

SEPTEMBER 14, 2005

Journey Into Revelation

Having finished John's Gospel in our faith-community, we have turned our attention to what I feel is the most challenging book in the canon – Revelation. As Mark stated last night in our meeting, I love the first few chapters and the last two chapters, but everything in between is just plain confusing.

For me, reading Revelation is like listening to modern jazz. It's filled with dissonance, syncopation and unfamiliar notes that tip me slightly off-center. Remember that party game where you put your head on a bat and spin around several times and then try to walk in a straight line? That's how I feel when I read Revelation. I feel like I'm constantly stumbling sideways when I have every intention to move forward. My equilibrium is constantly askew as I careen from the barrage of images, metaphors, symbols and poetry.

Reading Revelation is like reading a hybrid of a political cartoon, fairy tale and poetry. This isn't to say that Revelation isn't real or true. Rather, its reality is shrouded in a literary style that communicates more with images than with words. I came across a great quote by G.K. Chesterton that I think applies to Revelation:

"Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten."

That's the power behind Revelation. It's an art form that uses fictional images to express ultimate reality. Yet, when I think of art I imagine an art museum where people meander through an array of creativity, lingering at each image, whispering quietly in admiration and pondering about the artist's intentions. However, Revelation couldn't be further from this image. Its artistry is explosive. It compels us to action. Imagine the same art museum, but behind each painting is a stick of dynamite with a lit fuse. The last thing you do is stroll or discuss the detailed nuances of brush strokes.

Approaching Revelation this way is proving very difficult for me. My spiritual background is the one that spawned works like the *Left Behind* series. As a young Christian, I read books like *The Late Great Planet Earth* that viewed Revelation from a futurist perspective. I was frightened into Christianity by the "threat" of the rapture and the prospect of being left behind. Virtually every sermon I heard somehow weaved the rapture or Jesus' return into its application. During my early years as a youth pastor, I used to show the "classic" rapture movies to evangelize kids.

I have since repented of those tactics. And along with the sweeping changes that have occurred to my overall theology and spiritual life during the last several years, I have experienced significant alterations to my eschatology. However, when all you've cut your eschatological teeth on are ideas like the Rapture, the Tribulation, the Millennium, the Antichrist, the Mark of the Beast, and the Second Coming of Christ, it's very difficult to silence those voices as I read and reread Revelation.

And yet, as challenging as Revelation can be as a literary form and as difficult as laying aside my previous interpretive grid can be, I eagerly anticipate the journey through Revelation and its depiction of the unfolding of God's New Creation in fullness upon God's earth.

SEPTEMBER 17, 2005

Revelation: The Risen King

The Revelation is about a world being reborn. John writes to struggling churches, encouraging them to stand firm in the midst of a culture swarming with tyranny and evil. What does he use to encourage them? A vision of Easter. A vision of God's New Creation birthed into this one. A vision of the kingdoms of this world in all of their oppression and injustice, being swept up in God's tidal wave of his good world being renewed and reborn.

And what better way to begin this powerful and terrifying vision by drawing everyone's attention to the one who is at the very the center of the vision — the Easter Jesus. John will focus on Jesus' cosmic role in the vision in chapter 5. That moment is a huge wide-angle shot of God's dimension of reality with Jesus surrounded by all of creation. Chapter 1, however, is an intimate encounter with the risen Christ. It's a backstage pass, a chance to meet and speak with this Jesus before he takes center-stage in creation and history and unfolds God's plan of re-creation upon the earth.

I love how N.T. Wright summarizes this personal encounter:

"Revelation begins with a vision of the risen Jesus (1:12-16). Snow-white hair, eyes of fire, feet of polished bronze, voice like a waterfall, and his face like the sun itself — no wonder John fell at his feet as though he was dead. This is where terror and joy meet: this is the Easter Jesus. 'Don't be afraid,' he says; 'I am the first and the last, and the living one. *I died, and look, I am alive for evermore.*' 'And' — and this sounds almost conspiratorial — '*I've got the keys — the keys to Death and Hades*' (1:17-18). Whatever you've lost; whoever you've lost; whatever bits of your life are locked away for sorrow or shame, I've got the keys... Tyrants base their power on their ability to kill. Whether it's the invisible tyrant of sin or the visible tyrants that stalk our world still, their power lies in the threat of death. They claim to have the keys of death and hell, but they're lying. Where the tyrants' power runs out, God's power begins. He raises the dead." N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus*

It's in the Easter Jesus that our strength and hope lie. Not by befriending the tyrants in our culture, adopting their agendas, becoming their constituency, and trusting their influence. Tyrants on both the left and right of the political spectrum (and those in between) are ultimately opposed to the unfolding of God's New Creation no matter how much they seem in alignment.

Rather, as God's people, struggling to continue incarnating God's presence in a distorted and hurting world, we need fresh retellings and encounters with the Easter Jesus. We need to be reminded that despite the pain that the tyrants of sin or Satan or selfishness or consumerism or capitalism or communism or any other societal evil have inflicted upon us, our allegiance is in this majestic person we encounter in the opening chapter of the Revelation. We need to see him. We need to be terrified and collapse as if dead. We need to hear his voice, "Don't be afraid... of me or of anything out there trying to hurt you." We need to feel his right hand upon

us. We need to see the keys of life's greatest barriers swinging from Jesus' hand.

That encounter with the Easter Jesus prepares us to hear his words to us as in chapters 2 and 3 — words of commendation, correction and exhortation to overcome. And it prepares us to watch and trust how he will faithfully unfold God's plan upon the earth as in chapters 4 and 5.

We need Revelation 1's encounter with Jesus. Because if the rest of Revelation is any indication, it will get a lot worse before it gets better. Like any birth, the joy of New Creation's final consummation in Revelation 21 and 22 are preceded by severe and devastating birth pangs. *"So don't be afraid. I died and I'm alive. And I hold the keys to Death and Hades."*

SEPTEMBER 21, 2005

Revelation's Relevancy

In the comments on a [recent post on Revelation](#), Ben asked how has my changing perspective on Revelation been impacting my life.

Prior to engaging the Revelation, I knew this book had some relevancy to my life. However, except for the last two chapters and a few select passages ripped from context, I didn't know how to access the relevancy of the Revelation. I think the greatest obstacle for me has been the futurist interpretation that I've inherited as an evangelical. Over the last several years, I've begun to suspect that interpretative grid was a false one. Yet, because I've been so formed by it, I haven't had any idea how to get beyond it. So every time I would read through the Revelation, my mind would automatically begin associating the futurist interpretation to the specific symbols and the overall flow of the book. It caused frustration, because I intuitively knew there was a better way to read the Revelation other than with the "end-time" charts and interpretations I learned as a younger Christian. And the other three interpretative schools (preterist, historicist, and spiritual), although offering hope of another way to read and understand the book, didn't provide an ample solution. I didn't feel any of the views singularly engaged the Revelation properly.

