

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: A BIBLICAL BASIS FOR COMPASSION

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From its inception, Christianity has been no stranger to chaos, darkness, oppression, powerlessness, poverty, suffering, and death. But from the beginning, the very beginning, the affirmation of her faith has been that in the throes of chaos, God spoke and cosmos came into being; God spoke, and darkness gave way to light; God spoke, and oppressors stood condemned while the oppressed were redeemed, liberated, even brought back to life again. God spoke, and the Word became flesh. God speaks, and revelation comes into being. God uncovers, and understanding is made possible. God discloses, and mystery dissipates.

It is no different when one comes to the beginning of the last book in our canon, the beginning of the end, so to speak. When read and heard as the revelation of Jesus Christ to a people that were both believing yet struggling with their unbelief in times of persecution for their faith, the book of Revelation truly is a call for the faithful practice of the church as she awaits God's ultimate restoration of His good creation. Let those who have ears **hear**; let those who have eyes **see**; let those who have voices **proclaim** what God is doing, what God has done, and what God will do.

In the previous paper, John Wright proposes a bold strategy of reading Revelation as a narration of God's vindication of His good creation through the conquering Lion-Lamb, Jesus Christ. Under the tripartite headings of a prayer for justice, a hope for vindication, and a call to passive resistance, Wright contends that the book can properly be understood as **The Revelation of Jesus Christ** rather than as descending revelations of the end of the times where the world is seen to be heading to Hades in a hand-basket. He is persuaded that such a reading opens up the book to the reader, and provides a perspective that unites the letters to the visions that follow, and **in that unity there is a theological basis from which compassionate ministry may flow.** This paper is based upon that thesis.

The *Apocalypsis* of Jesus Christ attributed traditionally to John has a unique style and combination of literary genres. It has significant epistolary elements within the first 3 chapters and the last chapter, in addition to significant apocalyptic elements and prophetic characteristics interwoven throughout the entire work. Despite this variety, **there is a theological continuity that provides an over-arching integrity to the book as a whole, a theological vision that is sketched in the introduction of the book, given concrete expression in the letters to the seven churches, illustrated in the subsequent visions, and brought to dramatic climax at the conclusion of the work.** That is the

theological vision to be disclosed in this paper.

The opening verses of the first chapter ring with the powerful vocabulary of revelation, with verbs such as "made known", "shown", and "testified", coupled with declarations about the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ Himself. Blessing is pronounced upon "the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy" as well as those "who hear and who keep what is written in it" (1:3). In 1:4, the typical Greco-Roman letter form of salutation is followed, with John designated as the sender, the seven churches in Asia as recipients, and a typical NT greeting of "Grace to you and peace". But this typical greeting comes from someone very special, "the one who is and who was and who is to come", the Alpha & Omega, Lord God Almighty (1:8), and from "the seven spirits who are before his throne", and from Jesus Christ (1:4-5).

The Christological vision that unfolds throughout the book is given in seminal form immediately. Christ is designated "the faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). This crucified/resurrected one has demonstrated his affinity with humanity by "loving us, freeing us from our sins by means of his blood" (1:5). This sovereign above all rulers has made his faithful followers into a priestly kingdom, serving his God and Father to whom is rendered glory and dominion forever and ever (1:6). Jesus Christ is declared to be the coming one who will soon return publicly to demonstrate his sovereignty (1:7).

This worshipful Christological vision is mediated through brother John, recipient of the visions and a fellow participant in persecution. A partner in the kingdom of God that has both arrived and which is also not yet come, he has patiently endured and remained faithful (1:9). Brother John understands suffering and oppression, having been exiled himself to Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. And what a vision it is which he sees in the spirit on the Lord's day!

In the midst of seven golden lampstands he sees the one like the Son of Man dressed in splendor and hears his voice thunder the command, "Stop fearing! I am the first and the last, the living one. I was dead, but look, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades! Now write!" (1:17-19). In obedience to the command given in the vision, John commences to write to the seven churches in Asia: Ephesus; Smyrna; Pergamum; Thyatira; Sardis; Philadelphia; Laodicea. While there are specific issues and circumstances unique to each of these particular churches, there is also a consistent pattern in all of the letters that can aid in understanding the cumulative theology of the letters when read together as a whole.

In each of the seven letters, a four-fold pattern can be discerned. First, there is a vivid description of Jesus Christ. Second, there is an assessment of the actual life situation being experienced within each particular church, with positive comments mentioned first followed by a critique of any shortcomings thereafter. Third, there are words of warning and judgment coupled with a call to repent in most cases. Finally, there is praise and encouragement for those who do repent and for those who will overcome and remain faithful to the very end.

