



# The Book of Revelation in the Parish

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**L**ET'S STUDY THE BOOK OF REVELATIONS," THE ADULT BIBLE CLASS SUGGESTED TO the new pastor. "When did you last study it?" she asked. "About three years ago just after Pastor James arrived. We usually start off with Revelations when the new pastor comes, to see if the new one can make sense out of it. After all, Mr. Camping says that if you study Revelations you'll know when the end of the world will come." "O.K.," Pastor Sharon said, "but let's start off by learning the real name of the book: singular, not plural – the Revelation."

Already a learning point had been made, with a lot of people out there still waiting to learn it. Some of the easiest and most obvious things to learn about the book of Revelation are the ones most readily overlooked: its name, its author, its original audience, its purpose. Sent to readers who have experienced political and social pressure, it is written in code language precisely so that the oppressors would not understand it. Its intention is not to confuse the oppressed, but to encourage them and bring them hope. Its code language is not designed to obfuscate the very ones it wishes to uplift; nor is it to put them on hold, as if they should wait twenty centuries until Mr. Lindsey, Mr. Robertson, or Mr. Camping would decipher the code and let us know that the whole earth is on its last legs.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>These three names are probably familiar to many members of your parish. Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) combined fundamentalist biblical interpretation with outright scare tactics to predict the end of the world. His huge readership has tolerated his readjustments in the light of deadlines come and gone and has continued to purchase new editions of his book, which by 1981 had achieved its 86th printing. In a 1980 report to his 700 Club, Pat Robertson, the presidential candidate, identified the beast of Revelation 13 as the Soviet Union, which would attack Israel to gain access to middle east oil; the economy of western Europe would be doomed, a "counterfeit Messiah" would arise, a satanic figure "more malevolent than Adolph Hitler," who in 1980 was approximately 27 years old and was being groomed to take over the world. Harold Camping, the California radio preacher, used his biblical calculations to predict that the end of the world would occur on September 27, 1994. Evidently he miscalculated, but there are people who still listen to him.

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The title of the book is “The Revelation,” or, to be literal, “The Apocalypse,” as given in its opening words. “Apocalypse” is a Greek word whose English equivalent is “revelation,” and the book can just as well be called “The Apocalypse.” But whether “Apocalypse” or “Revelation” or “the Revelation” it remains singular. It is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ,” to be exact, transmitted to a man named John, who identifies himself to his readers as a “servant” of God (1:1), “your brother” (1:9). He is geographically separated from his readers and writing to them from the island of Patmos, but we don’t know why he was there. Perhaps he was forcibly removed to Patmos, or perhaps he was there voluntarily in order to visit those who had been banished to that well-known site of imperial custody in order to proclaim to them “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). But in that same verse he also says that he shares with his readers on the mainland “the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance,” which seems to suggest that John himself had been exiled there because of his ministry among his churches.

He writes “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” to them, to his churches on the mainland, seven of them, beginning with Ephesus (2:1) and moving in a geographical circle around to Laodicea (3:14). This is Pauline territory, and John knows the language they have known ever since Paul’s ministry there. He knows that in their worship services they are used to someone bringing a “revelation” (1 Cor 14:6, 26), and so he tells them to read aloud what he has written, obviously when they gather for worship, like others do when they bring a revelation.<sup>2</sup> In fact, John himself says that the idea of writing to them came to him in church (1:10), in a worship service, “on the Lord’s day” (Sunday), when he was “in the Spirit,” i.e., in the community of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Ask your Bible class if they have ever been “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” After the uneasy silence, remind them of words they use as they begin their communal worship: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit...”<sup>4</sup> On Sunday they are the inspired community of believers, gathering together “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” People read aloud to them there, speak to them prophetic words, bring to them the testimony of the gospel, which, when the Holy Spirit gets hold of it, is always “the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gives.” Of course, Paul went to great lengths in 1 Corinthians 14 to insist that whatever “revelation” or “prophecy” does take place in the worship services is clearly understood, even by the outsiders (1 Cor 14:16). At first sight, it looks like John of Patmos didn’t learn that lesson very well. Or did he?