But I've become used to this kind of inward dissonance. I've faced it head-on over the last several years as other aspects of my theology have changed – what is the Gospel, what is the Church, what is discipleship, who is the Spirit, what is Scripture's role, etc. So I'm acquainted with this inward journey of ongoing conversion and welcome the new life it will bring. So what is the Revelation's impact on my life? I think it's still too early for me to understand the fullness of the Revelation's relevancy – the journey's only begun. But I anticipate this: the Revelation will have as much importance to my daily apprenticeship to Jesus as I've come to expect from the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. And I hope I can share what I discover on this blog for anyone else who may be interested in dialoguing.

For too long, the Revelation has been like a shy Jr. Higher at a school dance. With her back to the wall and watching from the margins, she has waited patiently to be asked to dance. I've ignored her for too long. And even though I'm clumsy and awkward myself, I know what I have to do. You want to dance?

SEPTEMBER 23, 2005

Revelation: The Seven Churches

As I mentioned in a *previous post*, Revelation 1 is a like backstage pass. Along with John, we get the opportunity to meet the Easter Jesus in person before he takes center-stage in chapters 4 and 5 to unleash God's plan upon the world. Between Revelation 1 and 4, chapters 2 and 3 — the messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor — act as a sort of literary corridor moving us from backstage to frontstage.

The Revelation is a "circular letter," designed to be delivered by messenger to each of the seven churches. By addressing the seven churches, John accomplishes a few things. First, each church becomes aware of the particular issues facing the other churches in the region. By doing this, John begins the process of enlarging the local churches' perspectives from their own struggles to a vision of the larger Church and its role in God's unfolding plan for creation. In order to observe all that is revealed in the Revelation (1:3), each church must view its life and struggles in the context of the larger Church. The local churches are not isolated communities, but intimately connected to one another by the Resurrected Christ as his one body.

Second, John reveals to each local church how Jesus, as the Lord of the Church, is personally concerned with each local faith-community. The majestic Lord that we met in Revelation 1 is walking among the lampstands (the churches). He is the Lord of the Church as well as the local expressions of the Church. He sees and knows their deeds. He feels their struggles. He calls his wayward people to repent. He will vanquish their enemies. Regardless of the severe persecution from without or the sinister compromise from within, Jesus is always in their midst.

Third, despite the specific issues, Jesus calls all of his people to "overcome," which is a military term for victory. Not only is John enlarging the local churches' vision beyond their own communities, he is also revealing that each church's issues are part of a larger cosmic battle between good and evil. By overcoming and remaining faithful to the gospel of Christ, each person and local faith-community performs their part in the cosmic battle. The seven separate exhortations to overcome given to the local churches are drawn together by one final exhortation to overcome at the end of the Revelation. Those who faithfully participated in the battle against evil by remaining faithful and overcoming will ultimately inherit the New Creation (Revelation 21:7).

As mentioned earlier, the messages to the seven churches act as a literary corridor moving us from the vision of Christ as the ever-present Lord of the Church in chapter 1 to the vision of Christ in God's throne room as the Lord of Creation in chapters 4 & 5. The primary theme of the Revelation is a holy war. We quickly discover that the same Easter Jesus who calls his people to overcome is the Lion of Judah (a military image) and the only one capable and worthy to execute God's plan upon the earth. So not only has John expanded the local churches' vision beyond their own communities to the larger Church, but John is also helping the local churches to see their current struggles from both a heavenly perspective and an eschatological perspective. They are involved in a holy war, one being waged by the Lord of heaven and earth

and one that will ultimately usher in God's New Creation in the future. So how they live their lives now — their faithfulness to the gospel — is their contribution to the campaign.

With prophetic insight, John realizes that the struggles of the local churches are just the beginnings of what is soon coming. And the urgency of the messages to these churches reveals John's pastoral concern that they may not be ready for the ensuing battle. So the Resurrected Christ calls his people to repent and to overcome, even to the point of death. That is their only hope in what is about to occur.

The cosmic battle depicted in the Revelation is expressed on the ground between two opposing ideologies — the kingdom of heaven and the Roman Empire. Like many ancient empires, political loyalty was enforced through religious means. By the time of the New Testament, Rome viewed itself as divine. It was the "eternal city," whose prosperity and military might offered security to its populace. This security was known as *pax Romana*, the peace of Rome. And Rome's ideology was further enforced by the Emperor cult, which viewed Caesar as the "son of God." Loyal citizens would proclaim that Caesar was "Lord and Savior."

The churches addressed by John struggled at two points — persecution as they resisted Roman ideology or compromise as they were tempted to embrace Roman ideology and the security and prosperity it offered. So John offers prophetic insight, exposing Rome as a system of violent oppression maintained by political tyranny (the beast — Revelation 13 & 17) and economic exploitation (the harlot — Revelation 17-18). By offering both the heavenly and eschatological perspective, the Revelation makes it absolutely clear that God's people must choose either the ideology of Rome or God's perspective, seeing Rome for what it truly is. The battle line has been drawn and God's people must either choose loyalty to his kingdom or the Roman Empire.

So how does this apply to us today? Writing from the perspective as an apprentice of Jesus living in the U.S., I personally believe that the Church in the U.S. lives in the New Rome. The U.S. embraces its "manifest destiny" in the global community more than ever. Our leaders use biblical language to justify our role in the war on terrorism and the propagation of democratic freedom around the world. We have established our global dominance through military might and economic exploitation. We view ourselves as a divine instrument in the world. And we justify our actions because of the new "*pax America*" we bring. And from this exalted position, we thumb our collective nose at most opportunities for global cooperation in the pursuit of our national self-interests and continue to consume most of the world's resources.

If the Revelation speaks to us today, I think one of its messages to the Church in the New Rome is to repent and overcome. We cannot allow our imaginations as God's missional community to be shaped by our nation's ideology. This world and this country are not a friend to grace, no matter who lives in the White House or which party dominates our legislative body. What motivated and energized the Roman Empire at the time of the Revelation fuels the U.S.

Don't misunderstand me, I'm not simply picking a fight with the U.S. I think the Revelation's message is equally relevant to the Church in virtually every nation. But the U.S., having been

birthed from a Christendom perspective and now enjoying the privilege as the dominant global power, weds its ideology with Christian language in a way similar to Rome. And God's people must not blindly accept this distorted ideology and live as if the U.S. is God's instrument in the world. If we do, we may find ourselves at the cutting edge of Jesus' double-edged sword.

