

The True and the False in the Ecclesiology of Revelation

Edwin Reynolds
Southern Adventist University

The book of Revelation reveals two differing worldviews, each of which is represented by a segment of earth's population. One worldview is associated with the truth from God held dear by His followers, while the other is associated with the deceptions of the ancient Serpent, or Dragon, and those on earth who identify themselves with him. Thus there are two groups of people represented in Revelation: the majority of earth who side with the Dragon and his false teachings and the small remnant of those who are faithful to God and His truth, even to death.

But these two groups are not always as distinct as one might expect. There is a lot of crossover and confusion in the ranks before the final judgment is issued. For example, the final appeal of God before judgment is carried out on Babylon is, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues" (Rev 18:4).¹ This call makes evident that God has His own people who until the last moments are still within the corrupt system represented as Babylon. Conversely, the message of Jesus to the church at Laodicea reveals that there are those within the church who believe that all is well with them, yet Jesus has to tell them that they do not know that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (3:17), that because they are neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm, He is about to spit them out of His mouth (3:16), and that they are in serious need of repentance (3:19). In other words, the church has people in it who do not fit the model for God's people, while there are others whom God considers to

¹ Scripture quotations in this paper are from the NIV unless otherwise specified.

REYNOLDS: THE TRUE AND THE FALSE

be His people even while they are found within a corrupt system that is opposed to God and His truth.

The purpose of this paper is to study the true and the false in the ecclesiology of Revelation in order to determine what portrait of the Church emerges. What constitutes the Church in Revelation? Does Revelation envision more than one Christian Church?

Can there be a true Church and a false Church? If so, how can one distinguish the true from the false? Is there such a thing as a visible Church and an invisible Church? What would characterize each?

We begin with an attempt to catalog the language of ecclesiology² in the book. This will help identify the portions of text that should reveal the answers to our questions. We then summarize the results of a study of these passages in terms of what they reveal about the nature of the Church and the extent to which it may incorporate aspects of the true and

² When I speak of the language of ecclesiology or the Church in a general way, I mean to include all references or allusions to the people of God, whether in the Old Testament period, the Christian era, or the eschatological age, whether formal and organized (“visible”) or unidentified with any organized group (“invisible”), even whether faithful and true in belief and practice or spiritually lapsed and apostate but still considered a part of the corporate, visible people of God. I do not refer, however, to individuals, but only to collective groups or “corporate” representations. Subgroups may also qualify for this identification, as in the concept of a faithful “remnant.” My goals and methods in this endeavor are different from those of Stephen Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis*, Society for New Testament Studies Monographs Series, no. 128 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004). He utilizes Relevance Theory to classify references to “the people of God” by discourse analysis into three different ways in which they are represented: namely, as addressees, as audience, and as actors. His interest is in the third category, which he further subdivides into actors that are off stage, in the chorus, or center stage (64-67). His purpose is to examine the actors that are on center stage in 6:9-11; 7:1-8; and 14:1-5, as they point ahead to a culmination in chapters 21-22, to determine how John’s audience would have identified with the portrayals made and would have responded to the call to keep the words of the book (3-4, 64, 67, 197, 213). His classifications according to discourse analysis and his purposes with respect to using Relevance Theory as a hermeneutical method lead him in another direction from that pursued in this paper. Nonetheless, we take note of his work and what he has learned from that study.

I also acknowledge the work of Ekkehardt Mueller (“Introduction to the Ecclesiology of the Book of Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12/2 [2001]: 199-215), who has identified a variety of designations for the church in Revelation. However, his purpose is very different from mine: he focuses on a few select designations, where they are found in the book, characteristics and tasks of the ideal church, appeals and promises to the church, difficulties for the church, and God’s relationship to the church and her final victory, along with some practical implications.

the false. Finally we consider the theological implications of the conclusions of the research.

The Language of Ecclesiology in Revelation

There is a variety of ways in which the book of Revelation refers or alludes to the Church. First and foremost is the direct reference to seven real churches in the province of Asia to which John is directed to write letters from Jesus Christ. After recording the messages in a scroll, he is to send it to the churches (1:4,11). The content of these seven letters is recorded in Rev 2-3. The Greek word used for the church here is ἐκκλησία, the same word used for the church throughout the New Testament. It signifies an assembly or community of people who are chosen for a special purpose. The way it is used in Rev 1-3 is with reference to separate congregations of Christians meeting together for worship in their local communities. We shall see subsequently some of the things Christ has to say about them, but at this point it is important to note that the seven churches are literally only separate congregations of the Church, and neither individually nor collectively do these seven congregations constitute the whole Church, though the symbolic number seven suggests that they function as representatives of the whole, universal Church.³ At the end of each of the messages, Christ says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). What He says to one church, He says to all.