<sup>2</sup>So an ἀποκάλυψις (a revelation) is something which is transmitted between individuals, i.e., the human agent is not lacking. The source remains the Spirit, but the transmission is always mediated.

<sup>3</sup>See R. L. Jeske, “Spirit and Community in the Johannine Apocalypse,” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985) 452-66.

<sup>4</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship*, 56, 77, 98; *Book of Common Prayer* (Episcopal) 323, 355.

## I. THE WORSHIP SETTING

In many respects, the book of Revelation is more accessible than most biblical books to the life of modern-day congregations. The worship setting makes it so, and the elements of Christian worship permeate the book.<sup>5</sup> It begins with Christian worship, with a benediction and an invitation for one to read and others to listen (1:3), and it concludes with the ancient *maranatha* (22:20), spoken at early Christian eucharistic gatherings (see 1 Cor 11:26; 16:22) as well as in modern eucharistic liturgies.<sup>6</sup> Throughout John's writing the worship practices of early Christianity are reflected in hymns (Rev 4:11), salutations (1:4-5a), thanksgivings (11:17), liturgical gestures (1:17), blessings (1:3), doxologies (1:5b-6, 7:10), and benedictions (22:21), including its own version of the *Sanctus* :

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come! (4:8)

The influence of the book of Revelation on modern worship has proved to be a lasting one, as can be seen from the formal liturgies now in use in our churches. In each of the communion liturgies of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, in one form or another, the words of the Hymn of Praise come directly from the book of Revelation (see 5:12-13; 11:15; 19:6,16):

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,  
whose blood set us free to be people of God.  
Power and riches and wisdom and strength,  
and honor and blessing and glory are his.  
This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia.<sup>7</sup>

In the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* the imagery of the worship scenes in the book of Revelation (cf. 6:9-11; 7:9) is recalled in one of the eucharistic prayers:

And therefore we praise you, joining with the heavenly chorus, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all those in every generation who have looked to you in hope, to proclaim with them your glory, in their unending hymn....<sup>8</sup>

Virtually everything in the opening chapter speaks of images and symbols recognizable to Christians who attend worship: revelation, prophecy, Alpha and Omega, a beatitude, Lord's day, word of God, lampstands, etc. The dramatic moment of the chapter is a liturgical moment, when John sees the risen Jesus between the lampstands and hears him speak (1:12-20). It is a sight which the worshiping community sees every Sunday, the voice they hear when they listen, the vision of hope placed before them: between the lampstands, the lights, the candles is an image of "the living one who was dead and is alive forever and ever," who has "the keys of Death and Hades." In 1:20 the lampstands are identified as a

<sup>5</sup>This was emphasized by Bishop Hanns Lilje, *The Last Book of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

<sup>6</sup>*LBW*, 70, 90, 111; cf. *BCP*, 363, 368.

<sup>7</sup>*LBW*, 60, 81, 102.

<sup>8</sup>*BCP*, 370; cf. also 362, 367.

symbol for the churches, and every congregation sees and hears what John saw and heard: the Jesus who stands between the lampstands is the living Lord always present in the midst of the churches. The risen one has a word of hope to give them.

The description John gives of the one standing in the midst of the lampstands is an early indicator of the kind of symbolism John will use in the rest of the book. It is Daniel's Son of Man arrayed in the splendor of Ezekiel's cherubim (cf. Dan 7:9,13; Ezek 1:7). His only weapon is his word (cf. Isa 11:4), his face comparable to the sun, the greater light created to rule the day (Gen 1:16). His voice is described like God's voice is described: like the sound of a trumpet (Exod 19:16,19), like the sound of many waters (Ezek 43:2). His head of hair was "white as white wool," like Daniel's Ancient of Days (Dan 7:9), and around his waist was a golden sash, the sacred vestment for Israel's priests (Exod 28:4, 29:5).