Like it or not, we are at war. I personally don't like that imagery. But Paul used it and John used it. Yet Paul says that the weapons we use don't originate from this world's order. Instead, we overcome evil with good. And as we will discover in John 4 & 5, our Commander, God's vanquishing Lion, actually wages war as a slain lamb. That is our strategy — a cross-shaped life of self-sacrifice, allowing evil to do its worst to us as we continue to embody the love and life of the New Creation, even to the point of death.

OCTOBER 12, 2005

Revelation: God's Throne Room

Revelation is the ultimate answer to the Lord's prayer — hallowed be your name; your kingdom come; your will be done **on earth as it is in heaven**. God's glory, kingdom and will are coming from heaven to earth. The question is "How?"

Revelation 1 depicts Jesus as the Lord of the Church on earth. He walks among the churches and holds the keys to death and Hades, the enemies of God's people on earth. As the Church's Lord, he then addresses the local churches in chapters 2 and 3. He commends and corrects each congregation in a way that is unique to their locale in order to prepare them for a universal exhortation — to overcome. This is a military charge from a commanding general to his troops. The local churches' situations, whether external oppression or internal compromise, are part of a larger cosmic battle against ultimate evil, which John will reveal shortly.

A key to understanding the Revelation is that heaven and earth are interlocking dimensions of creation. They are not distant locations, but intermingling and coexisting aspects of the same reality of creation. Chapters 1 to 3 have focused on Jesus' presence with his people in the earthly dimension. But chapters 4 and 5 open our perspective to God's heavenly dimension as simultaneous with chapters 1 to 3. It is a picture of the "as it is in heaven" portion of the Lord's prayer. Remember, John is writing the Revelation to encourage God's people as they endure suffering, martyrdom and temptations. Jesus, the Lord of the Church has spoken from "on the ground." Now John reveals several things are happening right now "from above" that directly impact our earthly dimension.

One of the first things we notice is that God is on his throne. Even though it may seem contrary in the earthly dimension, God reigns supreme and all creation acknowledges this through worship. God's plan is being accomplished.

This leads to the next observation. The worship of God shifts in theme, focus and intensity to mirror the climactic unfolding of his plan to bring his kingdom from heaven to earth. In chapter four, creation (the four living creatures) declares God's holiness (cf. Psalm 19). A quick sidenote: God is described as "who was, and is, and is to come." Notice the change in verb. God's eternal being is not described as "who was, who is and *who will be*." His eternal futurity is described as the one who is coming. God's coming was always associated with his salvation and justice to his damaged creation. In other words, God's eternal future is now intimately connected with the very creation he has made. God's people (the twenty-four elders) witnesses this wonder and articulates and harmonizes creation's worship. God is worthy of all glory because he is the good Creator of all things — a Creator who has not just made everything, but is forever connected to his creation in loving salvation and reconciliation.

Chapter five picks up this theme in a new way. The song of creation is replaced by a new song — the song of redemption and New Creation. And the focus of the worship shifts from God to the Lamb — worthy is the Lamb. Why? Because he alone is able to unlock and implement God's

plan for New Creation. And he accomplishes this by purchasing people from every tribe, language, people and nation, who will in turn reign in the earthly dimension.

This is a politically charged statement. Caesar reigns the nations. He is the “lord and savior” of the world. But in this prophetic moment of worship, John reveals that God will bring his kingdom to earth through the reign of the very people that Caesar is oppressing. Caesar will be overthrown and replaced by the very ones he is oppressing. The song of the New Creation is joined by music and prayers. Then the angels join in the worship. Then the worship shifts focus to both God and the Lamb and finally crescendos as creation resounds with a loud and longing “Amen” (cf. Romans 8: 19-21).

Another observation is a literary device that John will use again in the Revelation. At first, no one can be found worthy to bring God’s kingdom from heaven to earth (the scroll in God’s right hand). But John hears, “the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.” The “Lion of Judah” is a military title for the Messiah. And John looks, expecting to see a great conquering military leader who has triumphed or overcome (the same word used in all seven exhortations to the churches). But what he sees is vastly different than what he has heard. He turns and sees a sacrificial lamb. In other words, God’s kingdom can come to earth not because of military might or worldly influence. Instead, Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are the climactic events in human history that alone make it possible for God’s kingdom to come to earth. It is no insignificant thing that Jesus overcomes through sacrifice, and not power or influence. He has let evil do its worst to him, and he has emerged victorious. As Jesus’ has overcome, he exhorts his Church to overcome. God’s people, living in the shadow of a mighty Empire, must overcome the evil embodied in the Empire with goodness and sacrifice (Romans 12:21).

This means that the Church “on the ground” doesn’t exist for itself. Rather, it exists to participate in the implementation of God’s kingdom coming from heaven to earth. God’s people are the implementation of Jesus’ victory through the cross and empty tomb. We are the means in which God’s kingdom comes from heaven to earth. And this happens as we overcome as Jesus did — through lives that embody the sacrificial love of God, even in the midst of the darkest and most oppressive evil. And as we learn to overcome as Jesus, we learn to reign as Jesus — again, with sacrificial love.

Another important observation from Revelation 4 and 5 is the Spirit. The Holy Spirit has two designations in the Revelation. Whenever John depicts the Spirit’s work in the Church, he calls him “Spirit.” But when John shows the Spirit’s ministry to the world, he calls him “the sevenfold Spirit.” A key passage in Revelation 5 is the depiction of the Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the sevenfold Spirit. It is important to keep in mind that seven is the number for fullness. Horns symbolize power and eyes symbolize discernment. What John is saying is that the sacrificial lamb, who alone is worthy to implement God’s plan to bring his kingdom from heaven to earth, has the complete fullness of power and authority (Matthew 28:18) and the complete fullness of discernment (Zechariah 4:10). And this fullness of power and discernment is through the complete fullness of the Spirit (Zechariah 4:6; Isaiah 11:1-9) sent to the earth to bring God’s kingdom from heaven.

How is the Spirit sent to the earth? Each message to the seven churches ends with “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” In other words, the fullness of the Spirit is sent to earth in order to implement God’s plan of bringing his kingdom from heaven to earth. And the Spirit accomplishes this by his prophetic ministry to and through the Church (Revelation 19:10).

Finally, Revelation 4 and 5 look forward to Revelation 22:3-5. At the end of John’s grand vision, God’s throne finally comes to earth from heaven in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2). This is significant. His throne has finally shifted from the heavenly dimension to the earthly dimension. When that happens, God’s people will see his face!