In looking at the theological affirmations of Jesus Christ at the beginning of the various letters, it quickly becomes obvious that there are numerous parallels to the language that has been used already to describe him in the opening section of the book, and as we shall see, continuous parallels throughout the remaining visions as well. Jesus Christ is described as the one holding the seven stars in his right hand as he walks among the golden lampstands (2:1//1:20). He is the first and the last who was dead and came to life (2:8//1:18). He is the one who has the sharp, two-edged sword coming from his mouth (2:12//1:16). He is the Son of God with eyes like flaming fire and feet like burnished bronze (2:18//1:14-15). He is the one who has the seven stars (3:1//2:1//1:20) and the seven spirits of God (3:1//1:4). He is the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens & no one shuts, who shuts & no one opens (3:7//1:18). He is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation (3:14//1:5,1:17). Clearly, the Christological vision established in chapter one is mirrored in the seven letters of chapters two and three.

The people addressed in the seven letters are engaged in the daunting task of putting Christian faith into practice in a world that is hostile to their mission and purpose. They understand suffering in behalf of righteousness in hope of God's ultimate triumph over evil. They have experienced first-hand life lived without power under oppressive political forces. These first century Christians are commended for their faithful work, toiling and laboring for the sake of the kingdom despite fierce opposition (2:2). They have patiently and steadfastly "remained under" the burdens placed upon them by their faith, enduring the consequences of that faithfulness (2:3). Many of them have demonstrated an intolerance of evil, putting false leaders and teachings to the test, refusing to compromise with those whose doctrines would undermine their theological affirmations (2:2,6). Despite conflict, they have not grown weary and have held up well in the face of resistance (2:3). These faithful ones have come to know firsthand slander, persecution, affliction, and suffering (2:9). Yet in the midst of that pressure, they have held fast to the name of Jesus Christ, refusing to deny their faith even when some of their numbers were put to death for that faith (2:13). In love and faithful service, they continued to do those works with which they had been charged, making progress and growing in the process (2:19). Even when some among them yielded to the pressures placed upon them, others refused to give in to the temptations and challenges set before them. They kept themselves pure in the midst of great impurity (3:4). Lacking in power or influence, they continued to keep the word of Christ, patiently enduring the consequences (3:8-10). These are the people who can indeed pray for justice, who are deserving of compassion in the midst of their struggles.

But not everyone within these seven churches had remained truly faithful. Some had clearly abandoned their first love (2:4). Some had misplaced their trust in God, shifting allegiance to riches and material wealth, becoming spiritually impoverished in the process (2:9; 3:17). Some had given in to fear (2:10),

while others had accommodated the adulterous and idolatrous beliefs of their culture (2:14-15), compromising the integrity of their faith in Christ in the process (2:20-23). Some seemed to be spiritually dead (3:1), while others had simply become lukewarm, losing their effectiveness along the way (3:15-16). Such a reality within the church produces discouragement and loss of heart among the faithful, especially when opposition increases.

To all of these churches, words of strong warning, judgment, and admonition are also addressed. For those who are failing or falling short, for those who have compromised or lost their spiritual bearings, the command is given: REPENT! Five of the seven churches are called specifically to repentance. There is an impending time of testing in the offing that will vindicate those who are righteous even unto death, and at the same time it will provide condemnation for those found faithless (2:10-11). There are repeated calls to remember (2:5; 3:3), to call back to mind again God's faithful activity in their midst. There are urgent admonitions to hold fast the faith until God's decisive intervention comes to pass (2:10; 2:25; 3:11). There are exhortations to wake up, to strengthen and encourage those who have been faithful (3:2). There are repeated calls for sincere and faithful obedience even unto death, in order to attain the ultimate goal and receive the promised reward. These words of warning and judgment are a call to increased solidarity with those who have already suffered and died in their resistance to evil. These refrains connect the situations in the various churches to the visions that follow in chapters 4 through 20.

The reality of famine, disease, starvation, and death as a result of war is graphically shown in chapter 6. The cry of the saints from under the altar in 6:9-11 echoes the reality of martyrdom disclosed in 2:10, which is re-echoed in 13:10 with the prospect of captivity and death that must be endured by the faithful. In the fall of Babylon described in chapter 14, blessing is pronounced upon those who will die in the Lord, coupled with a call to endure faithfully to the end. In the vision of the seven judgments in chapter 17, the great whore Babylon is described as drunk on the blood of the saints and the witnesses to Jesus. The vision of the fall of Babylon in chapter 18 concludes with the indictment of guilt upon her for the spilled blood of the prophets and the saints who had suffered at her hands. In the hopeful vision of chapter 20, it is those who had been martyred for their testimony and faithfulness to the word of God who will reign with Christ in the first resurrection from the dead. Those who are faithful through suffering unto death can hope for vindication in the end.