Already in the first chapter John indicates the source from which he will draw his imagery. That source is also a permanent fixture within Christian worship: the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> Of course, for him and his churches the Old Testament comprised their authoritative canonical writings, since the New Testament had not yet been produced. The reservoir, then, for his symbolic imagery was the Old Testament, that body of sacred literature which was read in John's churches, which formed the basis for preaching, which was read through the prism of Christ crucified and risen, which so read and heard could offer them encouragement and hope. It would also provide the code language which would be familiar to the worshipping community that listened to its sacred writings on the Lord's day, while remaining unfamiliar to those who did not.

## II. "DEAR SEVEN..."

The second major part of the book of Revelation is comprised of letters to the seven churches. The number seven is the number of completeness, a number which figures prominently in John's entire writing. In this case, the seven churches stand for the whole church. All the churches are to hear what is said to one church in one given place. The church in Ephesus is the church—in Ephesus. That is, the positives and the negatives of church life in Ephesus are the same elsewhere, and what happens elsewhere happens also in Ephesus. The churches can learn from one another.

What this section of the Revelation offers to modern readers is a glimpse of church life which can relate to our own. John of Patmos knows the inner conditions of each of these churches, and says so: "I know your works" (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15); "I know your affliction and your poverty" (2:9), "I know where you are living" (2:12). He speaks to them in the name of Jesus, and therefore not only brings them a message of hope but also one of challenge. His writing is a "revelation," a word which means "unveiling," and he also calls it a "prophecy" (1:3), i.e., a prophetic

<sup>9</sup>John's churches would no doubt have used the Greek Old Testament, which would not have conformed to the Hebrew canon defined a decade earlier at Jamnia.

word of God, a sermon (cf. 1 Corinthians 14).<sup>10</sup> The subject of the revelation is to reveal the presence (or absence) of Jesus in the life of the churches. The subject of the revelation is neither a periodization of world history nor a prediction of the end of the world. What is to be unveiled is not a timetable to identify the final days of this planet; the object of the unveiling is rather ourselves and our condition before God. Identified in Rev 22:9 as a Christian prophet, John of Patmos writes a prophetic message from the one who walks among his churches, unveiling them and challenging them to live out the gospel in a hostile world. The number seven calls the whole church to the revelation, to the unveiling of its life before its Lord, and it offers Christians of every time and every place a call to endurance (13:10; 14:12). The message to each church gets specific, holding up a mirror to them; and churches of every time and every place are to see themselves reflected there.

Before a parish embarks on a new mission statement or on a new congregational profile, it might read the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. John of Patmos has had time to analyze the inner life of each of these churches, and he envisions what the risen Christ would have to say to them through him. Paper and ink are scarce, so he must choose his words carefully, using references and symbols they would readily understand. His remarks will be pointed, but that is often the mark of prophetic address, and faithful hearers will welcome it. There is no need to worry about hurt feelings, the tip-toeing around fragile egos, the skirting of sensitive issues. It is prophetic speech, a revelation, an unveiling, and a speaking of the truth.

Truth is, he tells the Ephesian congregation they are more interested in truth than in love. That is a criticism. There are good things to be said about Ephesus: an active church, patient and steadfast (2:2-3). But it is also a fallen church, in need of repentance (2:5). In its zeal to purge itself of false teachers it has succumbed to lovelessness (2:2, 4). It now has the reputation of being a great heresy-hunting church, but in the process it has missed the point of the gospel: its people have abandoned the love they had when the gospel first brought them together (2:4). Hating works is one thing, but hating people is another (2:6), and that is Ephesus' portrait now. Truth is, if the victorious Lord has to choose between doctrinal systems and love, he will always choose love. He does not need an orthodox church in Ephesus, but a loving one. The one who has conquered by his own love of sinners will not be represented by zealots who hate them. He is not interested in listening to their denials; he just tells them that unless they repent he will pull their lampstand from its place. He will no longer be walking among them.