Throughout Scripture, this has been an impossibility. No one may see God’s face and live. Even through the Revelation, John describes God’s transcendence through the title “the one who sits on the throne.” In chapter 4, John also uses the traditional Jewish method of describing God’s transcendence with precious stones. But when God’s glory finally fills the earth and his throne rests in the earthly New Jerusalem, humans may finally enter a level of intimacy with God that has previously been impossible!

Along with this intimacy will be complete continuity between the character and mind of God and the character and mind of his people. They will have God’s name written upon their foreheads. This will in turn, allow God to release his people to reign alongside him in full human freedom. It is the full reconciliation of the ongoing tension between God’s sovereignty and human freedom.

Dallas Willard says that on that day, humans will be free to truly do whatever we want. We will be free to commit as much murder, adultery, fornication, and greed as we like, which will be absolutely none, because we will truly be like God in our character and desires. Rather, we will love, give and serve fully and freely as God. We will truly be imitators of God in the fullest sense (Ephesians 5:1-2).

But as Revelation 6 through 20 will show, it will get a lot worse before it gets better...

OCTOBER 28, 2005

Revelation: Chapter 6 & 7 (part 1)

Revelation 6 and 7 begin the first of three series of seven judgments that occupy a large portion of the Revelation. Each series of seven judgments escalates in severity. The first series affects 1/4 of the earth. The second series impacts 1/3 of the earth and the final series impact the entire earth, leading to the destruction of Babylon and the establishment of the New Jerusalem and the New Creation.

Each series of seven is broken into a common pattern — four visions followed by two visions followed by a two-part interlude followed by a climactic vision that transitions into the next series of seven. This pattern draws out significant theological meaning. Seven is the number of fullness and completion. Each series of seven represents the fullness of God's actions in bringing his kingdom to earth. Also, the number four represents the earth, so the first four visions in each series reveal their earthly impact.

I have found Richard Bauckham's comments regarding John's visions to be very insightful:

*"John's images echo and play on the facts, the fears, the hopes, the imaginings and the myths of his contemporaries, in order to transmute them into elements of his own Christian prophetic meaning. Thus it would be a serious mistake to understand the images of Revelation as timeless symbols. Their character conforms to the contextuality of Revelation as a letter to the seven churches of Asia. Their resonances in the specific social, political, cultural and religious world of their first readers need to be understood if their meaning is to be appropriated today. They do not create a purely self-contained aesthetic world with no reference outside itself, but intend to relate to the world in which the readers live in order to reform and to redirect the readers' response to that world. However, if the images are not timeless symbols, but relate to the 'real' world, we need to also avoid the opposite mistake of taking them too literally as descriptive of the 'real' world and of predicted events in the 'real' world. They are not just a system of codes waiting to be translated into matter-of-fact references to people and events. **Once we begin to appreciate their sources and their rich symbolic associations, we realize that they cannot be read either as literal descriptions or as encoded literal descriptions, but must be read for their theological meaning and their power to evoke response.**" (Emphasis mine)*

Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*

So as we examine the various visions, it is important to keep in mind that they do not necessarily find direct one-to-one correlation to specific events that have already occurred or will someday occur. Rather, John's visions are anchored in the readers'/listeners' historical context, drawing from both contemporary images and rich Old Testament allusions, but also transcend the literal historical context to create a fresh prophetic imagination for God's people.

John's visions speak directly to God's people as they live in and confront the Roman Empire with the embodiment of God's kingdom in their personal and corporate lives. In fact, at its heart, the Revelation is a prophetic critique of the Roman Empire. But by doing this John also

lays a foundation for a prophetic critique of all forms of human empire throughout the span of history.

This first series of seven judgments is depicted as the seven seals that bind the scroll, which is God's plan to bring his kingdom to earth, uniquely inaugurated by Jesus, God's sacrificial lamb. The seven seals are "preparatory" visions for the remainder of the Revelation. The first four (again symbolically demonstrating the impact of opening God's scroll upon the earth) are four horsemen — conquest, war, famine and death. Ironically, in preparation for God's kingdom to come to earth, humanity is allowed full expression in its distorted corporate will for conquest. In other words, human freedom is allowed to run rampant. And its fullest earthly expression is human empire. It was true of Rome. And it is true of every nation that has existed upon the earth. Every nation has an inherent agenda for conquest, which is quickly followed by conflict, poverty and ultimately death, regardless of its noblest intentions. Whenever the white rider of conquest rides forth, the other three riders are soon to follow. And none of these four riders are God's instruments in implementing his New Creation. They are the consequences of human depravity. They cannot be used by any nation, organization or person in the attempt to bring forth God's kingdom.

But before we shake our head in judgment, we must remember that societal sins are simply the amplification of our own personal sins. Our personal sins of greed, lust, anger, prejudice and fear find their expression in the national and corporate sins of conquest, war, famine and death. James offers the following critique:

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

Our ruined personal lives that Jesus longs to save us from are fraught with the very sins that feed humanity's corporate sins, whether they find varying degrees of expression in the devastation of the Nazi regime, the western colonialism of Christian missions, the vision of Manifest Destiny in the U.S., the genocides in Rwanda and Darfur, Walmart's strategy for global expansion or the building program at a local church, to name just a few.

Yet, as human history has demonstrated, human empires can be both blessing and bane. This is the confusion that John's original audience faced. Some faced oppression and martyrdom while others faced the temptation to yield to the benefits offered by the *pax Romana*.

I'm reminded of a humorous scene from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. At one of the many meetings of the People's Front of Judea, Reg (the group's leader) asks his resistance group, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" Although his question was to be the rallying point for his troops, in fine British humor, the members begin listing all the benefits brought by the Romans. Shaken, but not deterred, Reg poses the next question, "All right, but apart from the

sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?" Someone then answers, "Brought peace?" to which Reg responds, "Oh peace — Shut up!"

If we tune our internal radios to WII-FM (What's In It For Me?), we can easily be seduced by the many benefits that empires bring. And there are many benefits. For example, as a citizen of the U.S., I benefit from the many freedoms won through the four horsemen. But John's Revelation forces me to ask "At what cost and to whom?" And the answers to those questions make me realize that although the U.S. is often labeled a "Christian" nation, its history and tactics find little affinity to the Lamb and his strategy.

Please don't misunderstand me. Any critique of a nation or organization is a critique of its people, myself included. I am fully aware that my distorted life contributes to the very thing I'm critiquing. And therein lies the relevance of the Revelation's central message to God's people — overcome! That is the exhortation John provides to God's people. Not cursing the empire. Not fighting the empire with our own political or economic power. That would be fighting the Beast with the Beast's weapons and on the Beast's terms.

