and delay of judgment indicate the seriousness of rebellion against the One True God and worship of other gods, but also the invitation for the rebellious to come home and to have a future. So we can have language that holds out the hope of universal salvation right alongside language of destruction of those who refuse to "give up worshipping demons, and the idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk..." (9:20).

Genres of Revelation

We've mentioned the importance of understanding the kind of writing, or *genre*, of Revelation. Attention to the genre allows us to know what kinds of things we can and cannot expect from the text. In writing Revelation, John employed the use of three genres: apocalyptic, prophecy, and circular letter. Here we consider what is characteristic of these types of literature, why they are used, and how John uses them.

Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic writings were used by many

authors in and around the first century; including Jewish, Christian, and other Near Eastern religions. Apocalyptic literature is usually identified by its inclusion of a vision of divine revelation that discloses activities that were otherwise unknown by humans. Sometimes these visions are about historical events, and other times they recount a journey beyond the physical world (for example, 2 Baruch 36:1-40:3; Apocalypse of Abraham 12:3-10).

J. J. Collins defines apocalyptic as, "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world" John's apocalypse presents a transcendent view of his world by which he invites his readers to be freed from the deceptions imposed upon them by the physical world around them. This vision is not given, however, that the readers would seek to escape the world, but rather that they would be given the clarity necessary to live faithfully in it.

Apocalyptic literature typically divides the world into two opposing sides (good and evil). Revelation does this while clearly positioning the two as unequal. John's contrast uses parody to present evil as a farcical imitation. When the two opposing sides seem to be headed for a great battle, no battle actually occurs: evil is simply gathered up and destroyed.

(Christian) Prophecy

Revelation is prophecy. When many people think of prophecy, they often have in mind a kind of future-forecasting: reporting history in advance. Such a definition is a misunderstanding of the nature of biblical prophecy. The prophetic word is not *fore-telling*, but rather a *forth-telling* of a message from God that is given so that the people of God may know what they are to do in a particular situation.

Richard Bauckham says that Revelation “is prophetic in the way it addresses a concrete historical situation—that of Christians in the Roman province of Asia toward the end of the first century AD—and brings to its readers a prophetic word of God, enabling them to discern the divine purpose in their situation and respond to their situation in a way appropriate to this purpose” (*Theology of Revelation*, p.7).

To say that Revelation is Christian prophecy is to narrow that definition as the message from God to communities gathered around Jesus the Messiah. It is different from Jewish prophetic writings in the sense that it views those writings as having found fulfillment in Jesus. The Christian nature of the eschatological message located the contemporary situation firmly in the ‘already, and not yet’ of the Kingdom of God.

Circular Letter

Revelation comes to us, not simply as apocalyptic or prophetic writings, but as both of those folded into the content of a letter that was intended to be read to

multiple communities. Revelation begins and ends in the usual form of ancient letters (compare Revelation 1:4, 11 & 22:21 to James 1:1, 1 Peter 1:1; Colossians 4:16). It was addressed to seven communities in particular, and addresses specific concerns in those particular communities. Chapters 2-3 provide seven different introductions to the rest of the letter, thus suggesting that it was a letter intended to be read from seven different perspectives. Even so, the remainder of the letter is not specific to the situation of any one community. That it was written to *seven* communities might further suggest that it was originally intended to be read as a message to all the churches as well as to the seven initial communities. As a letter, then, Revelation must be heard in both its address to specific situations of seven first century churches and as a general message addressing communities of Jesus’ disciples throughout history.

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“John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”
Revelation 1:4-5

Revelation is about God. To say that is both obviously true and plainly insufficient. What Revelation has to say about God defines all of reality. How God is described in Revelation sets all of creation—heaven and earth, humans and demons, churches and nations—in its rightly understood place. By expanding the imaginative horizon beyond what John’s readers could see and hear and touch, not just into the future, but into the hidden reality of the present, John sets a new point of orientation. Heaven, and not Rome, was the place of ultimate reality. God, and not Caesar, was the sovereign of the whole world and alone worthy of worship.

The One Who Is, and Who Was, and Who Is to Come

Revelation refers to God as “the One who is and who was and who is to come” three times (1:4; 1:8; 4:8), and as “the One who is and who was” two times (11:17; 16:5). John uses this title in several ways. In one aspect, it is an interpretation of the name

YHWH (Exodus 3:14), which has been interpreted to mean “I am who I am.” God was known as eternal: the God who was “In the beginning...” (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 146:5), who “upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry...” (Psalm 146:7-9) in the present, and the God who will reign forever (Psalm 146:10; Isaiah 24:23; Daniel 2:44).

In another aspect, the variations on the phrase serve to move John’s apocalyptic narrative forward. In the first half of Revelation, there is a sense of partiality—of the ‘not yet’ of the arrival of the Age to Come. Thus, here we find the use of the title “the One who is and who was and who is to come.” In the second half of the book, there is a sense of completion—of the arrival of the reign of God. Thus, we find the use of the title “the One who is and who was.” Here, God is no longer “to come” for God simply “Is.” So say the twenty four elders in Revelation 11:17, “*We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign.*”

In a final aspect, the title serves as a contrast to the title of the “beast who once was, and now is not” (17:11). John shows the beast as a parody, a preposterous imitation of the one true God. The use of parody serves to demonstrate the asymmetrical relationship between God and evil in whatever form it takes.

The Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End

Revelation refers to God and to the Messiah by variations of these self-designated titles seven times in four locations:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega.” 1:8

“I am the first and the last.” 1:17

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” 21:6

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” 22:13

Notice the way these phrases act as bookends, appearing in the introduction and in the finale. Notice also how these titles are claimed by God (1:8, 21:6) and by Jesus (1:17, 22:13). Using these titles in their variations in this way and in this number (seven), John is linking Jesus with God, not merely by giving these titles to them, but identifying them as the *self-designation* of God and Jesus. In these titles, we hear the echoes of Isaiah 44:6-8 (notice below how the italicized phrases are echoed elsewhere in Revelation—further clarifying the meaning the John is conveying to his readers),

“Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, *the Lord of hosts*:

‘I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me.

‘Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it;

Yes, let him recount it to Me in

order,

From the time that I established the ancient nation.

And let them declare to them *the things that are coming*

And the events that are going to take place.

‘Do not tremble and do not be afraid;

Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it?

And you are My witnesses

Is there any God besides Me,

Or is there any other Rock?

I know of none.”

So, to identify God as “the first and the last” is to establish God above all other claims to sovereignty and worthiness for worship (see the rest of the context of Isaiah 44:9-20 and compare to Revelation 9:20). To identify God and Jesus together in this way, then, is to understand Jesus, not as a second god, but as in some way included in the eternal being of the one true God.

The One Seated on the Throne

Revelation refers to God as “the One who sits on the throne” seven times (4:9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:15; 21:5). It also refers to this title several other times in variation (see 4:2, 3; 7:10; 19:4; 20:11). The Old Testament images the divine throne in several passages (1 Kings 22:19-23; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; see also Daniel 7:9-10). The use of this image conveys the sovereignty of God over heaven and earth. That the throne is located in heaven is not to say that it is distant, but that what is reality in heaven *must* become reality on earth.

There is another who is seated on a different throne (the beast of 13:2), but the wrath of God was poured onto that throne—the throne of the beast (16:10)—“and his kingdom was plunged into darkness.” Again, this throne and the one seated on it are *parodies* of the one true God and the power He possesses. Here again we see John pushing the imagination of his readers beyond the visible kingdom of the beast so they may see another reality at work. The vision of the heavenly throne and the One seated on it allows his readers to see the earthly throne and the one seated there as temporary and unworthy of the loyalty and homage they demand.

The Lord God Almighty

Revelation refers to God as “the Lord God Almighty” seven times (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; and 21:22). This title is a common extended version of the divine name, YHWH. Found throughout the Old Testament and translated variously as “the Lord God of hosts” and “the Lord God Almighty,” this title indicates YHWH’s unequalled power and control over everything. Throughout Revelation we see that the operation of evil is not self-generated and eternal, but derivative and temporary (13:5, 15; 19:19-21; 20:7-10). In contrast, we see that the power of God is unrivalled and unending (4:8-11; 21:5-6; 22:1-5).