A second important term for the people of God in Revelation is “saints” (ἅγιοι), which means “holy people.”⁴ God identifies such with a key attribute of His own character (Lev 11:44-45; 20:26; 1 Pet 1:15-16; Rev 4:8). This term, therefore, always has a positive connotation.

Another way John refers to the Church is with the concept of a group of people who are faithful to Him and belong to Him. Jesus says in 3:4, “I still have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their garments.” While these people could be viewed individually, it is possible to see

³ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 186-87; Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2002), 62.

⁴ Pattemore, 83, states, “By far the most common use of ἅγιοι in the entire book is for the saints, the people of God.” They pray, shed their blood as martyrs, are righteous, etc.

REYNOLDS: *THE TRUE AND THE FALSE*

them also as a subgroup or “remnant”⁵ in the church of Sardis who are faithful while the majority are spiritually dead, or at least very nearly so. In 18:4 a voice from heaven declares, “Come out of her [Babylon], My people.” Again, these people could be viewed individually, but it is possible, even likely, that they constitute a sizable group of people being addressed collectively as a “remnant” in Babylon who need to come out before Babylon is judged. Finally, in 21:3, God announces that His dwelling place is now with people (or among people) and He will be their God and they will be His people. When they are thus identified with Himself, the term always signifies a faithful people, despite the fact that they may have been found, as in Sardis, in a spiritually lapsed environment, or, as in Babylon, in a totally corrupt environment.⁶

John also uses the symbol of a woman to represent the people of God. This is not original with John, since God’s people were frequently represented in the Old Testament by the symbol of a woman, whether a beloved wife or lover (cf. Isa 54:1-8; Ezek 16:7-14; Hos 2:19-20) or an unfaithful wife or harlot (cf. Isa 1:21; Jer 3:1-2,6-13; Ezek 16:15-59; 23:1-49),⁷ and this use was carried over also into the New Testament (cf. 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:23-32).⁸ This symbol is thus capable of representing a spectrum of relationships, from pure and vibrant to loss of love, even to outright unfaithfulness. In this symbol the true and the false become especially apparent.⁹ In fact, John draws a clear contrast between the pure Woman of Rev 12:1-3, who bears the messianic Son (v. 5; cf. Ps 2:7-9) and later appears eschatologically as the Bride and Wife of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9; 21:9-11), and the impure Woman, the Harlot of Rev 17:3-6.

⁵ See Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2002), 40-41; and Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 81-82.

⁶ Stefanovic, 527-28, observes the parallel with the story of Lot, who was identified with Sodom although he did not participate in its sins (cf. 2 Pet 2:7-8). See also Beale, 899.

⁷ William G. Johnsson, “The Saints’ End-Time Victory over the Forces of Evil,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2: Exegetical and General Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 17, correctly sees her also as Zion, the mother of the people of God, as in Isa 54:1 and Gal 4:26. However, more often she is portrayed as the lover that God wants to betroth to Himself as a faithful wife under the covenant.

⁸ Stefanovic, 378.

⁹ Beale, 62, notes that the term “woman” (γυνή) is used ten times for the community of God and seven times for the ungodly community in the book of Revelation.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

These two women are also represented as two starkly contrasting cities: the Holy City, called the New Jerusalem (21:2,9-27), and the Great City, variously called Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon (11:8; 14:8; 16:19; 17:18; 18:2,10,16,18,19,21).¹⁰ If the two women represent ecclesiological figures, so do the two cities,¹¹ though the emphasis as cities tends to be more on the civic or institutional character,¹² while the emphasis as women is more relational and spiritual.

There is other special language used here and there for the Church or the people of God. Among the expressions used are “servants” (δοῦλοι) of God, “brothers” (ἀδελφοί), “witnesses” (μάρτυροι) of Jesus, “the sons [υἱοί] of Israel,” “the 144,000,” and “the remnant” (οἱ λοιποί) of the offspring of the Woman. Some of these terms may at times be used for individuals or special groups, like “his servants the prophets” in 10:7 or “your brothers the prophets” in 22:9, but our particular interest is in where they are used in a more general sense for the corporate group of those who belong to the people of God, or at least a significant subgroup of the large body which constitutes the Church.

