

Things are not what they seem

Glimpses from Revelation

It does not seem that Christ rules the world or that his gospel announces the future of the world but the book of *Revelation* says this is exactly what is happening. At first glance, the book may seem bizarre or frightening, however, it gathers together all that God has revealed previously, and, using deliberately obscure language, tells us what God is doing in the midst of the power plays and cultural poisons through which we must live. In particular, it tells us how to be witnesses to the reign of Christ in the midst of our times.

We will take some 'glimpses' so we can savour a few things rather than cover many things.

The Church in Christ's presence

Revelation 1:1—3:22

The first three chapters of *Revelation* are a unit (after the prologue in vv. 1-8)—what we may call the first scene in this book. The risen Christ is revealed standing among his churches and he writes letters to the churches.

Prologue

Revelation is about 'what must soon take place', or 'is near' (1:1, 3; cf. v. 19, and Matt. 4:17). It is not given to satisfy our curiosity but to enable those who are bonded to him to act confidently. God is gracious to reveal his secrets to prophets (Amos 3:7), in this case, John, so that we are not caught unawares and unprepared for what is coming.

It is a revelation of, or by, Christ—both are true. Futurology without Christ is speculation because God has determined that all things are in his hand, and that they will hold together only in him (Eph. 1:10).

The book concludes (22:6-21) with an expansion of the themes in this introduction, indicating that the purpose of the whole book is that we should keep ourselves for God through receiving his gospel and heeding the teaching of the whole book.

John's greeting is personal, and at the same time, trinitarian. **God** is eternal—unfathomable, but necessary for us to know (vv. 4, 6, 8; cf. Eccles. 3:11). He is the Father to whom belongs glory and might. Seven lamps before God become seven eyes of the Lamb (in 5:6), the **Spirit**, sent to do God's work. And **Jesus Christ** is the faithful witness to the truth of God in the world, the one who deals with all life's big issues—death and the powers under which we must live (cf. our quip about the inevitable things in life—'death and taxes'). Especially, he has loved and freed us by his blood and appointed us to his service, and will come again to complete all that God has promised—a fact that will finally be acknowledged by all. The rest of the book will spell this out.

Scene one—Christ among the churches

John is commissioned for his work with a vision—like Isaiah and Ezekiel before him. John must see Christ 'high and lifted up'. The church is a 'form' in the world but can only be so if it knows its power (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5)—and this is nothing but Christ himself, among us, and in charge. Nothing will do other than that our being awed by him.

In no uncertain terms he is told to write what he is about to see—as we also are told, in no uncertain terms, to heed what he has written (22:18-19). His service to date has already landed him on Patmos and he calls us to share in this witness to the kingdom—the reign of Christ. Everything Christians are about is a witness to this reign.

Lampstands represent the witness of God's faithful people (cf. Zech 4:2-9). Barry Webb (on *Zechariah*) suggests this is 'a community "alight" with the presence of the all-seeing all-knowing God who dwells in their midst.' It is this high calling that lies behind the word of Christ to the churches.

He appears before the Father as Son of Man to receive a kingdom (v. 13 with Dan. 7:13-14; Luke 22:29). His hair dazzles like that of the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:9)—God who alone has the eternal wisdom. His long robes suggest dignity (or priesthood—Lev. 8:7). His eyes discern all things (19:12 with Dan. 10:6), and his voice will destroy his enemies (19:15). His boots tread down his enemies in purity and his voice is the voice of deity (cf. Ezek. 43:2).

Here is Christ, standing among us, bringing God's eternal wisdom, heavenly reign, penetrating sight, holy judgements and unquestioned authority.

The corollary of Christ's authority is, effectively, our 'death' and 'resurrection'. John has nothing to offer this Christ! 'Nothing in my hand I bring.' But he is raised up by the one who is first and last—that is, having authority from beginning to end over this world. All this is based on his own engagement of the world's death and his rising to secure its future.

Scene one (cont.)—Christ's letters to his churches

Rather than focus on each church, we will look at how Christ is central to the life of all the churches.