Rather, God's people must embody God's way, truth and life as Christ did. John 20:21 says that Jesus sends us just as his Father sent him. As we will see next time and throughout the rest of the Revelation, the prophetic witness of Jesus to and through the Church is the primary way that God's kingdom comes to bring the nations to repentance and to renew creation.

NOVEMBER 4, 2005

Revelation: Chapters 6 & 7 (part 2)

As the first four seals in Revelation 6 have been opened, we've witnessed the consequences of distorted human empire running unchecked upon the earth — conquest, war, famine and death. Next in the pattern are two more seals. These two seals present two key questions that set the direction for the remainder of the Revelation. The fifth seal depicts God's people who have been martyred, crushed under the machinery of human empire. They cry out for God's justice, asking "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Notice how their confidence is in God. They await his justice, which is holy and true. The answer they receive is twofold. They are given white robes, which declare God's vindication upon their faithful lives and sacrificial deaths. Then they are told to wait longer because more will be martyred. In other words, it will get much worse before it gets better.

The sixth seal opens, revealing God's judgment falling upon rebellious humanity. As God's kingdom comes into cataclysmic conflict against human kingdoms (Rome in particular), it is as if all creation shudders. And in the midst of the throes, humanity cries out with the second question, "For the great day of [God's] wrath has come, and who can stand?"

And like the pattern that will repeat later in the seven trumpets and seven bowls, the seventh and climactic seal is preceded by a two-part interlude. This interlude answers the second question of "Who can stand?" Before God pours out his wrath, he prepares those who will overcome. John hears an angel announcing that God's people must receive God's possessive and protective seal upon their foreheads. This announcement is followed by a census role-call of Israel, one that was often used as Israel prepared for battle. Twelve tribes of 12,000 form the ultimate expression of God's people in full and splendid military array. This army is ready to follow the Lion of Judah into his messianic war. But when John turns to see Israel prepared for battle, he discovers an innumerable multitude gathered from the nations who worship the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb. This multitude stands before the throne and their white robes are washed in the blood of the Lamb, a phrase meaning martyrdom.

John has just used the same literary device he used in Revelation 5. In that chapter, John hears that one has been found worthy to open God's scroll — the conquering Lion of Judah. But when John turns to see this military hero, he sees one who looks like a sacrificial lamb. Similarly, in this vision, John hears the announcement of God's conquering army, national Israel ready to follow the messianic Lion of Judah. But when he turns, he discovers a multitude from the pagan nations who are worshipping the Lamb! Just as the vision of the Lion of Judah and the sacrificial lamb are the same, these two visions of military Israel and the worshipping multitude depict the same reality. God's people are now drawn from all the nations and reconstituted around Jesus.

But what is the seal that marks this multitude as God's people? It is their worship and the white robes they wear — the same white robes given to the martyrs in the fifth seal. In other words,

this multitude belong to God because they follow and emulate the Lamb unto sacrificial death. They are truly his people, imitating his life, character and even death. They overcome not by military power, but by true witness, worship and sacrifice. Those who can stand in the day of wrath are those who are so completely given to God that they are ready to give their lives for him. This is an amazing twist! Those who will stand and overcome are the ones prepared to sacrifice and die on behalf of true witness for the Lamb!

We have already seen that God's people have been called to overcome. And we have also observed that Jesus has overcome as the sacrificial lamb. Now these two strands are woven together. The army of God that is ready to follow the Lion of Judah into a messianic war is an army of martyrs who will overcome as the Lamb has overcome — by participating through their own deaths in the sacrificial death of the Lamb! These are the people who can stand in the coming conflagration of titanic kingdoms in conflict. As the earth heaves from the confrontation of God's kingdom coming against human kingdoms and as rebellious humanity attempts in vain to find some sort of refuge from the onslaught, God's people, who truly follow the Lamb, will stand and shine and overcome!

And like any good story-teller, John leaves us in suspense, waiting until later to reveal how this will happen...

NOVEMBER 5, 2005

Revelation: Authorial Intent & Biblical Authority

A couple of posts ago, I quoted Richard Bauckham regarding John's use of visions in the Revelation. As we prepare to move to chapters 8 & 9 and the seven trumpets, I want to offer another quote from Bauckham that I believe helps us keep our course through the barrage of images we encounter.

"Consider, for example, the descriptions of the plagues of the seven trumpets (8:6-9:21) and the seven bowls (16:1-21). These form a highly schematized literary pattern which itself conveys meaning. Their content suggests, among many other things, the plagues of Egypt which accompanied the exodus, the fall of Jericho to the army of Joshua, the army of locust depicted in the prophecy of Joel, the Sinai theophany, the contemporary fear of invasion by Parthian cavalry, the earthquakes to which the cities of Asia Minor were rather frequently subject, and very possibly the eruption of Vesuvius which had recently terrified the Mediterranean world. John has taken some of his contemporaries' worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms. The point is not to predict a sequence of events. The point is to evoke and to explore the meaning of the divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world."

Richard Bauckham, Theology of the Book of Revelation

I think this quote is worth exploring before we move further into the Revelation because it raises a couple of significant questions that easily form obstacles to U.S. Evangelicalism's approach to the Revelation.

One question Bauckham's quote raises is "Is the Revelation the result of John's ability to simply dictate what he 'saw' or his ability to craft what he 'saw' into a theological and literary work to serve his pastoral purpose?" Another question raised, and which is intimately connected to the first, is "What is the Revelation's prophetic purpose? Is it a prediction of the future or is it a pastoral refashioning of the Christian imagination?" Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are not easy to arrive at. Because for many Christians, these questions bore into the bedrock of authorial validity and biblical authority.

Simply put, many Christians merge an extremely literal interpretation of the instructions John receives from the resurrected Jesus in John 1:19, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later," and faulty understanding of the prophetic role to form a dictation theory of the Revelation's origin. Here's how the reasoning goes: In the opening chapter of the Revelation, John is taken into heaven and instructed by Jesus to write down everything he sees. Then paraded before John are series of visions that predict future events. And depending on one's interpretative grid — future, preterist, historical or spiritual — these predictive visions find some level of one-to-one correspondence to historical, contemporary or future events. However, I believe that this approach does severe injustice to the literary style of the Revelation as well as creates various contradictions between the visions that require superhuman theological gymnastics to explain.