The Churches and the Church

In the messages to the seven churches of Asia, Christ gives about as accurate a portrait of the Church as one could find anywhere. In these seven letters He describes the diverse character of the Church as it existed not only in the first century but as it has continued to exist throughout the Christian era. It is not a portrait of the ideal Church but of the Church as it really is. Because it is an accurate portrayal of the real Church, it informs us about both the strengths and the weaknesses, the good and the bad, the true and the false in the Church. Thus there is both reproof and commendation, calls for repentance and reformation as well as promises to the overcomer.

The church of Ephesus is first commended for its efforts to maintain doctrinal purity in the face of false apostles and the Nicolaitans.¹³ They

¹⁰ Edwin Earl Reynolds, “The Sodom/Egypt/Babylon Motif in the Book of Revelation,” Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1994, 53-59.

¹¹ See Roberto Badenas, “New Jerusalem—The Holy City,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2: Exegetical and General Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 247; Reynolds, 56-59.

¹² Cf. Badenas, 250-51.

¹³ The Nicolaitans, according to the message to the church of Pergamos, were teaching the same things as Balaam taught Balak to entice the Israelites to do, namely, to eat

REYNOLDS: THE TRUE AND THE FALSE

could not tolerate heresy, so they put to the test those who made claims to apostolic authority to teach, and they found them to be false (Rev 2:2). Yet despite these good things, Christ reproved the church at Ephesus for having left their first love (v. 4). He appealed to them to repent and return to the earlier condition from which they had fallen. If not, He would come and remove their lampstand—their church (v. 5). The first step toward loss of status as the Church of Christ is to lose that love that provides the proper motivation for all works of service, including adherence to correct doctrine and the practices that are grounded in that doctrine. Orthodoxy apart from love results in legalism and formalism.¹⁴ This was the problem of the church of Ephesus, and it is the problem of many churches today. Christ appeals to everyone who has an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches (v. 7).

The church of Smyrna is one of two churches to which Christ issued no reproof. Members were suffering from malicious slander and were about to suffer more intense persecution, even to the point of martyrdom (2:9-10). They were poor in this world's estimation, but Christ assured them that they were rich in what heaven regards as of value (v. 9). He appealed to them only to be faithful unto death so they would receive the crown of life (v. 10).

The church of Pergamos was located in a place where it was difficult for members to maintain their faith. Jesus said it was “where Satan has his throne” (2:13).¹⁵ Some were maintaining their faith in that environment, even to martyrdom (ibid.). Yet Jesus protested because, unlike the church of Ephesus, the church in Pergamos tolerated those who held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans and those who held the doctrine of Balaam, who introduced pagan practices among the children of Israel and caused them to sin (vv. 14-15). Compromise with the pagan environment in

things sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality, things explicitly proscribed to the Gentile churches by the first church council (Acts 15:20,29). In other words, they were teaching the churches that it was acceptable to compromise on some of the essentials of church teaching and practice. For more on the Nicolaitans, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52 (Dallas: Word, 1997), 148-49.

¹⁴ Cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary, softback ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 75.

¹⁵ On the first-century situation, see Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series, no. 11 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P, 1989), 82-87; and Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 95-96.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

which they were living and increased tolerance of sinful teachings and practices was threatening to place them at odds with Christ Himself. Jesus said that unless they repented of this spirit of compromise, He would come to them quickly and fight against them with the sword of His mouth (v. 16). Clearly, Christ accepts no compromise, despite the circumstances in which the Church finds itself and the readiness of some to refuse to deny His name even in the face of the threat of martyrdom. The church of Pergamos was going another step beyond that of Ephesus in moving away from the plan of Christ for His Church.¹⁶

The church at Thyatira seems to have sunk even deeper into the pit of apostasy than that in Pergamos. Although Christ always finds something He can commend His Church for, in the case of Thyatira it is actually the members' latter works rather than their former ones that He finds more worthy of commendation (2:19). Thyatira has been tolerating a false prophetess who teaches the same kinds of things that Pergamos was tolerating, compromise with pagan practices like idolatry and sexual immorality (v. 20). Jesus calls this prophetess Jezebel, identifying her character and teaching with that of the pagan wife of Ahab and daughter of the king of Sidon (1 Kgs 16:31).¹⁷ When Ahab married Jezebel to secure a political alliance, he caused Israel to sin and "did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (v. 33). Christ says to the church at Thyatira, "I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent" (Rev 2:22). This reminds the reader of the three and a half years of drought which the true prophet of the Lord announced (Luke 4:25; Jas 5:17; cf. Rev 11:3,6). It also reminds the reader that sexual immorality or adultery functions as a symbol that represents spiritual apostasy.¹⁸ There was widespread apostasy in the church of Thyatira, brought about by a leader claiming to be a prophet who was not only teaching compromise with paganism but "seducing" the people of God into apostasy by her own example (Rev

¹⁶ Cf. Beasley-Murray, 85; Wall, 75-76.

