

LIVING OUT THE FUTURE:
 MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION
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Let me begin this paper by stating my basic assumptions: first, the whole of Scripture tells the story of a God who is on a mission to redeem and restore a rebellious humanity and ultimately all things through Jesus Christ. Second, the church's identity is rooted in and flows out of its participation in the mission of the triune God. Picturing the church apart from the *missio Dei* would be like imagining an ocean apart from water. Third, the New Testament writings, without exception, are addressed to Christian communities that are caught up in God's mission. What is more, these documents aim to shape and energize God's people so that they might faithfully engage in the loving mission of God.

Given these assumptions, what, then, do we do with the book of Revelation? Perhaps the most common reading in Nazarene churches worldwide sees Revelation primarily as a book that predicts immanent future events. As a result, concern for the church and its present mission takes a back row seat. Indeed, in some popular "pre-tribulationist" readings of Revelation, the church is "raptured" to heaven at the beginning of chapter four ("Come up here" 4:1). This amounts to an escape from participation in God's mission to an alienated world.

A Community-forming Purpose

In contrast, I am convinced the Apocalypse is one of the deepest wells in the New Testament for understanding who we are as God's people and how we are to participate in the mission of God.¹ This conviction is linked in part to John's rhetorical aims. For John's audience, the call to participate in the *missio Dei* was lived out on the dusty streets and in the crowded tenements of the Roman Empire. Christians in the churches in Asia to which he writes faced two basic problems: persecution (see 2:10, 13; 3:10)² and accommodation. For the majority of these churches, the greater threat of the two was the temptation to accommodate to the empire's ideology and practices (2:14-16, 20-23; 3:1-3, 15-19), perhaps as a means of avoiding persecution. Christians in Asia Minor faced daily pressures to participate in Roman public life, which was entangled with the "civil religion" of the emperor cult and the worship of

¹ This paper draws from Dean Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: Biblical Perspectives on Being, Doing and Telling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 231-51.

² There is a growing scholarly consensus that the threat of persecution for John's churches probably came in the form of sporadic local hostility, rather than an empire-wide campaign against Christians. See Greg K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 28-33. Moreover, John sees his audience's present trials as a foretaste of intensifying suffering to come (see 6:9-11).

traditional gods. For John, however, compromising with the ways of the empire meant colluding with a whole system of imperial power—religious, economic and political. It placed them in league with a competing rule/empire, which claimed an allegiance that God alone deserved.

John, then, has a dual purpose for Revelation. Negatively, he seeks to distance these communities from the empire’s ways of thinking and living.³ Positively, he calls them to an unrivaled worship of the one sovereign God and to bear prophetic witness to God and his mission in the world. Michael J. Gorman rightly sees that Revelation “is above all a community-forming document, intended to shape communities of believers in Jesus as the Lamb of God into more faithful and missional communities of . . . worship and witness.”⁴ How, then, does Revelation seek to shape the church’s missional identity?

A Counter-Imagination

John gives these churches an alternative vision of the world from the deceptive worldview of the empire. It is as if he declares to his audience, “This is the way things *really* are,” from the perspective of God’s future and God’s throne. As Richard Bauckham wisely observes, John takes his readers into heaven “in order to see the world from a heavenly perspective.” The seer pulls back the curtain on God’s future so that they can see the present from the vantage point of God’s ultimate purpose for the world.⁵

Revelation’s vision, for example, of a multinational multitude in heaven, worshipping God and the Lamb day and night (7:9-17) is not simply a picture of the church’s future. It also offers Christian communities a counter-imagination, which defines who they are as God’s people in the present. John gives them a vision of the earth’s peoples, in all their ethnic and linguistic variety, reconciled to one another and to the triune God. Such a vision shapes their identity and mission. In effect, John asks his audience: Which version of reality will determine how you imagine the world and practice the faith? Will it be the vision of God’s new creation or the values of the earthly empire?

Being a Missional People

One way that Revelation shapes the church’s missional identity is by answering the question, “Who are we?” Part of John’s answer is to portray the church as a “kingdom” and “priests” (1:5; 5:10; cf.