Reformers of the church always return to the scriptures to see if the biblical writings can still function for the ailing church as judge, rule, and norm. A parish interested in reviewing its own mission policies or its own inner profile will want to be among John's readers and listeners to see if the risen Lord is still walking

<sup>10</sup>In 1 Corinthians 14 the word προφητεία (prophecy) is used for preaching, intelligible preaching, in contrast to γλώσσαις λαλῶν (glossolalia, ecstatic speech, speaking in tongues). The primary meaning of "prophecy," then, is to proclaim a message from God; inside the worship service that would be the act of preaching. In Rev 22:9 John is identified as a Christian prophet.

among them. The letter to Ephesus is a good place to begin. Are we walking in the love of Christ? Have we abandoned the love which first called us together? Are we able to distinguish between good theology and bad theology without becoming hateful about it? Has our zeal to spot false doctrine been translated into a mean-spirited rejection of people for whom Christ has died? Have we become so institutionalized that our own agendas have higher priority than Christ's own expectations of us? Are we even able to *hear* this prophetic word of God addressed to us, as one of the seven churches to whom it was written? If not, if so, move on, and there will be something in these seven letters for every church.

Smyrna is a persecuted church, rejected by people whom they had counted on as friends. Removed from membership in their synagogues because of their faith in Jesus, its people have lost the privileged status of a legal religion, and they may now have to suffer for their faith. In fact, some sixty years later their own bishop, Polycarp, was martyred. "Be faithful until death," they are told (2:10), because in baptism they have died with Christ, and another dying poses no threat to them (2:11). In other words, Christians in Smyrna have resources to help them in their times of testing. Read Rev 21:8-11 to see if your church faces any of the kinds of pressures which Smyrna faced. What is your congregation's role in the community? Does it know you're there? Ask what your church would do if it faced serious outside pressures, such as loss of privileged status in the community (e.g., no longer tax exempt, no longer free to evangelize, no freedom for your pastor to address political issues). And while your discussion proceeds, remember what has been said to Ephesus as well.

Pergamum's church also has known persecution and martyrdom. It has also experienced external pressure from the government as well as internal pressure from its own members to conform to the wishes of the state. The great Roman temple there, built in honor of Caesar Augustus, beckoned to the entire populace to participate in the official civic religious exercises. "What's a little incense here, a sacrificial offering there, a show of the flag here, and a salute there, if it keeps us from looking unpatriotic?" some in this church would say. "Why court trouble by not showing? Antipas was a fanatic who's made it rough for the rest of us (2:13). What do you mean 'has our witness lost its sharpness'? What do you mean 'you can't tell the difference between us and civic religion'? What do you mean 'Jesus' sword is double-edged' (2:12)? What do you mean 'one edge for the world and one edge for us'?"

Thyatira had its trade unions and secret societies and its fascination with a spiritualism which John mocks as "the deep things of Satan" (2:13). He warns about the local guru playing pied piper with people's spirituality (2:20), and asks people to use their minds as well as their impulses, their heads as well as their emotions (2:23). Do we know a church like Thyatira?

Sardis's church has a great reputation in its community for being a church alive and active, but behind its facade this church is dead (3:1). It is a church going through the motions but with little substance to its witness. It has fooled everyone, including itself, because it is unable to distinguish any longer between real Chris-

tian witness and useless religiosity. A pathetic charade, it has become “the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity.”<sup>11</sup> Do we know a church like Sardis?

Laodicea, that wealthy, self-sufficient church, is neither hot nor cold (3:15). Smugly self-satisfied, it is a show church, on the surface in need of nothing. Fat, not sassy, it is controversy-free—neutral, lukewarm, and paralyzed. Next to the medicinal hot springs near its sister church in Hierapolis, and next to the cold waters of the Lycus river near its sister church in Colossae, Laodicea’s church has lost its ability to heal; neither hot nor cold, it can neither soothe nor invigorate. Financially secure, it is spiritually impotent. Within reach, right around the corner, so near yet so far, there are things they see every day which they really need: new garments to cover their shame and new salve to heal their blindness (3:18). Both are produced daily by people in their own church, at least by their neighbors. But who’s listening? Do we know a church like Laodicea?