As I've posted about previously, the Revelation combines three literary styles — epistle, prophecy and apocalyptic. The Revelation flows from John's pastoral heart as he attempts to bring encouragement and correction to the struggling churches in Asia Minor. To do this, he shares with them a prophetic message to help reshape their Christian imagination from a heavenly perspective. He wants them to view their lives from the ultimate Reality that God is on the throne and Jesus is unfolding God's kingdom and New Creation through the Church's ministry in the world. But God's purpose is met with vicious opposition by distorted human kingdoms, epitomized by the Roman Empire. The emergence of God's New Creation is a messianic war fought not by military power, but by following Jesus' ministry of faithful embodiment, demonstration and declaration of God's truth, even unto sacrificial death. In order to show that all of God's purposes are being accomplished, John casts his prophetic message in an apocalyptic style that draws heavily from the Old Testament (over 250 allusions to the Old Testament) and the contemporary realities of John's readers. So the visions themselves are not to be interpreted literally. They serve as symbolic and artistic portraits. They are not to be mastered by our brilliant attempts at deciphering all of the detailed symbols. Rather, they are to master us as they reshape and remold our imaginations, thoughts and feelings around God's true Reality. They are to help form the mind of Christ in us as we live in a world hostile to God's kingdom and therefore hostile to us.

However, our current Christian imaginations have been so formed by a futurist "Left Behind" perspective that a different approach to the Revelation is difficult to accept and can be even threatening. Like I mentioned earlier, it touches upon many Christians' unspoken and often distorted values of biblical authority.

At the extreme, many Christians view the Bible as God's instrument of exerting his authority to control and supervise sinful people on earth. God is holy and humanity is sinful. Therefore, in order to communicate his mind and will, God works through human authors to record his will for human posterity. This usually diverges into two separate, but equally distorted views. Because humanity in general is sinful, in order to fully capture God's holy will in human language, human authors either had to dictate what God told them in order to keep it free from human influence or the authors that God used had somehow attained an elite level of holiness that allowed him to use their minds and words to record his will. In the first view, if Matthew, Mark, Luke, Paul, and Peter are humans like us (i.e. sinful), they most likely dictated what God told them. In the other view, if what the human authors wrote was a human endeavor that God inspired, then they must be so holy that they are no longer like mere mortals.

Personally, I think both perspectives are flawed on many levels. I don't think God's authority is about exerting his control over people. If it were, why is most of the Bible in narrative form and not simply a rule book? A story is not the most effective means to control people. Nor do I believe that the Bible contains timeless truths that must be deciphered and extracted for modern readers. If so, then we are implying that God made a huge mistake in giving us his Word in its predominantly narrative form. By reading and interpreting Scripture from its current form into another more "accessible" form of principles, truths and application, we are stating

that the Bible's current form is flawed.

Any way, this is moving into territory that requires a lot of thought, time and energy than this post can allow. If you're interested, spend some time reading **"How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?"** by N.T. Wright. It's a great introduction into the issues of biblical authority and whets the appetite for his forthcoming U.S. release of, **The Last Word**, which has already been released in England as **Scripture and the Authority of God**.

NOVEMBER 7, 2005

Revelation: Authorial Intent (part 2)

I realize I left a lot of threads dangling in *my last Revelation post*. And I can't guarantee I will tie them all off in this one.

As our group has been moving through the Revelation, a primary issue continues to surface. It's expressed in different ways, but at its heart, it deals with authorial intent. Did John simply dictate these series of bizarre visions or did he utilize the literary style common in his time period to craft a prophetic message?

Many choose to believe that John merely dictated what he saw. And for those who hold this view, it usually means the visions must be interpreted literally and deciphered into one-to-one correspondence with real-time events, either historic or future. For many, this is the only way this strange and peculiar book has any relevance or authority.

But the evidence seems to weigh heavily in favor of viewing the Revelation as a product of creative theological reflection and literary crafting. It utilizes the style of apocalyptic literature, which relied heavily on angelic visions, cataclysmic events, monsters, numbers and symbols to predominantly communicate theological substance. For example, the detailed use of numbers as well as the number of occurrences of specific phrases require greater reflection than simple dictation would allow. In addition, there are approximately 250 allusions to the Old Testament. John has crafted a work that is completely saturated with the Old Testament. Whatever else is going on in the Revelation, John is obviously demonstrating that the major Old Testament themes are finding their consummation in this prophetic message.

Did John really "see" these visions? Did he actually see a lamb with seven eyes and seven horns and the other wondrous sites of the Revelation? Or did he receive a prophetic message and after a time of reflection and prayer, craft this message into an apocalyptic style that would communicate its unique significance in a way that his original audience would understand and receive encouragement? It's difficult to say, but personally, I lean heavily toward the second alternative.

But does the use of John's theological reflection and imagination lessen the Revelation's validity and authority? I don't think so. Jesus used imaginative stories. In fact, many of his stories were fictional. The prodigal son and the good Samaritan stories are prime examples. They were the product of creative and wise theological reflection. And they carry as much validity and authority for God's people as his Sermon on the Mount.

Yet, doesn't the author's agenda eventually taint the core message? If John received a divine prophetic message, isn't that message distorted if he crafts it around his pastoral agenda? Doesn't human participation other than dictation automatically assume distortion? If that's the case, then most of the New Testament would be distorted. Let's take the four gospels. Each writer uses Jesus' words and deeds to craft an historically accurate, yet theologically unique

message. In fact, Luke's Gospel is an historical and theological reconstruction from eyewitness accounts. He wasn't even around. And even though he accesses material very similar to Matthew's Gospel, he obviously uses it to tell his story differently from Matthew's. And then there is John's Gospel, which at times seems to actually contradict the other three gospels. For example, while the three synoptic gospels place Jesus' temple-cleansing episode at the end of Jesus' ministry, John places it at the beginning. Also, the synoptic gospels place the Last Supper on the Passover, while John places it the day before Passover. Yet, John's Gospel is probably quoted more than the other three (i.e. John 3:16).

The point I'm trying to make is that God is about renewing his creation. And he's doing it in the way he intended from the beginning — through the cooperation and participation of human beings made in his image. This is what the incarnation was about. Jesus is a human being in the fullness of God accomplishing the purposes and will of God. And this is the core message of the Revelation. God's kingdom and New Creation are coming through the cooperative ministry and witness of God's people on the earth. And this would include the authorship of the documents that provide the foundational charter of God's New Testament people.

NOVEMBER 7, 2005

Revelation: It's Relevance

Even though the Revelation has inspired God's people throughout Church history, I believe this book has unique relevance for western Christianity. Missiologists have stated that the Church is in a process of liminality as we shift from the preferred position of society's center to its margins. We find ourselves in a place similar to John's original audience. Existing on society's fringes, they were persevering through external opposition while simultaneously resisting the internal temptation to yield to society's values and benefits.