As power comes into question with the title “Almighty,” it is instructive to notice the way in which power is exercised by God and, in contrast, by the agents

of evil. At its most basic character, the power of God is creative and restorative (4:11; 21:4; 22:1-3). Even where we might suggest the power of God at work in judgment to be destructive, it is destructive of that which destroys (see 11:18)—as John’s allusions to both the plagues of Exodus (Exodus 7-12) and the prophetic judgments on Babylon and Tyre (see Isaiah 21:9; 47:7-8; Ezekiel 27:12-22) suggest. The destruction expressed in the seven seals and seven trumpets is partial, and thus can be understood as both warning and invitation to repent.

In contrast, the power of evil is both contingent and destructive. The authority enacted by the beast and the false prophet does not arise from within them, but is “given” to them (12:5, 7, 15). The nature of evil’s power is violent (13:7) and coercive (13:16-17), and ultimately self-destructive (17:16). The asymmetrical relationship of the power of evil to the power of God is clearly drawn out as the beast, the false prophet, and the dragon gather armies to fight against God, but are destroyed themselves before a confrontation can even take place (19:19-20; 20:7-10).

The Lion Who is the Lamb

As Revelation is both a vision and a disclosure, we often read the phrases “I heard” and “I saw.” In several locations, these are used together in specific ways. When what John hears and what he sees refer to the same thing, how those two things are arranged determines the intent of the meaning. What John hears

sets us up for one perspective, but that perspective is interpreted by what he sees. This is true of passages such as Revelation 7:4-12, 21:9-10, and in 5:5-6.

“Then one of the elders *said* to me, ‘Do not weep! See, *the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.* He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.’ Then *I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain,* standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders” (Revelation 5:5-6, *italics mine*).

The way that this hearing and seeing function together clarifies the way in which God rules. Jesus is introduced as the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” who “has triumphed.” This might suggest a militaristic Jesus who conquers with violence. However, this image is interpreted by the description of being “a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain.” The way God conquers is not with violence (as Rome conquered, and as evil ‘conquers’), but in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus. God does not dominate as Rome does, but rather, we see that “Christ’s sacrificial death *belongs to the way God rules the world*” (Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 64).

This imagery is not just a description of the self-giving love of God, but it is also a sign for the followers of the Lamb. The followers will conquer in the same way that the Lamb did—by obedience and faithful witness, even unto death (see 12:11). Certainly not with violence and coercion, as those are the methods of the

beast (see 12:17, and 13:7, 15-17).

The Spirit of God

Revelation begins with what can be understood as a Trinitarian formula: “*John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth*” (1:4-5) The naming of “the seven spirits” or “sevenfold spirit” is made four times throughout Revelation (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). This phrase is associated with the activity of the Spirit that is sent “out into all the earth” (5:6). John derives this image of the Spirit from Zechariah’s vision of the lampstand with the seven lamps (Zechariah 4:1-14) in which the seven lamps are interpreted as “the seven eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth...” (Zech 4:10). The “eyes” of YHWH in the Old Testament indicate both the ability to see what is happening in the world, and the ability to act in power wherever He wills.

The Spirit speaks to the churches. The messages to the seven churches each end with the phrase “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The messages are messages from Jesus, but they are delivered through the agency of the Spirit.

The role of the Spirit that emerges in Revelation is one of divine activity in the world: challenging, directing, and comforting the churches, calling the world

to repentance, observing all that happens in the creation, and anticipating the reign of God. The Spirit is the presence and power of God at work in the Present Age, in, through, and beyond the church; giving word (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), vision (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10), and invitation (22:17) for faithfulness in the present.

Heaven and Earth

Revelation gives the reader two points of reference: heaven and earth. John sees and hears things that happen in heaven, and things that happen on earth. The two, as John makes clear at the end of Revelation (21:1-4, 9-10; 22:1-3), are ultimately connected, although not, at present, coexisting. In the present, earth is a place in conflict, where the powers of evil seek to destroy and to deceive, and where the people of God bear witness so that the inhabitants of the earth might give “glory to the God of heaven” (see 11:1-13). Heaven, as the place of ultimate reality, is the picture of what will come to earth—what will, and *must* be. As such, what presently exists on the earth that is in rebellion or contradiction to what is in heaven will, and *must* cease to be.

To say that what is true in heaven *must* be true on earth is not to escape from the present, but to call ourselves and the whole world to *anticipate* what is true in heaven—to make true in and around us, to the extent that we are able (through our cooperation with the power of God at work within and among us), what is already true in heaven and what will be true in heaven *and* earth in the future.

Heaven and earth will not forever be separate. Revelation’s vision of the goal of creation describes the Holy City *coming down out of heaven from God* (21:2). It describes God making his dwelling place among the people. It describes a creation from which the curse (of Genesis 3) has been removed. What results is not a return to the ‘pre-fall’ world of Genesis 1 and 2, but to a *new heaven and new earth*. And this newness is not new in the sense of ‘starting over from scratch,’ but new in the sense of being made whole and set right. It is the reunion of heaven and earth which means healing of the creation, humans and animals and plants and rivers alike: life flowing to all from God, worship flowing from all to God, and no evil to bring disruption or darkness.

To say that heaven and earth will not forever be separate is not to refer merely to cosmic geography. It is a strong affirmation of the goodness of the creation and the future of the physical world, and that must not be forgotten (as it is in many popular conceptions of the future). However, what is being said about heaven coming down to earth is a declaration of the reunion of humanity (and the creation) with the Creator. Revelation 21 and 22 (as well as the anticipatory references in 2:7, 10, 17, 26-27; 3:5, 12, 21) emphasize the communion of God with humanity (21:3-4, 7, 22-23; 22:3-5). This future hope is anticipated in the presence of “him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1), and

in the Spirit who is “sent out into all the earth” and speaks to the churches.

It is important to pay attention to which location John is referring. At several points in Revelation, what happens in one location has a correlative result in the other. For instance, in Revelation 12, there is alternation between the two locations. What happens in heaven (the dragon being defeated by “Michael and his angels”) has a corollary event on the earth (the triumph over the dragon “by the blood of the Lamb”), and results in a new reality in both (the removal of the Accuser from the heavenly courtroom, and the activity of Satan of deception and destruction on the earth).

The Saints and the Inhabitants of the Earth

As with much of apocalyptic literature, there is a division between good and evil, and those who are found to be on either side. Humanity in Revelation is separated into two groups: those who worship God, and those who worship things other than God (i.e., the beast, demons, and idols). Those who are identified as God’s people are referred to as: 1) “the conquerors,” 2) “a great multitude,” and 3) “the saints.” Those who are identified on the side of evil are referred to as: 1) “the inhabitants of the earth,” and 2) “the dead” (*with the exception of 14:13, which provides the qualifier “the dead who die in the Lord”*).

While Revelation does provide this typical distinction, there is also a great deal of ambiguity and openness with regards

to who ends up among “the dead.”

Passages such as 1:7, 5:13, 14:6-7, 15:3-4, 21:3, and 21:24-27 seem to suggest (at the very least) that the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ bring salvation to all the nations (“every tribe, people, language and nation”; cf. 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6). While I do not believe Revelation suggests that God will drag people into salvation against their will, I do believe there is sufficient reason to hear in Revelation an openness to the rescue of all humanity. We must take seriously passages such as the judgment of the dead in 20:12. We must pause, however, and consider with equal seriousness passages such as 21:24.

REVELATION 1-11

We began with the affirmation that Revelation was both comprehensible and indispensable to the church. In the previous two sessions we examined, in a more topical fashion, some of the approaches to interpreting Revelation as well as some of the main theological themes. In this session and the next, we will try to make sense of Revelation as it unfolds. Of course we do not have space to comment on every verse, but we do want to be sure to look at a few examples in detail.