³ John’s rhetorical aims help to explain why Revelation draws sharper boundaries between the church and the unbelieving world, than, say, Acts, which shows more openness to affirm what is positive in human culture (e.g., Acts 17:22-31).

⁴ Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 176.

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.

20:6). These images recall the defining covenant passage of Exodus 19:5-6. As a *kingdom* people, the church both shares in Christ's rule (2:26-27; 3:21; 5:10) and bears public testimony to that rule by living as an alternative to "the kingdom of this world" (11:15). As a *priestly* people, the church is called to mediate between God and the world. Just as Israel was set apart to be God's light to the Gentiles (Isa 49:6), so the new priestly community mediates God's presence to the nations by a witness of word and life.

Closely related is Revelation's picture of the churches of Asia as seven "lampstands" (1:12, 13, 20; cf. 11:4). In the Old Testament, Zechariah envisioned God's people Israel as a seven-branched golden menorah (Zech 4:2). John, however, sees not a single lampstand, but seven, suggesting that each local church represents God's people as a whole.⁶ As lampstands, these churches are to *be* the light of God to the world around them.

Bearing Costly Witness

What, then, are God's missional people called to *do*? Above all, their role is to bear faithful *witness*. In the first place, this means giving verbal testimony (*martyria*) to the word and truth of God (1:2, 9; 6:9; 12:11; 20:4), empowered by the prophetic Spirit (19:10). But the church does not bear witness with words alone. Its testimony is anchored in "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness" (1:5), and Jesus' unswerving witness led him to the cross. To follow the slain Lamb, likewise, means to bear witness and suffer. God's people cling to the "testimony of Jesus" (12:17; 19:10; cf. 1:2, 9). This phrase refers not only a testimony *about* Jesus; it also includes sharing in Jesus' *own* testimony through his words and his faithful life and death.⁷ God redeems by the spilled blood of the Lamb (1:5; 5:9; 12:11), and the church's witness is defined by God's suffering love. God's people follow the Lamb "wherever he goes," (14:4), even when he goes to the cross. But through their suffering witness of word and life, they also share in the Lamb's triumph (12:11).

John's vision of the two witnesses (11:1-13), in particular, spotlights the church's prophetic testimony. These two prophets/witnesses represent the church as a whole in its role of bearing witness.⁸ Their story unfolds like a three-part drama, in which the church embodies the narrative of Jesus in the

⁶ Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005), 53.

⁷ See A. A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, SNTSMS 31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 156-64.

⁸ Note that the two witnesses are called "lampstands" (11:4), a symbol which represents the seven churches (1:12, 20).

form of testimony.⁹ In Act one, the prophets' witness displays uncommon authority and miraculous power (11:4-6). The fire that issues from their mouth symbolizes the powerful word of God (11:5). John's description of the witnesses recalls, not only the prophetic careers of Elijah and Moses (11:6), but also the earthly ministry of Jesus, "in which he enjoyed unparalleled success against his foes . . . and in which he was widely celebrated for the liberating, authoritative power of his preaching."¹⁰

Act two spells a dramatic turn of events. The witnesses are killed by the beast, then publicly humiliated in the "great city . . . where their Lord was crucified" (11:7-10). Just as Jesus' testimony to God's kingdom led to his death at the hands of his enemies, the witnessing church can expect no different from the beastly powers.

In the third act, God, the *re-creator*, breathes new life into the witnesses, even as Jesus was raised from the dead. And, like Christ, vindicated, they ascend to heaven at God's own calling (11:11-12). But not only will *they* be saved. Their witness of word and poured out life, along with God's judgment through an earthquake, leads people from every nation to give glory to the God of heaven (11:13). Costly witness is missional.

What does Revelation's vision of the church as *witness* mean for our participation in God's mission today? First, it calls God's people to prophetically speak God's truth, even when it is unpopular to do so. In many global settings, the gospel of the slain and risen Lamb continues to rub against competing truth claims from dominant religions, ideologies, or worldviews. In postmodern contexts, truth tends to be transformed into a designer commodity, tailored to the consumer. But regardless of the circumstances, *how* we bear witness to the truth must always match our message. Our witness must non-coercive and vulnerable; it must embody the story of the crucified Lamb.