¹⁷ Doukhan, 37, citing Josephus, notes that Ethbaal, Jezebel's father, was also a priest of Baal and Astarte, but his reference does not say that. Taylor G. Bunch, *The Seven Epistles of Christ* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1947), 164, says the same and adds that Jezebel was probably a priestess and prophetess of Baal worship, but no evidence is cited. We do know that Jezebel was instrumental in getting Baal and Astarte worship established in Israel (1 Kgs 16:31-33). In 2 Kgs 9:22 Jehu accuses Jezebel not only of idolatry but also of witchcraft.

¹⁸ Stefanovic, 131; Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation*, 3d ed., 1911 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 44.

REYNOLDS: THE TRUE AND THE FALSE

2:20,22). Christ refers to this apostasy as a doctrine that He calls “the deep things of Satan” (v. 24).

At the same time He addresses a “remnant” (οἱ λοιποὶ) in Thyatira,¹⁹ “as many as do not have this doctrine” (ibid.), telling them that He will place no other burden on them but to “hold fast what you have until I come” (v. 25). Again, we are reminded of the “remnant” of seven thousand who were faithful in the time of Elijah before He brought a reformation to the people of God at Carmel and ended the persecution by the religious leaders of the nation (1 Kgs 19:18; Rom 11:2-5). If the church of Thyatira represents a church in a largely apostate condition, it shows how the Church is not exempt from apostasy as a whole, while only a small remnant of faithful ones may remain true to the principles of the Church founded by Christ. The history of the Church reveals just such a pattern.²⁰

The message of Christ to the church of Sardis reveals a church in serious trouble. The members have a reputation of being alive, but they are as close to spiritual death as it is possible to be without being dead (3:1-2). Their works are unacceptable to God (v. 2). The best thing Christ can say about them is that they “have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes” (v. 4). There is a small, faithful remnant even in Sardis, the church that is the closest to closing its doors of any of the churches. They need the life-giving Spirit of God that Christ has to offer them (v. 1). They need to repent, to be watchful, to strengthen the things that remain, and to hold fast, otherwise Christ will come to them at an hour they do not expect, and, implicitly, they will face severe judgment (v. 3; cf. 2:5,16).²¹

The church at Philadelphia, like that in Smyrna, receives no reproof from Christ. The only seemingly negative thing He says of the members is that they “have little strength” (3:8), but this is not so much a criticism

¹⁹ See Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible* (Sarasota: First Impressions, 1997), 279-80; and Gerhard Pfandl, “The Remnant Church and the Spirit of Prophecy,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2: Exegetical and General Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 297.

²⁰ See Doukhan, 37-38; Stefanovic, 133-34, 152-53; and Roy Naden, *The Lamb among the Beasts* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1996), 81.

²¹ Alan F. Johnson, “Revelation,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 13: *Hebrews—Revelation*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 628.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

as a statement of compassion for their situation, in which, despite their relative weakness, they have kept Christ's word and have not denied His name (ibid.).²² Because of these things, He has set before them an open door that no one can shut (ibid.). He makes their enemies know that He has loved them, and He promises to keep them from the hour of trial that is going to come as a test upon the whole world (vv. 9-10). He promises them that He is coming soon, and He only asks them to hold fast what they have so that no one will take their crown (v. 11). Clearly, the church at Philadelphia demonstrates a fervor and faithfulness that exceeds their own feeble beginnings. It is not necessary to be strong to be loved and valued by Christ. He gives the power to preserve them through the tests and trials that they will encounter, and when they have overcome, they become strong pillars in the temple of God (v. 12).