**A View from Above:
the Big Picture of 1-11**

Revelation must be understood in its entirety. John uses imagery that is interwoven across the whole book. The book has a unity of composition that makes it difficult to understand without paying attention to the interconnectedness of the text. With that said, if we must make a division of the book for the purposes of this study, it will be appropriate to go this week only as far as the end of the eleventh chapter.

Revelation 1-11 gets the reader introduced to John's apocalyptic narrative, and begins to advance theological themes that will find resolution in the second half of the book. Following the introduction to the letter, the first eleven chapters tend to focus on the role of the church in the world and the call for people in the world to worship God. Judgments in the form of plagues and trumpets sounding suggest

a call to repentance. These judgments tend to emphasize both a partial-ness to judgment that suggests warning and invitation to repent, and a progression in severity that suggests urgency and a coming finality.

Introduction. *Revelation 1.* John introduces the book as a disclosure from God for the benefit of those who read and hear it. John introduces himself as a brother and companion of those to whom he is writing. This chapter also introduces Jesus in language that identifies him with Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days (see Daniel 7:9; also below). John sets off from the start to orient his communities toward God. With all the dizzying imagery of the later chapters, John provides an anchor for the seven churches: God is the true sovereign of the world, and is very near to the situations of the seven churches. Chapter one, then, is an orienting message that introduces important themes that will be picked up later.

GROUND LEVEL: REVELATION 1:12-16

John's description of Jesus here is quite strange. He is described as "one like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a gold girdle around his chest. *"The hair of his head was white as snow-white wool, and his eyes flamed like fire; his feet were like brilliant metal refined in the furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he had seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and his face was like the sun shining in its strength"* (1:14-16). John does not mean this literally—a strange sight that would be! John's language

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is saying something other than appearance. His imagery communicates meaning that is informed by the language of the Old Testament prophets.

The phrase, “son of man” is an allusion to Daniel 7:13. In Daniel, this ‘son of man’ figure is representative of faithful Israel—the people of God. It came to function later as a messianic title. John here emphasizes Jesus as Messiah—the representative king of Israel, anointed by God.

The long robe is an allusion to the long robe of the high priest. The Jewish historian, Josephus, refers to the high priest’s robe, saying, “...he wore a linen vestment...called *Chethone*, and...(t)his vestment reaches down to the feet...” (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 3.7.2). The gold girdle is also part of the clothing of the high priest (see Exodus 28:4, 39:29). Describing Jesus in this way, is a way to identify Jesus as the high priest of the people of God.

Again, John returns to Daniel for his imagery, but here he bends the image to say something more about Jesus. Daniel’s vision in chapter 7 describes God as “the Ancient of Days....His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.” John is suggesting here that Jesus is not just messiah and high priest of Israel, but is included in the being of the one true God.

To further emphasize this, John alludes to Ezekiel’s vision of the throne of heaven where Ezekiel sees a figure above the throne. He writes, “*I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him*” (Ezekiel

1:27-28). Earlier, Ezekiel heard the voice of the Almighty as being like “the roar of rushing waters” (Ezekiel 1:24).

The sharp two-edged sword that comes out of the mouth of the ‘one like a son of man’ is the word of God that pronounces justice. Isaiah 11:4 describes God judging with righteousness and faithfulness for “the needy” and “the poor of the earth.” There God is promised to “strike the earth with the rod of his mouth.” Isaiah 49:2 speaks of the servant of the Lord as receiving a “mouth like a sharpened sword.” The purpose of such language is not to suggest violence, but justice for those who have been suffering injustice. It is suggestive of the restorative action of God.

John is telling his readers in allusion what he will continue to make plain throughout Revelation; that what Jewish prophets and poets said about God can be said about Jesus. What he may also be saying, reflexively, is that what we see in Jesus, we can see in God; not the least of which includes the sacrificial and redemptive character of the operation of God’s power. The actions of Jesus the Messiah allow us to interpret what the Old Testament prophets said about God.

Overview: Messages to the Churches.

Revelation 2-3. The second and third chapters of Revelation deliver messages from Jesus to the seven churches. These messages contain challenge and/or comfort to each community. To all the churches except Laodicea, the Lord speaks words of affirmation. The church in *Ephesus* is commended for holding on to the truth. Smyrna is affirmed for its faithfulness in spite of poverty and persecution. The church in *Pergamum* is

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commended for faithfulness in the face of death and powerful religious structures in that city. The church in *Thyatira* is honored for its continual growth in love, faith, service, and perseverance. The church in *Sardis* is encouraged only for the few who were not pretending to be alive to the Spirit. The church in *Philadelphia* is praised for faithfulness though they were weak.

To all the churches except Smyrna and Philadelphia, the Lord speaks words of condemnation and warning. To the church in *Ephesus*, the Lord condemns their lack of love. To the church in *Pergamum*, He will not allow them to continue in compromise to the idolatry all around them. To the church in *Thyatira*, the Lord similarly condemns their toleration of false teaching, idolatry, and sexual immorality. To the church in *Sardis*, the Lord will not allow their superficial show of religion. To the church in *Laodicea*, the Lord condemns their inactive witness and their deep-set pride.

Each of these messages also includes a promise to 'the one who conquers.' The church in *Ephesus* is promised the right to eat from the tree of life. The church in *Smyrna* is promised the crown of life, and not to be hurt by the second death. The church in *Pergamum* is promised the hidden manna and a white stone with a new name (identified as God's own). The church in *Thyatira* is promised the authority to rule, and the morning star, which refers to identification with Jesus. The church in *Sardis* is promised to be dressed in white, and their names to be

found in the book of life. The church in *Philadelphia* is promised to be made a pillar in the temple of God (i.e., to have a permanent place in the living temple which is God's people). The church in *Laodicea* is promised the right to sit with Jesus on his throne (i.e., those who share in the victory over evil by their faithful witness will also share in His honor).

GROUND LEVEL: REVELATION 2:12-17

The message to the church in Pergamum includes words of both condemnation and comfort. Jesus is introduced as "the One who has the shard, two-edged sword." We know from 1:16 that this sword is the word of God that announces and enacts justice and sets the world right. This introduction picks up again in 2:16 where those who refuse to repent will find themselves on the wrong side of the justice of God: "So repent! Otherwise I will come to you quickly and make war on them with the sword of my mouth."

Pergamum was known as a center of Roman religious life in Asia Minor. Notable was the altar of Zeus that stood without a temple. The altar stood on a 20' high podium and may be said to resemble a throne. (The temple has been reconstructed and is on display in the Museum of Berlin.) While this may be in mind with John's reference, "where Satan has his throne," it is also significant to note that Pergamum was well known as a center of emperor worship.

The church is commended for remaining faithful in a time of particular difficulty. We are not told a great deal about this time except that one named 'Antipas' was killed. The suggestion seems to be that he was killed because of his loyalty to Jesus ("you did not deny your faith in me..."). This seems

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to demonstrate pressure from outside the community, which the church resisted.

They had a difficult time, apparently, resisting pressure from within the community. The message alludes to the story of Balaam (interpreted in Numbers 31:16) who led God's people to be unfaithful to God. This backstory serves to interpret the situation in Pergamum and the so named 'Nicolaitans.' The deceptive teaching of some within the church ("you have there some who hold to the teaching of Balaam...") apparently involved compromise to the idolatry of the surrounding culture. The mention of fornication as part of the Balaam allusion most likely refers to idolatry rather than to sexual immorality. The wider concern of Revelation and the situation of the churches was the issue of worship: to whom did people give their loyalty and obedience?

The promise to those who conquered was the gift of hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it. 2 Baruch 29:8 refers to a treasury of heavenly manna that descends to be eaten by those who will share in the life of the age to come. John is likely referring to this tradition, assuring those who remain faithful that they will have a place in the age to come. The white stone has a few possible referents. Stones were used in ancient cultures for entry into festivals or parties. A white stone was also the sign of being declared innocent in a trial. Both of these have interesting devotional significance, but it is unclear which of these, if either at all, John was referring to. The new name is perhaps an allusion to Isaiah 62:2 where Israel is promised to "be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow."