Second, the church's faithful witness frequently goes hand in hand with suffering. I admit that I have little experience with this aspect of John's message. For many Christian sisters and brothers in our world, opposition for the sake of Christ is an everyday reality. Undoubtedly, some participants in this conference grasp the connection between witness and suffering in a way I simply cannot. Yet even in relatively tolerant societies, when Christians prophetically bear witness in the public square, it is increasingly possible they will face some form of pushback or ridicule. Stephen Fowl makes this arresting observation: "The question . . . becomes whether Christians in America or elsewhere testify in word and deed to a faith substantial enough to provoke opposition from powers that are either indifferent or hostile to the triune God."¹¹

⁹ See Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 137-39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹¹ Stephen Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 71.

Whatever our circumstances, Revelation gives us hope that God will infuse the church's vulnerable testimony of word and life with divine power. As a result, even some who oppose us will come to glorify the one true God (11:13).

Witnessing through Worship

In Revelation, the witness of God's people is intertwined with worship.¹² Worship is not simply a liturgical practice. It is a public and "political" act. Worshipers proclaim loyalties. Throughout the Apocalypse, worship of the God who sits on the throne in heaven stands in sharp contrast to worship of the beast on earth (13:4-15; 14:9-11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), embodied for John's audience in the emperor cult. When the community sings songs of worship, it announces to the world that God is the one sovereign Lord and Caesar is not.

Worship is also missional. The many worship scenes in Revelation invite people to participate in God's mission. Michael Gorman states it well: "As a call to join the ongoing heavenly worship of God, Revelation is simultaneously a presentation of the divine drama that is celebrated in worship, and therefore also a summons to enter the story and mission of God."¹³ That call to worship is extended not only to the church, but also to the world. The community's worship seeks both to glorify God and to bring others into the sphere of worshipping God.

Leaving Babylon Behind

Part of John's strategy for forming the church's missional identity is to draw clear boundaries between the empire and the community of faith. With stinging symbolism, he exposes Rome as a formidable beast, which attracts the adoration of the whole earth (13:34). She is the harlot Babylon (chapter 17-18), a city that amasses her wealth by oppressing the powerless and exploiting the peoples of the empire. John uses the symbol of *Babylon* "to signify the tendency of humanity to construct idolatrous empires."¹⁴ It has biblical forerunners in cities like Babel, Sodom, and Babylon itself. But its present manifestation is Rome, whose evil outstrips them all.

It isn't enough, however, for congregations simply to open their eyes and recognize the beastly powers for what they are. These churches must actively "come out" of Babylon (18:4). This exodus is not from a physical city but from complicity with Babylon's greed, idolatry and injustice. It is a call to

¹² See Olutola K. Peters, *The Mandate of the Church in the Apocalypse of John*. Studies in Biblical Literature 77 (New York: Peter Lang), 2005, 142-44.

¹³ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 37.

¹⁴ Simon Woodman, *The Book of Revelation* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 232.

abandon Babylon-living. For John's audience, this involves separating from such ordinary cultural practices as eating food sacrificed to idols (2:14-15, 20-21), with its attachment to imperial worship. And, as John's message to the church in Laodicea shows, it means breaking with Babylon's arrogance and self-gratifying consumption (3:17; cf. ch 18). Emigrating from Babylon requires separation from the values and practices that prop up imperial idolatry and oppose the claims of the true God. Revelation calls the church to *be* a community of "holy people" (*hagioi*, e.g., 5:8, 13:7, 10; 14:12; 19:8), reflecting the character of a holy God.

But what does the appeal to "come out" of Babylon mean for how the church engages its world? Does John call for an isolating, navel-gazing, antiseptic brand of holiness? Not at all. In Revelation, holiness is wedded to mission. The church's participation in the *missio Dei* requires a dual movement: *both* separation and faithful witness. Only a people who are "blameless" and "without deceit" (14:4-5) can authentically bear witness to God's truth. As Gorman puts it, "The church cannot be the church *in* Babylon until it is the church *out of* Babylon."¹⁵ What's more, resisting the ways of the empire gives outsiders an opportunity to take a second look at the reality around them and perhaps renounce their citizenship in fallen Babylon.