One church escapes indictment. One out of seven. Not a fat church, not self-sufficient, not financially secure. Philadelphia’s church has been under pressure (3:10), but it hasn’t caved in. It has been pressured by civic religion and offered status if it participates; but the members have found the cost of political power too high, and have decided to remain true to the name of the crucified one (3:8). Like Smyrna, they experienced rejection by their friends (3:9) and were thrown into an identity crisis. So they are given a new identity. On their foreheads they wear the name of God’s new city—and John will come back to that later (21:1ff.). To them the risen Christ says: “I know that you have little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” One out of seven. Do we know a church like Philadelphia?

So Christ comes to his church. In letter, in prophetic speech, in word and sacrament (3:20).<sup>12</sup> His coming is a revelation, an unveiling. What is said to one is said to all, and they are to listen. At the end of each letter is the same refrain: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

### III. SEVEN SEVENS

Now that John of Patmos has described the forces at work within the churches, he offers his prophetic vision of the forces at work in the world, in order to help his readers understand why the world is hostile and threatening to them, and to offer them encouragement and hope. This section of the book is dominated by seven interlocking vision-cycles (6:1-21:5a), bracketed by two eschatological portraits: one of God’s present vantage point, the heavenly court (4:1-5:14), and one of God’s future vantage point, a new heaven and a new earth, the city of God

<sup>11</sup>G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper, 1966) 48.

<sup>12</sup>In 3:20 the word used for “eat” is not the normal word for casual eating (*ἔσθ(ω)*), but the word used in the early church for participation in the Lord’s supper (*δ(ε)ιπνέω*). Bach’s librettist for Cantata #61, *Savior of the Nations, Come*, was aware of this accent, and translated Rev 3:20 for the bass recitative: “zu dem werde ich eingeht und das Abendmahl mit ihm halten und er mit mir” (“to him I will come in and celebrate the Lord’s supper with him, and he with me”).

(21:5b-22:5). Literature that can provide some aid in presenting this material to a parish study group is listed below.<sup>13</sup>

### 1. The Liturgy

The first of the two vantage points indicates again the importance of the worship setting for John's entire writing. It is an eschatological scene, one removed from the confines of time and space, depicting the vantage point of God. This is the only objective vantage point from which to view all things human and make judgments about them. John's God is the one "who is and who was and who is to come" (1:8), which means that the confines of time and space are relative only to the human language used to describe this God. As we have earlier said, John's being "in the Spirit" relates also to communal worship, and all that follows is understood best by those who are at home in the Christian worship setting, in the community of the Spirit. The praise of God at the heavenly court is the language of Christian liturgy, and the imagery used to describe God's throne room comes straight from the Old Testament.

Jasper and carnelian are among the stones of paradise in Ezek 28:13. The rainbow around God's throne recalls the promise to Noah that God's rule would be featured by his covenant with the whole earth, God's mercy toward every living creature (Gen 9:12-17). The twenty-four elders on twenty-four thrones (Rev 4:4) reflect the ancient idea of the heavenly court which keeps closest counsel with God regarding affairs in heaven and on earth (cf. Job 1-2; Psalm 82). The number twenty-four also suggests the totality of God's people, a combination of twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles, now doing priestly service (1 Chron 24:4-5). The lightning and thunder that proceed from God's throne (Rev 4:5) recall the many Old Testament passages that describe God's awesome power in terms of the activity of nature (cf. Exod 19:16ff.; Ps 18:12ff.). The four living creatures—lion, ox, man, eagle—represent for John all living things, and they join the twenty-four elders, creation, and people of God, in praising the Creator. The scroll in God's right hand (Rev 5:1) is a symbol that all of world history is subject to the power of God, and no one is able to unlock that scroll but "the Lamb who was slain."