In fact, I think the Revelation can speak freshly to the Emerging Church, which finds itself both on the margins of the Church and society. **Scot McKnight** has recently posted his observations that the Emerging Church can be defined as praxis, protest, and postmodern. I believe the Revelation speaks to all three aspects. Regarding praxis, the Revelation refashions the Christian imagination so we can "overcome" through our prophetic witness in society. It is a revelation about Jesus that can fuel our lives for Jesus. Secondly, the Revelation shows that our prophetic witness is protest. We confront both the surrounding culture as well as the heretical teaching within the Church to embrace the culture by embodying the truth of Jesus, even unto sacrificial death. Finally, the Revelation speaks powerfully through its literary and theological form to the postmodern values of story and mystery.

The Revelation has been held hostage long enough by the literal futurist interpretation that strips it of its beauty, meaning and worth. As the Emerging Church focuses upon following Jesus' life, words and ministry as communicated through the Gospels, we should also embrace and integrate the Revelation's portrayal of the Resurrected Jesus, who is the Lord of creation, history and the Church and who holds the keys of death and Hades and has overcome by being the sacrificial lamb of God.

NOVEMBER 7, 2005

Revelation: It's Relevance (part 2)

Chris Erdman has a great post about [Preaching As An Alternative to Violence](#) that focuses on both Jesus' and his Church's responsibility to wage war on evil not militarily, but homilectically. In his post, he discusses the Revelation's depiction of the Church's prophetic ministry as bringing about God's kingdom:

"The only weapon Jesus used was the Word. The only weapon the church is to use is the Word (Eph. 6.17). We are told that the "weapons of our warfare are not worldly, but they have divine power" (2 Cor. 10.4). We are told that "through death Jesus destroyed the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and freed those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb. 2.14-15). And we have the whole of The Revelation as a sustained testimony of the church's understanding that Jesus has changed everything and is changing everything. It witnesses to the fact that the first Christians realized that just as Jesus' preaching was the power above all powers, so too the word of their testimony, their preaching, had the power to... undo and redo the whole world. It was a word that could make the empires of the world tremble. It was a word that would shake the empires to their core and topple their arrogant usurpation of God's authority. They knew that following Jesus meant that they would conquer the world for God not militarily, but homilectically—"they conquered [the violent] 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" (Rev. 12.11)."

As we have seen in previous posts, Jesus is the messianic Lion of Judah who has triumphed (overcome) by being God's sacrificial Lamb. His people constitute an army that follows him into his messianic war against evil by joining him in his faithful witness, even unto sacrifice and death.

In this light, I believe that the Revelation teaches us as Jesus' apprentices to embrace the spiritual discipline of non-violence. This is especially significant for USAmerican Christians who live as citizens of the world's superpower — a nation that has formulated a theology of war to support its renewed sense of divine appointment and Manifest Destiny to rid the world of evil.

NOVEMBER 9, 2005

Revelation: Chapter 8 & 9

Revelation 8 begins with the opening of the seventh seal that has bound the scroll. This is the climax of the first series of judgments. And the tension mounts as the seal's opening is followed by a period of silence. It is as if heaven is holding its collective breath in anticipation of what will come next.

As the silence ends, seven angels are given trumpets, reminiscent of the Jericho story. But before the angels sound their trumpets, God responds to the prayers of the saints with a dramatic epiphany, similar to what Israel experienced on Mt. Sinai. As the next series of judgments (which are more severe than the first) are about to fall upon the earth, God is powerfully present in covenant with his people!

The seven trumpet judgments fall into a similar pattern as the seven seals — four judgments that directly affect the earth, followed by two more judgments, followed by a two-part interlude, followed by a climactic judgment. The angels sound their trumpets, heralding in Jericho-like style the imminent judgment upon the earth. But these judgments are actually warning-judgments, intended to bring rebellious humanity to repentance. To communicate this, John describes the first four judgments with images similar to the plagues that befell Egypt in order to bring Pharaoh to repentance. Also, each judgment only affects 1/3 of the earth. Interestingly, John combines images from the Exodus story with contemporary images that would evoke strong emotions from his readers. For example, the huge mountain that falls into the sea is an image of Mt. Vesuvius' eruption in AD 79, which brought untold chaos to sections of the Roman Empire. Also, the fifth and sixth judgments describe in apocalyptic style the barbarian hordes from northern Europe, casting them as a demonic army with allusions to the locust swarm from the Book of Joel.

What is particularly significant about these warning-judgments is their results — although devastating 1/3 of the earth, these "acts of God" have no effect in bringing humanity to repentance (Revelation 9:20-21). Something more than these divine deeds are needed to turn hearts to God. And this sets us up for the two-part interlude in Revelation 10 & 11, where the contents of God's scroll are finally revealed.

Revelation 8 & 9 have relevance for us today as we live and pray for God's world. Many of us are crying out for God to move powerfully in our families, neighborhoods, relationships, nations and world. We are praying that God would move powerfully and bring revival. Even as we witness the catastrophes of natural and human-initiated disasters, we pray that somehow God would use these events to lead people to repentance. But these chapters show us that this is not enough! These chapters reveal that the coming of God's kingdom from heaven to earth does not occur solely from God's end. Something more is needed in the equation. The renewal of his creation occurs as God works in tandem with his people. As we will see in the next chapters, this is the mystery of the scroll.

NOVEMBER 10, 2005

Revelation: Chapters 10 & 11

Revelation 10 & 11 describe the two-part interlude preceding the seventh trumpet. This interlude finally reveals the contents of the scroll initially shown in Revelation 5. So what is this scroll? The scroll reveals the way in which the Lamb's victory will be made effective upon the earth. It reveals how God's kingdom will come from heaven to earth because of Jesus' triumph. More specifically, the scroll reveals how Christ's apprentices are to participate in the coming of God's kingdom by following him and embodying his witness, sacrifice and victory. The first part of the interlude focuses on John's prophetic ministry and the second part focuses on Christ's followers' prophetic ministry.

When we first encounter the sealed scroll in chapter 5, it is revealed by a "mighty angel." Now in chapter 10, another "mighty angel" brings the opened scroll to John. Revelation 4, 5 & 10 closely parallel Ezekiel 1-3. In that passage, Ezekiel receives his prophetic call via a vision of God's throne room. This vision prepares him to receive a prophetic message from God, which he in turn must deliver to Israel. The prophetic message comes to Ezekiel in the form of a sealed scroll with writing on both sides. God opens the scroll and Ezekiel is instructed to eat it. Ezekiel obeys, symbolically absorbing and embodying the divine message that he will communicate.