The Throne in Heaven. *Revelation 4-5.*

From the visible situations of the seven churches, John presents a vision of the situation in heaven that, though invisible, is every bit as real. John has already introduced this perspective in the first chapter, but here the focus has moved beyond introductions. John's vision is informed by the vision of the heavenly throne in Ezekiel. The One who is sitting on the throne is worshipped by the creation as "the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." The creation's worship is then interpreted by the representatives of humanity (the twenty-four elders are the heavenly counterparts of the people of God on earth) who declare God's worthiness for worship because He "created all things...."

The Lamb is introduced first as the Lion of the tribe of Judah who alone is worthy to enact the redemptive plan of God (i.e., to open the scroll). The Lamb is worthy to do this because he was slain, and by his blood he "purchased for God members of every tribe and language and people and nation....[and] made them to be a kingdom and priests...." As we noted in the previous session, these chapters serve to orient the readers and hearers toward the God who rules, not through violence and coercion, but through creative and redemptive love. The One seated on the throne and the Lamb alone are worthy of worship because they are the source of life and rescue for all creation.

The Seven Seals. *Revelation 6:1-8:5.*

Chapter five introduced a scroll that was sealed and that no one but the Lamb

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could open. The function of breaking a sealed scroll was to enact or make effective that which was written on the scroll. As *the first four seals* are opened, a series of terrible events fall upon the earth: war, strife among nations, famine, violence, pestilence, and death. These events seem to arrive at the beckoning of creation's representatives in heaven (the four living creatures around the throne say, "Come."), and so the events must be understood as part of the inbreaking of the reign of God. We noted in the second session that God's power at work in destruction is destroying those who destroy. Judgment is a double edged sword that is good news for those who suffer injustice, but bad news for those who inflict it. When God puts the world to rights, those who have been doing otherwise will find their world turned upside down. As terrible as the events seem, they must be understood as ultimately restorative: it is good news for the world to be turned right side up.

The *fifth seal* introduces the cry of those who were killed because of their faithfulness to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. They are told to "wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants and brothers and sisters were killed just as they had been." While this seems strange, we remember that in John's view, it is this witness that will result in the repentance of the nations (look ahead to 11:13). The *sixth seal* describes the upheaval of societal life symbolized in the language of cosmic phenomena. Those who had been in

power and benefited from their power, "the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else..." are scattered in fear of the judgment of God. In an upside down world, those who are on the top (keeping the world upside down by their injustices) find themselves on the bottom when it is turned right side up.

Between the sixth and seventh seal, we find an 'interlude'—what turns out to be the first of three such interludes occurring between the sixth and seventh in each series of judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls). In this interlude, we find John using self-interpreting imagery similar to that in 5:5-6 (i.e., "I heard...Lion of the tribe of Judah...I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing..."). In this case, John hears the reporting of a military census, numbering off the twelve tribes of Israel (in the Old Testament, censuses were taken to determine military strength). What John hears is then interpreted by what he sees in 7:9-17. There, (in the same way that the Lion is the Lamb) the soldiers are an innumerable multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language who had "come out of the great testing...[who had] washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." The suggestion here is that they have given their lives because of their loyalty to Jesus, and in so doing, they have joined their sacrifice to the sacrifice of Jesus.

The *seventh seal* would, upon first reading, suggest a final and terrible judgment, but

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instead it is followed by silence, and then the introduction of a second series of seven judgments in the seven trumpets.

The Seven Trumpets. *Revelation 8:6-11:19.* The seven trumpets allude heavily to the plagues of Egypt and follow a similar pattern to the seals (4, 2, interlude addressing the church, 1). The *first four trumpets* bring plagues inflicted on 1/3 of the earth (as compared to 1/4 noted in the judgments of the seals). Hail, fire, blood, poisoning of the seas and drinking water, and darkness allude to the plagues on Egypt. Again, we note that the allusion to the Exodus narrative points to John's meaning: God's judgment comes to put the world right side up, but all along there is invitation for God's enemies to repent—to turn from their injustice and idolatry and instead to worship the one true God. The language of cosmic phenomena is again employed (i.e., “a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark.”) to point to the upheaval of the current world order as it gives way to the inbreaking order of God (compare 8:8 with Daniel 2:31-45).

The *fifth trumpet* sounds to call up a plague of demonic locusts that alludes to the plagues of Egypt and the locusts of Joel 2:1-11. The locusts have human faces, which suggests that their violence and the suffering they inflict, while demonic in origin, is human in its execution. Human beings are responsible for much suffering that is inflicted on other humans. As G. B. Caird comments, “Evil may take many

sinister forms and ramify far beyond the immediate implications of individual sin; but in the last analysis it has a human face, for it is caused by the rebellion of human wills against the will of God” (Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 120).

The *sixth trumpet* sound a call to release the angels held bound at the Euphrates. This is an allusion to the Persian armies that kept Rome in constant fear. Here, judgment on Rome comes in the form of conquering armies that bring death and destruction—although, again, the destruction is limited to 1/3. The purpose of the plagues to call the world to repentance is made clear in 9:20-21, but it appears that those who were called to repent would not stop worshipping demons and idols.

Between the sixth and seventh trumpet there is another interlude. Here we notice that these interludes function as a message to the churches—to orient their self-understanding and clarify their mission as witnesses to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” The first part of the interlude (10:1-11), John receives another commission to “prophesy over many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.” This passage has allusions to the scroll of Ezekiel 3. This image of John's commission sets up a vision of the church's commission in the two witnesses of 11:1-13. As John must prophecy over many peoples, so the church must prophesy and give testimony.

Chapter eleven begins with the

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measuring of the temple and the altar and the worshippers there. This scene is functioning in the same way as the sealing of the 'servants of our God' in the beginning of the first interlude (see 7:3). To be sealed, and here to be measured, identified those who were included as belonging to God. It indicated an eschatological protection (which was not protection from, but rather *through*, suffering and even death).

Chapter eleven also tells a parable of two witnesses who prophesy and bear witness to Jesus and to the reign of God. Because of this testimony, they will be killed, but just as God raised Jesus, God will raise these witnesses, and they will join in the vindication of Jesus (ascending in a cloud to the throne of God; see Daniel 7:13-14, Acts 1:9). The result of their witness and vindication from God is the salvation of many of their 'enemies'. The salvation of their enemies because of their witness is suggested by the allusions to the ministries of Isaiah, Amos, and Elijah.

"In the judgments announced by Old Testament prophets a tenth part (Isa. 6:13, Amos 5:3) or seven thousand people (1 Kings 19:18) are the faithful remnant who are spared when the judgment wipes out the majority. In a characteristically subtle use of allusion, John reverses this. Only a tenth suffers the judgment, and the 'remnant'...who are spared are the nine-tenths." (Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 87).

The *Seventh Trumpet* sounds, not to bring destruction, but to announce the arrival of the reign of God. Here again, we see John referring to God, not as "the One who was, and is, and is to come," but as "the One who is and who was." Here we have reached only the halfway mark of John's letter, and he has arrived at the end (that is, the goal, remember?). Or has John interpreted this 'end' as the 'end' that arrived in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus? Is this the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus, or is this John's first of several arrivals at the end? At this point, I think a case can be made for both. Regardless of which 'end' John is referring to, the meaning is the same. What was inaugurated in Jesus will be made completely true as the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.

REVELATION 12-22**The Big Picture of 12-22**

Whereas Revelation 1-11 gets the reader introduced to John's apocalyptic narrative, Revelation 12-22 carries the reader on to the resolution of the drama. Whereas the first eleven chapters tend to focus on the role of the church in the world and the call for people in the world to worship God, the second half of the book focuses on the deeper conflict between Satan and God. While the situations of the churches is still firmly in mind, the perspective on the situation moves toward the hidden realities behind the situations of the churches. The judgment theme in the second half of Revelation describes finality and resolution.