That is the dominant image of the book. "The Lamb who was slain" occurs twenty-eight times, and itself has various antecedents in Old Testament tradition. By the time of John of Patmos the church had already employed the imagery of the passover lamb of Israel's exodus from Egypt (Exod 21:1ff.; cf. 1 Cor 5:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19) in reference to Jesus. Acts 8:32 applies to Jesus the words of Isa 53:7, "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,

<sup>13</sup>Study guides for general readership: J. L. Blevins, *Revelation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984); E. S. Fiorenza, *Invitation to the Book of Revelation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981); R. L. Jeske, *Revelation for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). The classic critical exegetical commentary is by R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols. (1920; reprint, London: T. & T. Clark, 1975-6). Of current commentaries, the one which offers the most comprehensive and detailed analysis is by R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); profitably used alongside it is the commentary by C. Caird (note 11). For a review of scholarly publications, see R. L. Jeske and D. Barr, "The Study of the Apocalypse Today," in *Recherches de science religieuse* 14 (1988) 337-44.



so he opened not his mouth." This image of Jesus, dominant throughout the book, is code-language to the worshiping church, equipped with its knowledge of its theological heritage. The Lamb who was slain is alone worthy to open the scroll. Puzzling except to Christians, that image of Jesus means that all history, past, present, and future, is to be seen through him. Through him Christians are able to understand a fallen, hostile world, in him to overcome it, and in him to see it redeemed (5:9-10). The Lamb who was slain is the most prominent image of hope in the book.

What a wealth of resource material lies in these two chapters for a review of parish worship practices! "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb..." (5:13). Is that where our worship is focused? Is God in Christ the object of our worship, or do we pander to our own ears, satisfy the consumer, please the buyer, stoop to entertain the congregation? Does our worship have to do with the eternal, or with the (con)temporary? Has our congregation been allowed to look at the options, or only at "what they want"? Have their eyes been lifted to John's vision of a continuity not just with their own secular tastes but with the people of God of time past, with the praise of God by apostles and patriarchs? Is the continuity of the church with Israel reflected in our congregational praise of God? Do our worship practices accord with the precious site to which they are directed? Are our parishioners lifted to the precious throne of God, or do we expect God to come get his ticket to our rock concerts? Are we inviting every living creature to join us in a theater where the consumer is king, or in worship where God is king, a worship honed by centuries of attention to the development of human spirituality before the face of God? Is our attention directed to the "Lamb who was slain," in our thanksgiving, in our proclamation, in our use of the sacraments? Or is the focus elsewhere, on us, on our meager fads, on our likes and dislikes, on our schedules for the rest of the day? "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb": it is there where our worship begins and ends, and John of Patmos is there to remind us of that again.

## *2. The Vision Cycles*

This praise of God continues throughout the section of the vision cycles, 6:1-21:5a. The symbol of the 144,000 indicates the fullness of Israel (7:4ff) and is amplified by the "multitude that no one can count" (7:9), reflecting the church and its mission to the world, all those who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14). Again, this portrays the continuity of the church with ancient Israel; all are there to "worship God day and night within God's temple." This is the Israel of God, of which Paul speaks in Gal 6:15-16, a new creation. Revelation 6-7 says that neither cosmic calamities nor the forces of evil at work in the world nor the final destruction at the end of time will overwhelm those whose identity and security are found within the Israel of God.

It is important to recognize John's method of interlocking some of the vision cycles. It is this feature which presents a difficulty to those interpreters who wish to view this material in a historically linear fashion. For instance, the opening of the

seventh seal actually sets in motion the next cycle, that of the seven trumpets (8:1ff.); the seventh trumpet inaugurates the next cycle, the visions of conflict (11:15ff.), and one of the angels of the seven-bowls vision shows John the visions of Babylon's fall (17:1ff.). There is also some close parallelism between various cycles, especially between the visions of the seven trumpets and the seven bowls: the second element has to do with the sea, the third the rivers, the fifth the nether world, and the sixth mentions the river Euphrates (compare 8:8-9:25 with 16:3-14; also compare 14:1-20 and 19:1-6).

By structuring his writing in this way the author is not intending a linear-temporal reading of his symbols. The message that he wants all his readers to hear is that Christ crucified is the victor, whose own victory offers promise, hope, and therefore a future to God's people. This one message is portrayed by various word pictures, and those who use the word pictures to chart the sequence of future world historical events have missed the significance of John's method of interlocking. The seven sevens represent a complete whole: the same message is stated in different portraits seven times. So we should really speak of John's overall "vision," rather than of many various and singular "visions," and remember the title of the book: "the Revelation," not many.

