

# Perspectives



## Book of Comfort, Book of Warning

**I** CAN IN NO WAY DETECT THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT PRODUCED (THE BOOK OF Revelation).” So wrote Martin Luther in 1522 (*LW* 35:398). Twenty-four years later, though, toward the end of his tumultuous life, he was willing to ascribe more value to the Seer’s work. Identifying the beasts of Revelation with the historical forces working against the gospel preached by the reformers, he realized that “we can make good use of” the book of Revelation:

First, for our comfort! We can rest assured that neither force nor lies, neither wisdom nor holiness, neither tribulation nor suffering shall suppress Christendom, but it will gain the victory and conquer at last.

Second, for our warning! [We can be on guard] against the great, perilous, and manifold offense that inflicts itself upon Christendom. (*LW* 35:409)

How shall we in the late twentieth century “make good use of” Revelation? Surely not by figuring out once for all (with the historians) that the “enemy” is imperial Rome; nor by figuring out once for all (with Luther) that the “enemy” is ecclesiastical Rome; nor by figuring out once for all (with the modern self-made prophets) that the “enemy” is the Common Market. We will “make good use of” Revelation not by trying to solve it (for all such attempts allow us to control the text, with the result that it can no longer serve as word of God over against us), but by listening for its witness to Christ in our own time. Such hearing will help us identify *both within and without* the “enemies” that work against God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. It will recognize, with Luther, that the communion of saints in which we profess belief is not that group that agrees with us, but are the faithful finally known only to God. It will turn us to hope not in our own discernment or ability to get it right, but in the active presence of God in Christ:

If only the word of the gospel remains pure among us, and we love and cherish it, we shall not doubt that Christ is with us, even when things are at their worst. As we see here in this book, that through and beyond all plagues, beasts, and evil angels Christ is nonetheless with his saints, and wins the final victory. (*LW* 35:411).

*Lee Snook’s* sermon, which opens this issue, is like apocalyptic in that it sees Christ as the end. Unlike some apocalyptic, however, it finds the end in the love of Christ the servant rather than the power of Christ the tyrant. We deliberately include Professor Snook’s sermon as a gentle counterpoint to those apocalyptic hopes that seem to delight unwholesomely in violence and control.

*Craig R. Koester's* remarkably helpful history of the interpretation of Revelation reminds us clearly that there is little new in modern attempts to interpret the book. Reminders of past mistakes will help keep us honest in our present readings.

*Nancy Koester* extends the historical review into American protestantism. Her exploration of American post-millennial thought will be particularly useful as the church sorts out its social mission in today's world.

*Fidon Mwombeki* reminds us that other cultures have other issues in interpreting a book like Revelation. In overhearing his comments on African interpretation, American Christians will recognize some common problems and also be encouraged to listen anew to the book's powerful message of hope.

*Robert H. Smith* presents an interpretation of Revelation not so much in words as in pictures—particularly the woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer. He finds in Dürer's work the new religious and artistic spirit of German humanism.

In his own self-identification, *Cordell Strug* tells us "he worries a lot." His chilling description of apocalyptic themes in movies makes us his partners in worry. His final reliance on the cosmic drama of Christ calls us to be partners in hope.

*Wendell W. Frerichs* laments the hegemony of historical-critical or dispensationalist readings of the book of Daniel. He suggests a non-polemical evangelical reading that focuses on the prophet's admonition and hope as that can be addressed to the modern church.

*Joy A. Schroeder* analyzes the woman of Revelation 12, finding many images and allusions coming together in her. Most important for present Christian women and men is her faithfulness and her opposition to evil, which make her a fitting role model for all called to endure the devil's attack.

*Richard L. Jeske* takes us through the book of Revelation, presenting its challenge and hope for contemporary parish life. "John of Patmos intended to bring a word of encouragement and hope to his original audience," writes Jeske, "and any use of John's writing to frighten people and to increase their anxieties, especially by means of speculative predictions, is a misuse of John's writing."

*James Arne Nestingen* argues that apocalyptic thought, defined as "the cosmological dimension of Easter hope," was essential to Luther's understanding of Christ. Luther's apocalyptic vision, says Nestingen, is what separates the reformer's radical assertions about Christ as the end of the law from Melanchthon's later revisionism on this issue.

In a resource article, *Roy A. Harrisville*, who has written extensively on the history of exegesis and who, more than most, appreciates the philosophical background and theological implications of what biblical critics do, examines and responds to four types of recent biblical interpretation.

Is legalized gambling a justifiable boon to Native American sovereignty or an economic and social parasite? *F. William Johnson* and *R. James Addington* go Face to Face on this question. In *Texts in Context*, *Duane A. Olson* examines the Johannine gospel texts for the Sundays of Easter.

F.J.G.