As sobering as the judgmental warnings are, they are not the last words within the letters. Those who repent will be able to join with the faithful in final victory. Assurance is given that the faithful will not forfeit the final prize. Those who overcome the obstacles, who victoriously conquer the temptations and faithfully endure until the end, they shall be rewarded! To them will be given permission to eat from the Tree of Life in the Paradise of God (2:7; 22:1-5). They shall be given the victor's crown of life and can never be harmed by the second death (2:10-

11). They will be given hidden manna to eat, and a white stone with a new name inscribed upon it (2:17). They will receive a new pure wardrobe and they will be deemed worthy to walk with Christ Himself (3:4). Their new name shall be placed within the book of life and it will be confessed before God and the heavenly hosts (3:5). They will become pillars in the temple of God and never again will they be denied access (3:12). They will be given authority and power to rule as they are seated with Christ upon His throne (3:21). Truly there is hope for vindication for the faithful followers of the Lion-Lamb!

To those facing death, the hope and promise of new life is given. To the hungry, the promise is for food that will nourish and sustain life forever. To those with nothing, those who have suffered the loss of all things of earthly value, the promise is for the possession of that which is of greatest worth. To those nameless, depersonalized, and disenfranchised peoples, a new name that will be known -- an indelible identity that will endure forever -- is to be given. To the powerless and non-influential, a new power will be given with a recognition of their new status that will be obvious to all on earth and in heaven.

And what provides the basis for this powerful and hopeful theology within these chapters? What makes them think that their prayer for justice will be answered? It is the compelling vision of the Christ of God, the resurrected Lion-Lamb that stands slaughtered. It is He who has overcome suffering and death that sends forth this message of challenge, judgment, and hope to suffering churches. This Christological vision, begun in the first 3 chapters, continues throughout the unfolding visions of chapters 4 through 20.

The language of worship that dominates the vision of the heavenly throne in chapter 4 echoes again the themes of glory, honor, and power that are rendered unto the Holy Creator God in the first chapter (1:4-8). This imagery continues into the vision of the scroll with the seven seals in chapter 5, where Christ is depicted as the slaughtered Lamb who alone is found to be worthy to open the scroll and break the seals, revealing their contents. The songs of worship in 5:9-13 reverberate with the earlier descriptions of Christ in 1:5-6. "You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth." (5:9-10). "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (5:11). "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (5:13).

The song of worship that follows the sealing of the 144,000 in chapter 7 continues the familiar refrain: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (7:10). "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!" (7:12). When the seventh trumpet sounds in chapter 11 (11:15-19), we hear "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Messiah), and he will reign forever and ever." (7:15) "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who

were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign." (7:17). This theme continues into the interlude of chapter 12 where John hears a loud voice in heaven proclaiming, "Now have come the salvation and the power and kingdom of our God and the authority of His Messiah (Christ) ... They have conquered the accuser by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death." (12:10-11). In the midst of the vision of the seven judgments beginning in chapter 17, we hear that the Lamb will conquer the opposing kings, for "he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful." (17:14). In the marriage supper of the Lamb described in chapter 19, the multitudes in heaven praise God who sits on the throne with shouts of "Hallelujah! ... Amen! Hallelujah! ... Hallelujah!" He is glorified for his power and salvation, for his true and righteous judgments, and for his triumphant reign with those who have been faithful.

In the dramatic climax of this Revelation of Jesus Christ, it is clear who reigns and rules over all of the earth. In the wake of the rider on the white horse, all forces of evil reluctantly but ultimately succumb. With the final defeat of evil, all who have ever lived are summoned before the great white throne of eternal judgment. The earth and the sea pass away. In their stead is a new heaven and a new earth, the reward for the righteous who had remained faithful and who have overcome. The new Jerusalem descends from the heavens, dominated by the brilliant presence of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb, who together give light and life to all who inhabit this holy place. This vision ends with the promise and the challenge that echoes the opening chapter, "Look! I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (22:7//1:3). The epilogue of the final chapter gives a thrice repeated promise that Christ is coming soon (22:7,12,20) that is concluded with the Invocation/Benediction "Come, Lord Jesus!"

It is upon this Revelation of Jesus Christ that the prayer for justice and the hope for vindication of the faithful finally rests. The call to resist evil at the price of persecution, suffering, oppression and death is a call to solidarity with those who have gone before, whose blood cries out from under the altar, but it is ultimately a call to solidarity with the crucified/resurrected Lion-Lamb that sits upon the throne to be worshipped by the faithful multitudes forever and ever. He is "the Alpha & Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (22:13)

Marana tha. (Our Lord, Come!)

Maran atha. (Our Lord has come!)