A linear-historical reading of the Revelation also misses the point of John's symbolism. The author's symbolic imagery is not static, sedimented symbolism, with each symbol fixed forever on only one point of reference. The symbols in the Revelation have a "tensive" quality; their meaning is not exhausted by any one referent. The symbols invite many comparisons: a symbol may be *like* a given referent but not equal to it. For example, the beast of Revelation 13 is clearly a symbol for the Roman empire; however, the empire in itself is symbolic of any human institution which sets itself over God, at any point in history. Appropriate interpretation will avoid limiting this symbol to any one point of historical reference and will retain the dynamic quality that a symbol in fact allows.

However, there is one set of symbols in the Revelation which has only a single, fixed point of reference, namely, the christological symbols. These symbols will allow no other reference point than Christ crucified as the victor whose own victory guarantees the future for God's people. There are a number of richly drawn images that clearly refer to Christ alone. In this case, because of the nature of this one central subject of the book, the reference point cannot fully be described by any one symbol. In fact, the entire complex of the Revelation's symbolic imagery has its creative ground in the cross of Christ, the one who died and now lives. It is this reference point from which any new interaction with John's word pictures must move. John's churches are used to this, because they are Pauline churches (cf. Gal 2:19-20).

In our study of the Revelation, then, a good rule of thumb is to ask where the emphasis of interpretation has been placed. Has the reader concentrated only on the meaning he or she perceives behind each individual symbol, or has that reader related John's choice of symbols to the central message pervading his entire writing, namely, to the good news of the crucified one who now lives? Has the reader

connected his or her applications of the symbols to this central message? For instance, John of Patmos intended to bring a word of encouragement and hope to his original audience, 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. The good news of the one who died and now lives offers hope, not anxiety. John's message is that through the most tragic of human circumstances God's offer of life and hope is still good.

The vision of the seven bowls of purgation, wiping the earth clean and making it ready for the new creation, is completed (15:1-16:21), and with the fall of the hostile powers (17:1-18:24) the scene turns once again to the praise of God surrounding God's throne (19:1-10), offered by the same heavenly chorus we heard in chapters 5-6. A rider appears, identified as "The Word of God" (19:13), his robe dipped in blood. This is the conqueror, the Lamb who was slain, and the final battle is about to be waged. His followers are aligned behind him, but they do not engage in violent combat, not even in the great final battle. The enemy is overcome by one weapon, wielded by the rider: it is "the sword of his mouth." The only weapon needed to overcome the opponents is "the sword of his mouth." A pacifist symbol, it is also a sign of confidence in the outcome of Christian preaching: the word of Christ is all that is needed to overcome the hostile powers, to win over the nations.

To churches under pressure, socially adrift and politically suppressed, this is a courageous message of faith, confidence, and hope. It also bespeaks John's vision of Christian behavior in a threatening world, something he has told his readers once before: "Let anyone who has an ear listen: If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (13:9-10). Is this too radical a message for today's churches?

### *3. The City of God*

With the old order purged the new heaven and earth begin to appear. The drama now unfolds, not up in the sky somewhere, as if John is painting the final outcome of the old primordial, cosmic conflict. God's new city is not some transcendent place, remote from where human beings live. It is simply eschatological: it is God's city, not ours, a new creation from the God who makes all things new (21:5). It is not meant for the extra-terrestrial stratosphere, but rather "comes down out of heaven from God" (21:2): it is the new Jerusalem. "See, the home of God is among mortals," not remote from them; "God will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples" (21:3).

Within the community of the Spirit John sees things differently. The churches of Paul are used to that concept: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17). You see things differently when you come to church, at least you are asked to. Your vision of what can be usually begins when someone places a biblical text before you, in which God's point of view is expressed. When that happens a new vision begins. So John's new vision begins with a biblical text, a major Old Testament

motif: "I will place my dwelling in your midst and I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev 26:11-12; cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Jer 31:33; Ezek 37:27; Zech 8:8). And soon you see that the future of God cannot be built on the old failed structures of human achievement: it is eschatological, i.e., it comes from God, it is God's own doing, God's new city. In contrast to the old city rife with corruption and vice (18:2-3), God's new city comes down from heaven to earth like a new bride adorned for her husband (21:2).