The big picture message of Revelation 12-22 includes the following emphases:

12-14) The battle between the Messiah (and his followers) and the Satan, along with his agents in the world—the two beasts—from the birth of the Messiah to the return, or “appearing” (*parousia*) of Jesus. The battle results in the two-stage defeat of the Satan (first in his expulsion from heaven in 12:9, and his final removal alluded in 14:8-11 (note how this may correlate to what is denoted in 20:1-3, 7-10).

15-16) The judgment of God comes in its finality as those who receive the reign of God sing in worship of God, while those who reject the reign of God curse God “because the plague was so terrible.” These two chapters, again, set before the

reader both invitation and warning—an opportunity to embrace a destiny with God, or to suffer a destiny without God.

17-18) The destruction of Rome is portrayed in two images: the Prostitute on the Beast, and the fallen city of Babylon. Here the image of a woman and a city are used to describe the human socio-political system that has set itself in opposition to God.

19-20) The end of evil and the completed victory of God are presented from several angles including a messianic feast, a messianic reign, and the judgment and elimination of evil itself.

21-22) The renewal of all things is portrayed in two images: the Bride of the Lamb, and the holy city of the New Jerusalem. Here again, the images of a woman and a city are used to describe the human socio-political system that has set itself in the worship of God and the Lamb, and in concert with the Spirit.

Throughout, then, John is showing: 1) the two possibilities for humanity and people within humanity, and 2) the surety of the ultimate end of evil and the complete restorative reunion of heaven and earth. All along, John is calling up the language of Israel's ancient prophets (in warning and judgment, promise and hope) to inform and accentuate his message in his day.

The Messianic War. *Revelation 12-14.*

Chapter twelve begins with a vision of

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a woman who gives birth to a son. This begins John's apocalyptic retelling of the first appearing of the Messiah. The woman represents the people of God from whom the Messiah was to come. The twelve stars of the crown on her head recall both the twelve tribes of Israel, and perhaps the promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:5). The image may also be a reference to an ancient mother goddess, the queen of heaven. The language of sun, moon, and stars was used in descriptions of this goddess who was worshipped in Asia Minor. If so, we can say that John has claimed the image for his own purposes—the true 'Queen of Heaven,' he may be saying, is the bride of YHWH from Jewish prophets; the people of God.

This woman gives birth to a son under the threat of the great red dragon, whom John identifies later as "that ancient serpent, who is called Devil and the Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (12:9). The imagery of the dragon draws upon the language of Psalm 74 and Daniel 7:8. The imagery may also suggest Greek and Roman legends of the birth of Apollo. While that may have been part of John's cultural environment, if he used it here, it is subverted to his own Hebraic narrative.

The power of the dragon is frightening and terrible. The phrase, "his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and hurled them to earth" has connections to Daniel 8:10, and perhaps to Revelation 8:12-9:2 and 12:9 ("[Satan] was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."). The dragon stood before the woman so he

might devour the child at its birth. This suggests the events around the early life of Jesus as Herod ordered the slaughter of toddlers so he might kill a young would-be Messiah. But the dragon, like Herod, was unable to destroy the child.

The narrative proceeds, but not in the same way we might expect. Instead of a flight to Egypt, as occurs in the gospel birth narratives, the child is delivered directly to the throne of God. The woman is delivered into the protection of the wilderness. Here we see that John's 'birth of the child' seems to sum up the entire life of Jesus. The birth, we might suggest, refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus, while the child's being 'snatched up to God' refers to the ascension of Jesus.

The result of this scene is carried out in a scene of a war in heaven. There the dragon is defeated and thrown down by "Michael and his angels." In Jewish tradition, Michael was the angelic agent of the power of God (see Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1) sent to fight against evil. The scene demonstrates the heavenly result of the death and resurrection of the Messiah: the Accuser is thrown out of the court of heaven. That the death of Jesus is the cause of the removal of the Accuser is made clear in the hymn of 12:10-12.

While the hymn declares a victory in the court of heaven, it also declares a warning and woe to the creation that the dragon has gone down "in great fury, knowing his time is short." The dragon attempts to destroy the people of God, but the

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creation itself prevents their destruction (12:16). Unable to destroy them as a whole, the dragon turns to wage war on the individual saints—“the rest of her offspring.”

The dragon stands on the shore of the sea, the ancient abyss, the home of evil. From the sea comes a beast. The beast, like the dragon, recalls the imagery of the beasts of Daniel 7. For John, the beast from the sea is the personification of Roman imperial power. The dragon bestows its own character and authority on the beast, and the dragon is worshipped because of the power of the beast. The beast is characterized as a parody of God and the Lamb. It had a wound that appeared to have been fatal (compare to 5:6), it was worshipped by those who said, “Who is like the beast? Who can fight against it?” (compare to Exodus 15:11 and Revelation 12:7-9), but it bore blasphemous names on its heads (which likely refers to the divine titles claimed by many Roman emperors), and spoke blasphemous words against God.

The beast waged war against the people of God (an expression of the dragon’s war against the saints). 13:7 says that the beast conquers God’s people, but 15:2 says that the people of God were victorious over the beast. To be consistent with John’s perspective, we must note that these are not two opponents trading winning rounds, but rather two perspectives on the same event. From the perspective of the beast, killing the saints is a victory, however, from the perspective

of heaven, the very same event is actually the victory of God. The saints conquer evil by remaining faithful (refusing to worship the beast) in the face of the destructive power of evil because they believe in the greater, restorative power of God.

A second beast appears from the earth. This second beast, like the first beast, recalls the imagery of Daniel 7:11. For John, the beast from the earth is the cult of emperor worship. The second beast “made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast” (13:12). The performances of the second beast serve to deceive people into idolatry. It used coercion and trickery to gain domination over people. The second beast caused people to have a “mark” placed on them.

The “mark of the beast” is set as a contrast to the “seal of the Lamb” (7:3, 14:1). Both indicate belonging and allegiance. John was not suggesting an actual mark such as a brand or tattoo (again, compare to the seal of the Lamb). The word John uses for “mark” refers to both an official stamp and the impression of an emperor’s head on coins. Many such coins also included such titles as “dominus et deus” (*lord and god*). To refuse to participate in the worship of the emperor could likely have included the refusal to handle coins making such declarations. To refuse these “marks” (and the associated practices of emperor worship and/or participation in pagan trade guilds) placed one at risk of social exclusion, unemployment, and even

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criminal prosecution and (rarely, at this time) execution.

Worship of the first beast (Imperial power), invoked and demanded by the second beast (Imperial cult), was ultimately worship of the dragon. John is presenting the situation of the churches from another perspective. The reality behind their cultural situation was that Imperial power and the systems that propagated its worship were agents of the Satan. Worship of the emperor, whether in participation in the Imperial cult or in participation with the oppressive systems of the empire (including economies that are secured by oppression and exploitation), is actually worship of the Satan.

Chapter 14 begins with the Lamb and his people (the 144,000 of chapter 7), “who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.” They are described as those who did not defile themselves in idolatry (again, the reference to military men who were ceremonially clean before battle—see Deuteronomy 20; 23:9-10; 1 Samuel 21:5; 2 Samuel 11:11). In contrast to the deception of the second beast, the army of the Lamb had ‘no lie found on their lips.’ The point is that these are the people who refused to worship the beast.

So the call for the church is to refuse to worship the beast, and to refuse to take the mark of the beast. They are called to “patient endurance” and to keep God’s commands “and remain faithful to Jesus.”

They will find rest from their labor, but not so for those who do worship the beast and receive the mark—“There will be no rest day or night” (14:11). This is another example of both warning and invitation. John sets out the options: “Fear God and give him glory...Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” and find rest from your labor, or drink the “maddening wine” of Babylon’s idolatry and “drink of the wine of God’s fury.”