What Christ sees

To every church, Christ says 'I know....' — in five cases, their **works**, and in two, their **situations**. A church is what he sees it to be, not what it seems to be.

We may wonder at the emphasis on works. Does not faith come before works? Clearly Christ expects his gospel will produce fruit and this fruit, especially, is love. Two churches, the first and last, are threatened with extinction—removing a lampstand or being spewed from Christ's mouth. In both cases what is lacking is fervent love.

This must have hit John who had spent much time at **Ephesus** as leader and had taught them well. As an old man, he is reputed to said at every assembly 'Little children, love one another.' Earlier, Paul had finished his letter to this central church, 'Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible'. They had kept all the other requirements, commendable labour, endurance, rectitude and discipline, but lost their early love. Their works had lost what alone can drive true works. Works without affection will not last (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8). All this will have to change or Christ will remove their witness entirely. Francis Schaeffer called love 'the mark of the Christian'.

At **Laodicea**, the church has become like their poor water supply—tepid and reputedly unhealthy. That is, their witness in the city is not life giving but detrimental. The reason is not hard to find—they are full of themselves. The city's hubris over their banking and textile and eye salve industries has invaded the church and Christ says he will not be associated with that. Love arises from Christ's love for us, and those who see themselves as competent see no need to drink of Christ's mercy and kindness.

Between these two churches are three whose works are described, and again, love is in view.

At **Thyatira**, the believers do love, and better than they did at the beginning. In this respect, they appear better than the Ephesians who should return to the first works—or

love. However, here, love is tarnished with **tolerance**—of ‘Jezebel’. A prophetess in the church says it is fine to share in idolatrous feasts and orgies. This is normal fare for Thyatira and this new ‘Jezebel’ thinks it unnecessary to separate from their culture in this respect. Some in the church tolerate this view. Others believe it is wrong. Christ will deal with each according to their works. Paul has dealt with this issue at Corinth and Rome and allowed some latitude in some situations. Here, Christ himself knows what is going on. There is no room here for saying ‘idols have no existence’ (1 Cor. 8:4) because passions of the flesh are replacing godly affection—the idols are well and truly at work. If they tolerate this, they will soon have no truth to go on producing genuine love. The capacity to ‘bear with one another’ (Col 3:13) that Christian faith has taught the West now has a life of its own apart from Christ and threatens to undo the very witness of the gospel that is the sole source of true tolerance.

At **Sardis**, the church’s works are not complete in God’s sight. Reputation or appearance matter more to them than substance. Their love is for human praise, or self-justification. Jesus said that love for human glory keeps people from him who can give life (John 5:44). It kills faith and stifles true works of love.

At **Philadelphia**, the church’s works are not critiqued, other than their having ‘little power’—perhaps meaning that they do not have the gifts or opportunity to be anything else. Christ putting an open door before them, and their being loved by Christ, suggest they will not need to be strong (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1-10—and Tolkien’s hobbits). Christ loves his whole church (3:19) but enemies in this city will see the believers’ love based unity (as in John 17:23) and see that God loves them.

Two churches are revealed more in the way they handle their crisis than in what they can initiate.

At **Smyrna**, believers are persecuted, poor and slandered, and are about to suffer more. *This* is what Christ knows about them, and this is their comfort. No correction is offered; only encouragement to endure and not to fear. Fear is incompatible with love (1 John 4:18).

At **Pergamum**, believers have suffered—one man has been martyred and the rest remained faithful. Christ knows where they dwell—a place that prides itself on a shrine to Caesar, a healing cult and temples to two other deities. Satan has his throne there. No small thing to remain faithful in this city! Even so, they are among the five churches called to repent because they have not dealt with a Balaam like seduction and another false group. Like the Balaam who knew God’s favour was on Israel, but counseled infiltration with idolators, someone in the church is allowing infiltration of idolators that will weaken the truth, and so, the love this church has demonstrated. If they will not deal with this problem, Christ will.