With a biblical text and within the community of the Spirit, John could see the new city of God: it is a precious one, like jasper, transparent, "clear as crystal" (21:22). In fact, so was the city itself: precious, made of pure gold, "clear as crystal" (21:18). It was transparent; you could see through its wall, which has four sides, and three gates on each side. On the gates were inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, connecting it to its Old Testament heritage, and the wall had twelve foundations, "and on them are the twelve names of the apostles of the Lamb." Nothing new for John's churches, since they were already quite used to such language: "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (Eph 2:19-20).

You had to be able to see through the city wall, because of the nucleus within it. Most city walls encompass the city proper, but not this one. The city itself measures 1500 miles on each side, far out of proportion to the city wall, which measures 216 feet (21:16-17). The wall surrounds the nucleus of the city. Is there a temple inside? No, John saw no temple in the city, "for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (21:22). When one looks at this city, one does not see an institution; through its transparency one is to see through to its nucleus, "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb." That means that everything that is done in God's new city is to reflect what God has done for us in Christ, the crucified and risen one. That is its glory and its light. The transparency of the city has another purpose: so that the nations will walk by its light. Worship of the old creation is not done here: sun, moon, stars are not how we guide our lives anymore. For this city, "the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb."

In the midst of the city there is a river which flows from the throne of God and the Lamb, which says something about the purpose of the city. On either side of this river is the tree of life, withheld since the fall (Gen 3:24); but now it is never dormant, always producing fruit each month, never without leaves. The leaves are there, John says, "for the healing of the nations" (22:2). The city of God has work to do: to bring healing to the nations – no more corruption (21:27), no more racism (22:3), no more dangerous night (22:5). The face of God, withheld since the fall (Gen 3:24), will now be seen by everyone (22:4).

Around the font the worshipping community hears the words: "By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>*LBW*, 121.

At the altar this community of the Spirit sings: "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world."<sup>15</sup> After the meal they depart with Simeon's song: "My eyes have seen your salvation...a light to reveal you to the nations."<sup>16</sup> The book of Revelation is never very far removed from the life of any Christian congregation, because it lives and breathes the very language of the community of the Spirit at worship. It is the language of the people of God, inherited from Israel and developed over the centuries for their own spiritual sustenance and growth. The new city of God seen by John is also never remote from that community; already in Rev 3:12 John had heard the risen one say, "I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name."

God's new city is not transcendent but transparent, not secluded from but open to the nations. You do not have to wait to get a glimpse of it. As a matter of fact, you are it. And every Christian congregation gets to ask questions of itself that can mean healing and renewal for mission. Do we exhibit that transparency by which people can see in our midst the God who has acted in Christ crucified and risen? Do our lives reflect the light of God and the lamp of the Lamb? Do our worship services reflect the joy around God's throne and the mission of God's new city? Are we able to offer healing to the nations? Are we able to receive healing ourselves? When people look at us, do they see a depressed angel, an angry angel, a conceited angel, an anxious and fearful angel? Or do they see an angel eager to show them from our midst the river of life and invite them to its waters for rebirth and to its food for healing? When people look at us do they see an institution taken up with itself, or do they see the transparent city with the throne of God and the Lamb who was slain at its center?

Such questions correspond with the purposes John intended for this book. He wanted his churches to use it as a resource for parish renewal. And the striking thing is that the book ends as it has begun: not with a prediction of the ultimate future of the world, but an encouragement to the churches to bring God's newness to their own inner life and witness. The book of Revelation has little interest in supplying the churches with a timetable for God's future. It offers rather a challenge to the churches of every age to examine their mission and ministry in the light of the gospel, to reflect the vantage point of God in all that they do. And if that happens, what John of Patmos has written will indeed be a revelation, the revelation of Jesus Christ.

<sup>15</sup>*LBW*, 72, 92, 114.

<sup>16</sup>*LBW*, 73, 93, 116.