The Laodicean church, like that of Sardis, has a serious spiritual problem. They are prosperous and comfortable and do not sense a need for anything (3:17). Jesus says that they do not know that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (3:17). This lack of awareness of their own true condition and need makes it nearly impossible for them to do anything about it. Yet Christ calls their attention to the problem and offers them the solution. They need to obtain from Him the heavenly gold of a pure life of faith, refined and tested by trials (cf. 1 Pet 1:7),²³ the white robe of His righteousness to cover the shame of their exposure as sinners (cf. Isa 61:10; 64:6; Rev 3:4; 7:13-14; 19:8), and the anointing eyesalve of the Holy Spirit to take away their spiritual blindness and provide spiritual discernment (cf. John 9:11; 1 Cor 2:14-15).²⁴ Christ stands at the door knocking and awaiting a response from those who hear His appeal (Rev 3:20). A place with Him on His throne is promised to the one who overcomes by accepting the remedies Christ offers (v. 21).

These messages to the seven churches offer de facto evidence that the Church as a whole is not indefectible, according to Christ's own assessment. The organized, "visible" Church undergoes various struggles, including loss of love as a proper motivation for correct doctrine and

²² George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 60; cf. notes by Beale, 285-86; and Swete, 54-55.

²³ Beale, 305, states, "*Refined gold* is a biblical idiom for purifying one's life by removing sin (cf. Job 23:10; Prov. 27:21; Mal. 3:2-3; . . .). The metaphor is also used for the purifying effect of tribulation on God's people (Zech. 13:9; 1 Pet. 1:6-9)." Cf. Swete, 62.

²⁴ Stefanovic, 148; Swete, 62-63.

REYNOLDS: THE TRUE AND THE FALSE

practice, tolerance of compromise in doctrine and practice, tolerance of false teachers and false prophets, open apostasy, spiritual slumber and almost death, or complacency and apathy caused by the prosperity and self-sufficiency which blinds them to their spiritual need. Rather, it is the “invisible”²⁵ Church that proves indefectible, namely, a group of individuals who prove themselves faithful to Christ, or at least responsive to His counsel to repent when in spiritual danger. These are described as the “remnant,”²⁶ the rest who do not give in to the carelessness, compromise, and apostasy that too often characterize the Church as a whole. These are those who have not soiled their white clothes (3:4), those whom Christ preserves from the hour of trial (v. 10), those of whom He requires nothing more than that they hold fast until He comes (2:24-25), those to whom the promises to the overcomer are made.

The Two Women, Two Cities, and the Church

Supplementing the portrait of the Church offered by Christ in His letters to the seven churches is John’s vision of two women, who are also two cities.²⁷ As already noted, the symbol of a woman was already recognized before the time of John, both in the Old and New Testaments, as representing the people of God. God used the marriage covenant as one model of the kind of covenant He wanted to have with His people.²⁸ He represented Himself as the Bridegroom or Husband in this model, while

²⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, one-vol. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983-85), 1043-44, traces the use of such terminology back as far as Augustine, as a necessary attempt to distinguish the “true church,” comprised of true believers, from the “earthly institution,” which may be comprised of members who are not actually a part of the spiritual body of Christ. For an alternative view of such a distinction, see Larry L. Lichtenwaller, “The Church: Visible or Invisible?” Unpublished paper presented for the course THST 685 Seminar in Systematic Theology, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, February 1989.

²⁶ Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 2002), 56, point out that “the faithful remnant” in the Old Testament “constitutes the true Israel within an apostate nation of Israel. True Israel is then evidently a spiritual entity, a spiritual Israel, not bound by blood relationship to Abraham.” Likewise, with reference to the new, spiritual Israel in the New Testament, “the true Israel is ‘a remnant, chosen by grace’ (Romans 11:5, RSV). It is a new creation (Galatians 6:15)” (ibid.).

²⁷ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 127; Mueller, 213.

²⁸ Wonyong Jung, “The Divine Father Concept in the Old Testament,” Ph.D. diss., Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 1996, 122-23.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

He represented His people as His bride, whom He had betrothed to Himself, or as His wife. Often, when His people were unfaithful to the covenant, He represented them as a harlot or an adulterous wife.²⁹ This imagery is carried over into the book of Revelation in the symbolism of the two women, the pure Woman or Bride and the impure Woman or Harlot. These two figures should be viewed as “two sides of the same coin,” as it were. Both are symbols of spiritual categories by which God evaluates people in their relation to the marriage covenant He wants to establish with humanity.³⁰ The pure Woman represents the covenant keeping community of faith throughout human history,³¹ while the Harlot represents a persistent spirit of rebellion against the covenant and those who want to keep it.