As John sees God upon the throne and ultimately ingests the open scroll, his visions validate his prophetic ministry in a manner similar to Ezekiel's. The main difference is that God doesn't open the scroll, Jesus does. So the scroll is taken from God's hand by the Lamb, who opens it. It is then taken from heaven to earth by an angel, who gives it to John to eat (c.f. Revelation 1:1-3). So the Revelation comes from God, to Jesus, to an angel, to John, and finally to the Church. So everything that has occurred from Revelation 1 to 10 has been in preparation for the actual revealing of the scroll – how God's kingdom will come to earth.

Why the delay in the revelation of the scroll until after the sixth trumpet? Simply, it flows naturally with the rest of the book. The seals binding the scroll are opened in preparation for revealing its contents – human kingdoms run rampant, the subsequent oppression of God's people and God's imminent judgment upon this evil. These seals then transition into warning-judgments upon human empire – judgments similar to the plagues that fell upon Egypt. These judgments have the intention of producing repentance in rebellious humanity. By the sixth trumpet, however, it is clear that these divine judgments alone do not produce repentance (Revelation 9:20-21).

The failure of the judgments to produce repentance is why the seven thunders (most likely another series of more severe warning-judgments) are aborted. What follows is the revealing of the scroll's contents, then followed by a greater description of the ensuing conflict, lastly followed by the final series of judgments that ultimately destroy evil and fully usher God's kingdom to earth.

The scroll unfolds what is truly necessary to bring the nations to repentance – the faithful witness of Jesus’ apprentices in conjunction with God’s judgments. This is not a small thing. God’s powerful judgments are unable to produce repentance. Instead, it is the cooperative work of his people, as we imitate Christ, that draws the nations back to God.

The scroll reveals that it is the faithful witness and sacrificial deaths of God’s people, in the midst of hostility and violence, that will be instrumental in the conversion of the nations back to God. The life and death of the Church is the salvation of the nations! As we saw in Revelation 8, God’s messianic army is a multitude redeemed from the nations and given a robe of martyrdom. Revelation 11 reveals that this has been done in order that they bear prophetic witness back to the nations. The Lamb’s army has been redeemed from the nations to witness to the nations.

The two witnesses symbolizes the Church’s faithful witness to the nations (they are described as lampstands, the symbol of the Church in Revelation 1). John uses two witnesses in this image because of the biblical legal requirement that evidence must be established by at least two witness.

We must keep in mind that this vision is not a literal event. Rather, it is a prophetic parable dramatizing the nature of the Church’s ministry on the earth. Like Elijah and Moses, the Church will faithfully embody the truth and power of God in the midst of hostile rebellion. But the Church’s ministry will surpass that of Elijah and Moses because it will be faithful even unto sacrificial death like the Lamb. And God will use the Church’s faithful witness to convert rebellious humanity. This vision demonstrates the Church’s faithfulness to Jesus’ witness by dramatically linking its vindication (the Church’s resurrection and exaltation) with Jesus’ vindication (his resurrection and exaltation). This is another way of saying, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). The Church is God’s instrument as it continues to embody Jesus’ life and witness and participate in his death (i.e. in the blood of the Lamb). But our power does not come from our own strength. Our life and witness draws power from Jesus’ life and witness.

The results of the Church’s witness are remarkable! First, an earthquake strikes rebellious humanity as another judgment. But for John’s readers, who are steeped in Old Testament imagery, the results are startling. In the Old Testament, a tenth part (Is 6:13; Amos 5:3) or seven thousand people (1 Kings 19:18) are usually spared as the faithful remnant. But John reverses this. Rather than nine-tenths perishing, only a tenth suffers judgment. In other words, the faithless majority are spared so that they may come to repentance! It is as if the Church’s faithful witness blankets humanity with grace so the majority are spared judgment in order that they may repent.

Following the earthquake, the seventh angel sounds his trumpet, followed by a remarkable declaration, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Rev 11:15). Because of the Church’s faithful and powerful witness of embodying the way, truth and life of Jesus, the kingdom is spilling over from heaven

to earth! And rebellious humanity is repenting and being renewed under the banner of God's leadership.

Because it is the Church's faithful witness that is instrumental in accomplishing God's plan of bringing his kingdom to earth, it is essential to discuss what that witness looks like. First, it has repentance as its central theme. The two witnesses are clothed in sackcloth, symbolic of repentance. The Church's witness must be an invitation, like the one offered by Jesus in the Gospels, to examine one's ruined life in contrast to a new life in God's kingdom. It is an invitation to lay down one's self-destructive agenda and enter into a new life constituted around the ever-living Christ.

Second, the Church's witness remains faithful to the entire biblical narrative. It's not a mere coincidence that John chooses Moses and Elijah as representative of the Church's witness. They represent the full story of God's people, now climaxed in Christ and being implemented afresh by Jesus' people. Their story is our story. And it is in the midst of this story that the Church's witness finds its power.

I personally believe that the Church's witness finds expression in four avenues. In these four ways, the followers of Christ plant flags of God's kingdom in enemy territory. First, we express God's truth through our own personal spiritual formation into Christ's likeness. Christ coaches and teaches us to deny the inward core of our ruined and distorted lives so that we may embrace a new life. Christ's likeness in our lives is the human expression of the New Creation!

Second, we incarnate Jesus' presence through authentic community. Jesus stated that he is present when two or more gather in his name. This applies to far more than worship services, prayer gatherings and committee meetings. This is a description of *koinonia*, the sharing and participating in one another's lives. As we build communities of love that model Jesus' love, Jesus is embodied and made known upon the earth.

Third, we declare God's truth via social justice, challenging injustice and oppression at all levels throughout the world. God's kingdom coming to earth is God making things right. It is his renewing of all that is damaged. This was inaugurated by Jesus, who reconciled everything in earth and heaven back to God, and is now implemented by his apprentices as we engage all forms of brokenness in the world.

Fourth, we embody God's truth as we create. We are God's image-bearers, created to be co-creators who continue to invent and nurture new forms of goodness and beauty from the raw materials of life on planet earth. So whether it is science, writing, dance, music, painting, numbers, study, space, etc., we are to engage life as an artist's studio in which we create masterpieces of love, joy, peace and compassion.

And for the Church to be powerfully faithful to God's truth, all of us must engage all four avenues of witness. The Christian vocation is to follow Jesus into the personal embodiment of

his character and power, the life of authentic loving community, the implementation of social justice, and the continual creation and nurturing of goodness upon the earth.