What Christ is to each church

To each church, Christ reveals something of himself—mostly, something already revealed in John’s introduction, or in the vision he sees, things that will be opened up in the rest of the book. The churches need the whole book, not just their personal letter.

In every case, it is ‘the word of him who...’. The fullness of Christ comes to his church by his word. Hence the importance of John delivering what he is shown and what we are to hear. As John Calvin noted,

‘When we have access to the preached Word, God speaks to us in a common and ordinary fashion. It is an illustration of his condescension. Hence the preaching of the Gospel is like a descent which God makes in order to seek us. We must not abuse this simplicity of the Word of God by disdain it. Rather we must receive it all the more recognising that he indeed deigns to transfigure himself, so to speak, that we might approach him.’

If the church has a problem or a need, the place to run is to Christ. He is sufficient for all the church's life and ministry. If the church is cooling, it needs Christ tending and speaking. If the church is threatened with death, it needs Christ who has conquered death. If the church lives in Satan's stronghold and in danger of compromising, it needs Christ who, by his word, strikes the nations. If the church has a prophetess (or prophet) who thumbs her nose at the revelation of God's power and incites compromise with idols, they need Christ whose eyes flash and whose feet march on in purity. If the church has descended to cosmetics, it needs a Spirit sending Christ, baptizing and cleansing his threshing floor (Luke 3:16) as it did on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4). If the church is weak and beset by entrenched powers plays (Jews cosyng up with Rome—a synagogue of Satan) they need the one with the keys to unlock the keys into the kingdom (John 9:34-38; 10:1ff) and who can open doors of ministry. If the church is all but lost in its own grandeur, like the church in Luther's day having 'a theology of glory', it needs Christ who, crucified as he was, still reigns as Lamb and reboots the whole creation by his gospel—just as took place at the Reformation.

Paul was a faithful preacher of Christ, proclaiming the full blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3-14; 4:13), bringing every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5) and presenting everyone mature in Christ (Col. 4:12). He alone is the one in whom all things hold together (Eph. 1:10).

The future Christ promises

Five of the seven churches are called to repent. If this set of letters covers the range of Christ's whole church, this statistic suggests that most of Christ's church needs to repent of something! In fact, the whole life of the church is one of repentance.

This is what Luther says in the first of his 95 theses posted in Wittenburg 600 years ago. 'When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.' He also said about Psalm 51: 'Here the doctrine of true repentance is set forth; two parts constitute true repentance: first that a man recognize sin, then that he recognize what grace is.'

It is by this call to repentance that Christ opens up the possibility of a future for his church. It should not be construed as a mere 'telling off' but an appeal to recognise the good he has done and is doing on our behalf and to leave all that is tawdry behind. Apart from the repentance that his gospel enables, we are locked into our sins and their results.

All of the members of the churches are called to 'conquer'. From this we understand that the church is 'the church militant', not 'the church at rest' (from Samuel Stone's hymn, 'The Church's one foundation'). Here is our dignity, that we can do something significant in regards to the plan of God.

To those who conquer, Christ promises a share in the future he is making. This is the completed creation (Gen. 2:9; Rev. 22:2) brought to its goal by Christ, a deathless future beyond the death threatened in this life, a new name linked to all Christ has done (2:17 with 3:12; cf. 19:12), a share with Christ in ruling the nations, purity and eternal security, and a part of God's eternal dwelling. All of these future blessings have powerful present effects. He who has hope has a reason to live and work, to prepare for this future, and especially, to love.

The one blessing promised that is clearly intended to include the present is to the last church. 'I stand... I knock... I will enter in and eat with him and he with me.' So much of what Christ calls us to could be described as a revival and here is revival—God's people with a refreshed love through direct fellowship with the gracious Christ. Jim Packer says revival is about life, and not to be about life is to sin, so we should all be praying for and expecting revival. Here, Christ promises that we can move from what sickens Christ to being hosts of the beloved Saviour—in an instant. Things are not what they seem to be. All is never lost.