This choice is drawn into further distinction in the images of the harvest and the vintage. The harvest images the appearing of Jesus to gather the converted nations. The harvest is a positive image that links back to the language of ‘firstfruits’ in 14:4. Whereas the faithful saints were the *firstfruits*, the rest of the harvest came from the people “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” The vintage is the negative counterpoint to the harvest. The trampling of grapes “in the great winepress of God’s wrath” alludes to Isaiah 63:3 and Joel 3:13, where God’s wrath is carried out against the wicked. The terrifying image of blood flowing “from the winepress up to the horses’ bridles for a distance of sixteen hundred stadia” recalls the coming of YHWH in judgment and redemption in Isaiah 63:1-6, but also may echo other apocalyptic literature such as 1 Enoch 100:1,3, and 4 Ezra 15:35 (which suggest the self-destructive nature of evil). The sixteen hundred stadia refers to the completeness of the judgment (40x40 stadia; the

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number 4 refers to the earth). Again the imagery is not to be understood literally, but as conveying meaning. Here, the meaning is not too subtle: God's judgment will be complete and terrible.

The setting of these two images alongside each other, however, holds out the possibility and hope, at least, that the response to the call of the angel in 14:7 will be that the nations will indeed "fear God and give Him glory."

The Seven Bowls. *Revelation 15-16.*

John continues his emphasis on the eventuality of the final judgment of God. Whereas the seven seals and trumpets held out an opportunity for repentance and rescue, the last series of judgments, the seven bowls of God's wrath, indicate that the opportunity has passed. The justice of God cannot allow evil to continue forever.

Revelation 15 gives John's readers another view into the heavenly assembly. "Those who had been victorious over the beast" (see again 13:7) sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb. The allusion here is to Exodus 15 where Moses and Miriam sing to celebrate God's victory over their enemies, the Egyptians, and Israel's deliverance from slavery. The song John writes down, however, does not limit the worship of God to Israel. He writes that "all nations will come and worship...." What is celebrated is not the destruction of their enemies, but the justice and truth of God that refuses to tolerate injustice and deception indefinitely. No one could

enter the heavenly temple until the seven plagues (bowls) were completed. The suggestion here may likely be that there will be no intercession to put off the final judgment of God—there will be no more delay.

Revelation 16 announces the pouring out of the seven bowls of the wrath of God. The bowls, again, suggest finality. The bowls, like the trumpets, allude to the plagues of the Exodus. Skin sores, poisoning of the seas and the rivers, burning heat of the sun, and the kingdom of the beast being plunged into darkness seem only to harden the hearts of those who "had the mark of the beast and worshiped its image." They did not repent, but only cursed the God of heaven.

The sixth bowl draws on the plague of frogs from Exodus, and uses them to describe demonic agents of deception who deceive the kings of the world to gather them for war against God (16:14).

John interrupts this bowl with a short message (interlude?) to the church. Jesus speaks a blessing (one of seven in Revelation) on "those who stay awake and keep their clothes on, so they may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." The message is for watchfulness (see similar messages in Matthew 24:43, Luke 12:39, and 1 Thessalonians 5:2).

The interruption is brief, and John returns to describe the gathering of the enemies of God for battle to a place called "the mountain of Megiddo," or Armageddon

(*har meggido*). Megiddo was the scene of many historic battles, but it lied on a plain near Mount Carmel. Josiah (2 Kings 23:29-30) was killed by the Egyptian King (Pharaoh) Neco (he had come to the aid of the Assyrian king) at Megiddo, and the place became a symbol of disaster for Israel. The suggestion may seem to be the threat of a repeat of that disaster as the kings of the whole world gather to fight against God and his people. There, however is no battle (compare with 19:19-21, 20:7-10). Instead, the seventh bowl is poured out into the air and voice from the throne declares, "It is done!" This is followed by language that signals divine visitation (see Exodus 9:24, Daniel 12:1, and Mark 13:19). The visitation of YHWH results in the collapse of opposing kingdoms. Still the only response of the enemies of God is to curse God.

The Fall of Babylon. *Revelation 17-18.* Revelation 17 and 18 present the images of the great prostitute and the fall of Babylon the Great. The woman and the city are presented as two images of the same reality. Specifically for John, the images represent the city of Rome, which itself represents Roman society, government, religion, and economic system. More generally, we can understand these images to describe any human socio-political structures that practice domination, destruction, and exploitation—actions that operate in opposition to the will and justice of God.

John details the character of such structures as idolatrous, blasphemous, and murderous. For John, the structures were

not ambiguous agents of unseen realms or unfamiliar characters of some future day. He identifies the 'great prostitute' as Rome. The woman sits atop a beast which has seven heads with ten horns. The seven heads, John says, are seven hills on which the woman sits—a reference to the city of Rome which was known as 'the city on the seven hills.' The ten horns refer to kings—Roman emperors—whose number is not exact (ten being representative of a short and limited number).

The prostitute will suffer betrayal from the beast and the ten horns. John again points to the self-destructive nature of evil. The city will be destroyed by the very powers it used to exploit the people of the earth. John seemed to suspect that the kings of the peoples who were subject to Roman rule would turn on Rome, and that somehow this was both the action of the beast and the accomplishment of the judgment of God.

If there was any confusion, John states clearly that the woman is "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18).

The vision moves into an announcement of the fall of that 'great city,' the call for God's people to 'Come out of her' (see Jeremiah 51:45) so that they will not share in the evil acts of the city, and will avoid the fate of the city. People 'come out of her' by refusing to participate in the unjust, oppressive, and idolatrous practices and aspirations of that culture. Refusal to heed this warning results in a share of the destruction of the city.

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In a lament similar to laments over cities in prophetic writings of the Old Testament, those who mourn the destruction of 'Babylon the Great' are those who benefited from their positions of power and wealth that were established by the structures of an unjust, oppressive, and idolatrous society: kings, merchants, and sea-captains. The laments here are over the personal implications of the collapse of the societal structures that propped up their wealth and power. The collapse of these structures, however, is good news for the world. It means the end of exploitation and domination. It means the arrival of true justice and a way opening for a shared and equitable life for all (see 22:1-3).

The End of Evil. *Revelation 19-20.*

Revelation 19 begins with the call to celebration that was announced in 18:20. God is praised because of his just and true judgments against evil; specifically against 'Babylon' for her idolatry and violence. Babylon has fallen, never to rise again ("the smoke from her goes up for ever and ever"). This is a promise that the end of evil has real implications for the function of human societies.

As the liturgy continues, John hears a countless multitude of people shouting, "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns...the wedding of the Lamb has come..." The end of evil means the arrival of the reign of God—and vice versa. John's announcement is not wishful thinking, but the announcement of the future that 'must' come.

The language of worship shifts to the language of battle as Jesus is presented as a rider on a white horse. In this description of Jesus, we remember the imagery called up in Revelation 1-3 where Jesus was identified with the characteristics of the Ancient of Days. Here Jesus' name is announced to be "the Word of God." Here, the Lamb becomes the judge who brings justice to the earth. John again recalls Isaiah 11:4 and 49:2 to further emphasize that the arrival of Jesus is on behalf of those who have suffered injustice. Jesus is followed by an 'army' of those who had conquered by their faithful witness (recall the way John understands Christian 'conquering').

The beast and the kings of the earth gather for a battle against the rider and his army. Again, there is no battle as the beast and the false prophet (the second beast of chapter 13) were simply captured and thrown into the lake of fire. The rest (referring to those who refused to stop worshiping the image of the beast) were "slain by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came out of his mouth." This is not the slaughtered Lamb turned slaughterer. The sword is the word of judgment and justice. The picture is of the end of evil and those who identify themselves with it. It is important to note two things at this point: 1) the judgment is carried out by Jesus, and not by those who followed him, and 2) the destiny of those who had been deceived by the beast and the false prophet is ambiguous as 21:24 suggests the "kings of the earth" bringing

their glory into the New Jerusalem. Does the end of evil mean the annihilation of humans who ally themselves from the beast, or does it mean the annihilation of their deception and the evil in their hearts, or is John again presenting several possibilities for the future?