What would it mean for Christian communities to "come out of Babylon" today? We must start by asking the Spirit to help us discern where "Babylon" is to be found. It may be much closer than we think. Where in the world do governments or companies promote their own wealth and security at the expense of powerless people? Where do political, economic, or religious powers function as empires that demand idolatrous loyalty?¹⁶ Where do individuals and societies bow to the culture-god of consumerism? And in what ways are Christians lured into being an accomplice to Babylon, either actively or passively?

For God's people, renouncing citizenship in Babylon surely involves prophetically challenging today's idol-makers, oppressors, traffickers and exploiters. But John also calls the church to the witness of a holy lifestyle, which resists the seductions of Babylon and visibly demonstrates a positive alternative. Consider, for example, the way we use our money. In many of our societies, consumer economics is a controlling power, an idol, and it's hard to drive against the flow of traffic. We need to ask some uncomfortable questions: Do we participate in a system of bribery and corruption that unjustly benefits those with power? Do we purchase unnecessary luxury goods at the expense of the resources of others? Can we continue to work for, invest in, or buy from companies that exploit the poor in order to sustain the lifestyle of the rich? Should churches pour their limited financial resources into buildings? Or might we

¹⁵ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 185.

¹⁶ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, JSNTSup 132 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 22.

better use those funds to support ministries that serve the needy and the lost? Christian communities will need to work out precisely *how* to leave Babylon in their own circumstances. It will not be the same in Manila as in Manhattan. But these are not simply questions of personal ethics. They are part of our Spirit-led witness to the world.

Embodying the Future

Thankfully, Revelation's story doesn't end in Babylon. John offers an alternative for God's people—the New Jerusalem. Revelation's vision of the new heaven and the new earth (chapters 21 and 22) reveals the ultimate triumph of God's mission. But how does this climactic vision inform our missional ecclesiology? If the New Jerusalem is simply a picture of the future destiny of Christians, without connection to the present life and mission of the church, then it has little to tell us. But that is not the case. Although the holy city belongs to the future, this vision profoundly shapes the present identity and mission of the church. In one sense, we need to read the Apocalypse, and, for that matter, the entire biblical story of God's mission, *from the back*. By latching onto the goal of the *missio Dei*, we receive the grace to live as a foretaste of God's future even now. John's breathtaking vision of New Jerusalem equips the church to live out Jesus' prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth, as it is in heaven*."

Revelation 21—22 pictures the *fullness* of God's saving and restoring purpose for his creation. Instead of the church being raptured to heaven, the New Jerusalem, the heavenly manifestation of the church, *comes down* to a renewed earth (21:2). This vision transforms the readers' theological imaginations and the way they see the church's role in the world.¹⁷ What are some aspects of the New Jerusalem that might shape our missional ecclesiology?

1. *Communion with God and Others.* The New Jerusalem represents intimate fellowship with God, as well as restored human relationships. Its citizens live in full, loving communion with one another, with the triune God the focus of their shared life. Above all, they enjoy the unhindered presence of God (21:3; 22:3-4). Such a vision energizes the church to bring others into fellowship with God. But the church is not simply a collection of saved individuals. Redeemed persons must also become a part of a loving, worshiping *community* (21:7).

2. *A Healing Community.* The mission of the New Jerusalem is "the healing of the nations" (22:2). This suggests God's restoring work in every arena of human life: spiritual, relational, physical, social and political, among them. Participating in God's mission, then, means serving as an agent of healing for all wounds and misery that result from human sin. If the church drinks from the spring of living water and

¹⁷ See Woodman, *Book of Revelation*, 235.

has the tree of life in its midst (21:6; 22:2), then what we offer the world's nations is abundant life in its fullest sense.¹⁸

3. A Just Community. There is no hint of injustice or oppression in the New Jerusalem. Whereas Babylon enriches itself by exploiting others (18:11-17), Jerusalem's extravagant wealth is shared by all. "The New Jerusalem has no hoarding, no exclusive neighborhoods, and no poverty."¹⁹ All its inhabitants enjoy an abundance of food and water (21:6; 22:1-2; cf. 7:16). This hope-filled vision calls God's people to prophetically unmask the powers that exploit the powerless. The church must be a signpost of justice and generosity, a foretaste of God's coming reign.