Chapter 20 presents the end of evil from a third(?) and final perspective: the end of the Satan. John sees a vision of the dragon being seized and bound for a thousand years (again, the number 1000 referring to a long, but limited amount). The contrast is made as the saints who had received the seal of God (contrast to the 'mark of the beast' in 19:20) reign with the Messiah for a thousand years. This thousand years has become quite important for certain frameworks of eschatology, but it is important to note that it is mentioned only here in the entire Bible. We have been suggesting all along that to read John is to listen for the message behind the images and words. What is being stated here is not a forecast of any specific length of time where Jesus and the church reign over the earth, but that the dragon's power is limited and temporary.

As with the beast and the false prophet, the Satan, upon his release, goes to "deceive the nations...and to gather them for battle." The countless number gather and surround the people of God, but again, there is no battle. The devil who deceived them is thrown into "the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown."

The end of evil results in the coming of the final judgment. This is the judgment of 'the dead' (in contrast to those who "came to life" in 20:4). 'The dead,' here, refer to those who had worshiped the beast and had taken the mark of the beast (in contrast to those of 20:4). These are judged according to their deeds (compare to 14:13) as recorded in the 'books'. This judgment results with death and Hades being thrown into 'the lake of fire'. Those whose names were not found in the book of life (a contrast to the 'books' which recorded the deeds of 'the dead') were also thrown into the lake of fire. This is the end of evil.

The Coming of the Age to Come.

Revelation 21-22.

Revelation 21-22 gives a vision of the arrival of the Age to Come. This vision is characterized by language of restoration and renewal, of healing and wholeness, and of worship and holiness. In contrast to the 'great prostitute' and 'Babylon the Great' of chapters 17-18, John presents the images of 'the bride, the wife of the Lamb' and 'the holy city, New Jerusalem.' These images function in the same way as their contrasting images; that is, they are two symbols of the same reality. Whereas the prostitute and Babylon referred to the human systems (social, political, economic, religious, etc.) that set themselves up in opposition to God (primarily characterized in worship of the beast), the bride and the holy city refer to the human systems that are set up in service and worship of God.

John sees a new heaven and a new earth. This is not to refer to a completely new and different creation (as if God had destroyed the present creation and started over), but to an eschatologically new heaven and earth. What John is envisioning is the creation as it must be when the Creator is reunited with His creation; evil must be no more (which John suggests as he mentions that “the sea was no more”), and the peace (*shalom*) of God must transform the pain and sorrow of the Present Age into the joy and gladness of the Age to Come.

It is important to notice that John sees this ‘healing’ or ‘restoration’ of heaven and earth as a ‘coming back together’ of the two. He sees the holy city *coming down out of heaven* (21:2, 10), and he sees God *coming to dwell among people* (21:3). Many people typically think of things the other way around (i.e., people going *up* to live with God), but John sees heaven coming to earth. This is after all what Jesus’ disciples have prayed for since he taught them to pray “...your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...” The meaning of all of this is that the goal of the creation is to once again receive its Creator and for God to reign over all of His creation—no longer will the two be separated. This was the hope and expectation of the Old Testament prophets, the early church, and, as we see here, John.

“The bride, the wife of the Lamb” is introduced, and the holy city Jerusalem comes down out of heaven. The language describing the holy city is not suggesting the actual architecture and construction

materials of an actual place. Rather, the language conveys the meaning John gives to the people of God in the Age to Come. It reflects the glory of God (compare 21:11 to 4:3). John uses the number 12 to refer to the people of God throughout Revelation, and here he describes the city as having twelve gates (bearing the names of the 12 tribes of Israel), twelve foundation stones (bearing the names of the twelve apostles of Jesus).

The precious stones that adorned the wall of the city allude to the jewels that were found on the breastplate of the high priest (see Exodus 28:17-20; 39:10, 13), but John alters the list as they refer, for him, to the apostles of Jesus). The meaning of this language points to the concept of the people of God as a kingdom of priests. There is no temple in the city because the city is the temple. This concept was not novel to John. Paul referred to the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit. For John, the Age to Come meant that there would no longer be any separation whatsoever between God and his people (21:3; 22-24).

John sees the “river of the water of life” (see 21:6; 22:17; compare Isaiah 55:1 and Ezekiel 47) flowing from the throne of God. On each side of the river is the tree of life (see Gen 2:9-10; compare Ezekiel 47:12). The tree yields its fruit every month, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. John here has modified Ezekiel’s vision where the leaves were for healing. John adds “of the nations” because he sees the Age to Come as a healing that encompasses the whole world.

REVELATION FOR TODAY

Revelation must be understood in its contexts. If we are to make any sense of this book, we must appreciate the kind of literature it is, the historical situation of its author and first recipients, and the religious tradition from which it draws its memory and hope. Of course, to limit the relevance of Revelation to its first recipients, would make such a study nothing more than an academic exercise, but to jump into any application of its message for today without understanding at least some of its original intent places us into equally dangerous territory.

This study has attempted to draw attention to the contexts of the book in the hope that such an awareness will direct our interpretation along a trustworthy trajectory—that we'll be interpreting John's message appropriately. It is with that background that we can now attempt to consider appropriate application of the text to our situation today. We have tried to give some answers to the questions "What is it?" and "What is this about?", and now we try to suggest some answers to the questions, "So what?" and "What does Revelation mean for us?"

I am suggesting eight areas in which the church ought to find appropriate application from Revelation for today. This list is not exhaustive, and does not demonstrate a complete examination of any one of the suggestions, but I believe it gives us more than enough to begin to engage together in our discipling communities.

Shaping a Christian Imagination

In a culture that denies the possibility of an overarching explanation of life, the people of God cannot afford to forget the story that is to shape them. The alternative is to be shaped by the fragmented 'un-stories' of our culture. Regrettably, this is already under way.

There is a desperate need for many Christian communities to develop imaginations that are shaped primarily by the scriptures. What I mean by 'imagination' is the framework of interpreting and engaging in life; what we hope and dream for, how we order our lives, how we interpret our present situation, and how we think of and relate to others. Is our imagination, in this sense, shaped by the stories of God, His people, and His world? Are the resources we draw upon in times of crisis and celebration located in the scriptures? Or is our imagination shaped by the advertising slogans and self-improvement mottos of our culture?

What I am suggesting is not a biblicism that attempts to use only Bible words, to speak a parallel language, and to avoid contact with the world. Rather, what is needed is a framework for interpreting and engaging our world that has God at the center, that is oriented toward justice, faithfulness, worship of God, love for all, and hope for the future. What is needed is for the church to listen for the heart of the prophets and poets of God so they will have the resources to both know what in their culture must be challenged, and to actually confront it.

John's imagination is clearly shaped by the tradition of the prophets and poets. He alludes to the Hebrew scriptures over 500 times; many of these allusions being to prophetic writings and to the Psalms. It is this resource that allows John to properly see his and his fellow disciples' situations, and to speak a word that links them all to the God who was and is and is to come. Do the practices in which we engage in our communities enable us to interpret or prevent us from interpreting life in a way that is consistent to the scriptures? Do they regularly challenge or reinforce our prejudices and errors?

This is not an easy application because even if we can agree that it is important for people to know the scriptures, there is still the problem of which interpretation of the scriptures is informing our imaginations. While this question would take us beyond the limits we have for time and space in this lecture, let me simply say that wherever people humbly place themselves beneath the scriptures, or more properly, beneath the God of the scriptures, wherever people are submitting to one another with the genuine desire to be obedient to God, wherever people are seeking together the reign of God and his justice, I believe that there you will find a people whose imagination will lead them along a path of right interpretation of the text and right engagement with the world around them.

Envisioning Heaven and Earth

It is my hunch that many Christians view heaven and earth in a way that is more

similar to dualism of Greek philosophy than to the biblical view of the cosmos as a whole. Many Christians have divided heaven and earth; calling one 'spiritual' and the other 'physical'. This dualism tends to value the 'spiritual' while it devalues the 'physical.'

Revelation will have no such view of heaven and earth. In Hebrew thought, heaven and earth, though separate from each other in the Present Age, were originally and will finally be *one*. Even now in their 'separateness' they are connected in some very real ways—especially since the arrival of Jesus the Messiah. Revelation views heaven as a 'veiled' reality, but though it is hidden from sight, heaven and earth correlate: what happens on earth has effect in heaven (i.e., the prayers of the saints go up to the throne), and vice versa (i.e., the heavenly censor is thrown to earth). As the reign of God was inaugurated in Jesus, the Age to Come begins to break into the Present Age in the presence of the Spirit through the churches.

N.T. Wright has said, "Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world." The goal of the creation is to see heaven coming down to earth: the renewal and reunion of heaven and earth, the dwelling of God among human beings. Our view of the creation and our present activity within it must anticipate its future by seeking its healing and renewal. It is a very un-biblical attitude to treat the creation as disposable.

Equally, our view of heaven must anticipate the arrival of heaven to earth by our obedience to and worship of God. As we pray, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we cannot dismiss this as being for some day far off into the future. It is a prayer that is for today just as much as the prayer for daily bread is for today. Think of the language of heaven in Revelation 4-5 alongside that of Revelation 21-22. How might that take shape in the life of your discipling community? How might it take shape in your life? Where is the “holy city coming down out of heaven to earth” so that the nations of the world can “bring their glory into it?”

Worshipping the One True God

Worship is a central concern of Revelation. The central question, one could argue, is “Who do you worship?” Which is to ask “To whom do you give your allegiance?” and “Who do you serve?” In Revelation, worship takes the form of *remembering* and *recalling* the faithful action of God as Creator, Savior, and Judge, of *praying* for God to bring His restorative justice to bear on the unjust systems of evil in the world, of *obeying* the word of God spoken by Jesus through the Spirit, and of *telling the truth* of God as they bear witness in the face of persecution and even death.

In our time, worship has become narrowed down to one particular form of music or another. This reductionism places communities of faith in the dangerous business of marketing

strategies oriented toward attracting people from certain target demographics. What is needed is a broader reorientation of worship to include the forms we find in Revelation; one that involves a centering around God rather than our preferences, through the practices of memory and hope, prayer, obedience, confession, self-sacrifice, and mutual submission. What is needed is a willingness to identify the idolatries in our culture and a mutual call for each other to refuse to worship our modern day ‘idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk’ (Revelation 9:20).

Naming the Beast

Revelation invites the reader to identify the beast. In John’s day, the beast represented the totalitarian imperial power of Rome; in its violence, exploitation, oppression, and blasphemy. John saw the beast as the functional power of the dragon at work in the world to deceive and to destroy. How are we to identify such a system at work in our world today? The most obvious way would be to identify the systems that operate in totalitarian ways, bringing violence, exploitation, oppression, and blasphemy (i.e., claiming the place of God and/or denouncing God as not-God).

This becomes less obvious and more challenging as we discover that many systems in our world are involved in actions that bring both healing and destruction, hope and suffering. Consider, for example, the militaries

of the world that drop both food and bombs from airplanes, bringing relief to some, and death and destruction to others. Consider also pharmaceutical companies that develop medications that alleviate suffering and avert death, but also market high priced drugs to people who don't really need them (i.e., anti-ulcer medication for overstressed and overeating Americans) while they refuse to provide free and low cost treatments for people who do (i.e., AIDS medication for impoverished Africans).

Where might you identify the operation of destructive, oppressive, and blasphemous systems in the world today? What might it mean to 'refuse to worship the beast'?

Enduring with Patience

The situation of the church, says John in Revelation, calls for 'patient endurance.'

This call is made in the midst of persecution, opposition, and seduction carried out by the beast and those the beast deceived into following him. Patient endurance is the response of the saints. It takes the form of faithfulness to God and a refusal to participate in the cycle of evil. The church will not respond to violence with violence. The church will not respond to persecution with persecution. The church responds, instead, with prayer, worship, faithful witness, good deeds, telling the truth, and uncompromising allegiance to the one true God.

Think about the church's response to persecution, opposition, and seduction. Where have we responded to evil with evil? Where have we responded

with prayer, worship, faithful witness, good deeds, telling the truth, and uncompromising allegiance to God? Revelation's message to Christians who live in a hostile culture is to refrain from hostility—to endure it (even if it should mean death), trusting God to deliver them *through* the ordeal, even if they are not delivered *from* it.

Bearing Witness

Revelation presents one central task of the church as 'bearing witness'. While we usually tend to think of giving speeches to people in the hopes that the audience (whether it be one or many) will be converted, bearing witness involves more than giving speeches. For John, as for the rest of the New Testament authors, bearing witness involves both announcement *and* action.

I think of bearing witness as the church in three main actions: 1) Announcing the reign of God (which also involves invitation to enter God's reign), 2) Embodying the reign of God, and 3) Participating with the reign of God.

First, in *announcing the reign of God*, I think of the messenger in Jesus' parable of the king who threw a great banquet. We invite people to the party—into the life that is truly life. This is not conversionism, but evangelism in its original sense of 'heralding' good news about a new King. Today, in the ruins of Christendom, this invitation only has weight insofar as it is demonstrated by the church in its life together and engagement with the world.

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Bearing witness involves **announcement** and **invitation**—calling people to receive and enter into the rule and reign of God. We are not calling people to make travel plans for the afterlife—we are calling people to align themselves with God's kingdom, and thereby enter into the life that is truly life. We do this as our lives together (representation) and our engagement with the world around us in the reality of the kingdom of God (participation) present a tangible and attractive option to the people around us.

Second, *embodying the reign of God* refers to a body of people who demonstrate what life together with God as king looks like. Colonization is not isolation, but dynamic engagement with surrounding culture in order to subvert the present order. It is what Rome did with Philippi (among others), and what Paul used to describe the task of the believing communities there.

Bearing witness here involves **representation**—simply living as a faithful people. We are sent to 'colonize' (see Phil 3:20-21) our neighborhoods and workplaces and schools by simply being 'heaven-ized people' together in those places. We are to be the present representatives of what life-in-God's-future looks like.

Third, *participating in the reign of God* refers to a body of people who see their activity as subversive action. Our good deeds have a larger agenda than benign social action. *We want to see God's rule and reign*

become a reality where we are. This includes everywhere from home to work to nation to planet. It is where we work for justice and peace grounded in and springing from kingdom theology.

Bearing witness here involves **participation**—active cooperation with what God is doing in the world. We are not just to *talk* about what should be; we are to be *actively engaging* in what God wants done. We look where there is injustice, violence, destruction, and suffering, and we work to bring justice, peace, healing, and wholeness. Bearing witness means that we are pulled forward by God's desire for the healing of our broken world.

Anticipating God's Future

John's vision of 'what must soon take place' is written down and delivered to the churches for the expressed purpose of shaping their lives and engagement with the world around them. The view of what is to come shapes the life of the present. For the church, this means that we are to anticipate in the present the future that is to come. We are to embody today, in the power of the Spirit and to the degree that it is possible, the future that God has in store for the whole world.

Here we may ask questions such as: What does God's future look like? How is our present out of step with that future? What might we do and be to bring a glimpse or foretaste of that future into the present? How are we to be a sign of hope, a sign of things to come, with and for the world?

Answering these questions is a task for each local expression of the church under the direction of the Holy Spirit, as is the employment of those answers.

Hearing What the Spirit Says to the Churches

John communicates seven specific messages to seven churches (Revelation 2-3). Each message concludes with the phrase, "He who has an ear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." There is a great need for many churches to rediscover the practice of discernment. How do groups of Jesus' disciples discern together what the Spirit is saying to the church? How do they go about listening for and identifying the call, challenge, and encouragement of the Spirit?

The other aspect of hearing what the Spirit says to the churches lies in *heeding* what the Spirit says to the churches. It is one thing to listen for what the Spirit is saying. It is quite another to do what the Spirit is calling the church to do. Just as important as the practice of discernment is the practice of obedience. Groups of Jesus' disciples must constantly ask themselves: Where are we doing or not doing what the Spirit is calling us to do? How are we responding to the Spirit's word of challenge?