4. A Holy Community. Holiness is the true hallmark of the New Jerusalem. The *whole city*, with its perfect cubic shape, becomes a sanctuary like Israel's holy of holies, sanctified by the presence of God and the Lamb (21:15-17, 22). Only those who wash their robes are invited to enter (22:14). Everything morally unclean is excluded (21:27; cf. 21:8; 22:15). Only a holy people can fulfill the mission of a holy God. And that involves more than getting people "saved." It invites them to be transformed into the holy character of Christ.

5. A Hospitable, Multinational Community. The New Jerusalem shapes the church's identity as a community that embraces all nations, cultures and peoples. Its open gates face every direction, extending hospitality to people from every point on the compass. (21:13, 25).²⁰ The nations walk there by the light of God and the Lamb. In this hope-filled vision, even the formerly rebellious "kings of the earth" (see 17:2; 18:3) bring their "glory" (i.e., worship of God) into the city (21:24). Moreover, God dwells there, not with his "people," as in the Old Testament (Lev 26:12; Jer 24:7), but with his "peoples," in the plural (21:3). The Lamb's bride (21:9) is gathered from all the peoples of the world. This represents the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and his offspring (Gen 12:1-3). John's vision beckons the church to be an instrument of blessing to peoples from every corner and crevice of the earth.

6. A Renewed Creation. God's restoring mission is as wide as creation itself. John envisions the new paradise as a lush urban garden, one that seems to erupt through the city's main street (22:1-2).²¹ This is a picture of ecological harmony and the *re-creation* of the world. God's loving purpose embraces the whole of his creation. If so, then what it means for the church to participate in the *missio Dei* includes *being*

¹⁸ See Mangina, *Revelation*, 248.

¹⁹ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos 2010), 177.

²⁰ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*, 222.

²¹ Wes Howard-Brooke and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 190-91.

good news, not just to people, but to all of creation.²² We are caught up in God’s transforming work of making “all things new” (21:5).

Conclusion

We have seen that Revelation’s purpose is not primarily to predict future events, but to form missional communities of faithful worship and witness. Consequently, it provides a rich resource for the global church in mission today. Let me summarize some implications from the Apocalypse for our missional ecclesiology:

- The church’s very existence is defined by its participation in the *missio Dei*. We are a priestly people, called to mediate God’s loving presence to the world.
- In Revelation, the church’s basic missional task is to bear witness. That involves both speaking the “eternal gospel” (14:6) to the nations, as well as the witness of a poured out life, even to the point of suffering and death.
- It follows that *ecclesiology* is inseparable from *Christology*. The church lives out its missional identity as it reenacts the narrative of the slaughtered Lamb. That story of self-giving love is not only the content of our message. It is also the pattern for our life and mission in the world.
- In Revelation, faithful witness involves *resisting* the powers, human or Satanic, that oppose the worship of the God who sits on the throne. At times, that will mean prophetically challenging the idolatry and injustice of modern day “Babylons.” At other times, it will ask us to disentangle ourselves from values and practices that might seem perfectly “normal” in our contexts. The church is a contrast community, which publicly embodies the holiness of God.
- Revelation weds witness to worship. In our worship, we announce to the world that the Lamb is worthy of our allegiance and the gods of our cultures are not. And as others are touched by our heartfelt praise and proclamation, even in the context of our “worship services,” some will be magnetically drawn into the song.
- John’s vision of the New Jerusalem invites the church to get caught up in God’s sweeping purpose for humanity and all of creation. It simply will not allow us to reduce the gospel to a mere ticket to heaven. John’s vision of the future energizes God’s people to *be* an instrument of healing for and among the world’s nations, even as we eagerly expect the day when God finally makes “all things new.” Revelation calls the church to embody the life of heaven on the very streets of Babylon.

²² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 60-61.