In Rev 12:1-2, the pure Woman is introduced as a great sign. She is clothed with the sun, representing the glory of God seen in the righteousness of Christ with which she is clothed (cf. Isa 60:1-5,19-20; 61:10), and with the moon under her feet, a likely symbol of the word of God³² upon which her feet are firmly planted (Ps 40:2; Matt 7:24-25; 16:18), which reflects the light of the Sun of righteousness (cf. Mal 4:2). On her head she has a crown of twelve stars, probably a symbol of both the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles, the founders and leaders of the people of God under both the old and new covenants (cf. Rev 21:9-14).³³ She is shown to be pregnant with the Messiah, who is destined to rule all nations with a rod of iron (vv. 2,5; cf. 19:15-16; Ps 2:7-9).

The Dragon, subsequently described as “that ancient serpent, called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (Rev 12:9), is shown standing before her, waiting for her to give birth so that he can

²⁹ See Hans K. LaRondelle, “Babylon: Anti-Christian Empire,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2: Exegetical and General Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 159.

³⁰ LaRondelle, “Babylon,” 158, states that “the covenant framework is the basic point of orientation for understanding the new Babylon.” Again, “The symbolic language of Babylon as the great ‘prostitute’ in Revelation 17 is *covenantal language* that continues the framework of the covenant of the OT prophets. . . . Isaiah, Hosea, Jeremiah, and especially Ezekiel, described apostate Israel and Jerusalem as *the wife of Yahweh* who had become in their time the greatest prostitute on earth. She would not escape her judgment, the covenant wrath of God” (159).

³¹ Beale, 631; Reynolds, 64; Stefanovic, 378-80.

³² Reynolds, 61; Johnson, 696, understands it at least as “signifying her permanence (Pss 72:5; 89:37; cf. Mt 16:18).”

³³ Mounce, 236; Reynolds, 62-64; Stefanovic, 378, 380.

REYNOLDS: THE TRUE AND THE FALSE

devour her Child as soon as it is born (v. 4). The imagery of the ancient deceiving serpent, the woman, and her promised Child is intentionally reminiscent of the story of the Fall and the promise of salvation included in the curse on the serpent (Gen 3:15).³⁴ The Woman in Rev 12 represents the people of God in all ages who look to the birth of the promised Child who would crush the head of the serpent. As the mother of the Messiah, she represents every family who looked forward to the coming of the Promised One. The fact that she both pre-dates the Messiah and continues to exist and suffer the persecution of the Dragon after the Messiah has ascended to God and to His throne provides evidence that she is a symbol covering the whole history of humanity³⁵ from Eve to the time when the pure Woman becomes the Bride and Wife of Christ in the eschatological era, a symbol of His kingdom, represented by the Holy City, the New Jerusalem (19:7-9; 21:2,9-14).

In contrast to this image of the pure Woman is the image of the Harlot. The contrast is particularly explicit in the introduction of the Harlot in Rev 17:1-5 when compared with the introduction of the Bride in 21:9-11. Both are introduced in parallel language: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you . . .’”(17:1; cf. 21:9). In both cases John is carried away by the Spirit and shown a woman who is also a city. In 17:1,3 John is carried away into a wilderness and shown a harlot sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of names of blasphemy. This Harlot is the Great City Babylon, which reigns over the kings of the earth (vv. 5,18). In 21:9-10 John is carried away to a great high mountain and shown the Bride, the Lamb’s Wife, which is the Holy City Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. While the Bride in 21:11 is clothed with the glory of God, a radiance like a crystal- clear precious stone refracting the light, the Harlot in 17:4 is adorned as a prostitute (Jer 4:30),³⁶ wearing purple and scarlet and decorated with gold and precious stones and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. Further, the Harlot is drunk with the blood of the saints and of the witnesses of Jesus (v. 6). In fact, according to 18:24, “in her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth”

³⁴ Cf. Beale, 655-56; Beasley-Murray, 201; Stefanovic, 381, 387. Beale, 630-32, like many other commentators, notes also the various parallels to the Exodus story in this passage.

³⁵ Cf. Beale, 631; Stefanovic, 378.

³⁶ Beale, 854-55.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

(cf. Jer 51:49).³⁷ This makes her a symbol of the stubborn and rebellious defectors from truth and enemies of God and His people all the way back to Cain and Abel (cf. Matt 23:35).³⁸ Cain belonged to the people of God, but he was not prepared to obey the command of God in the manner of how to offer acceptable worship to God. Cain wanted to do things his own way. As a result, when God did not accept his offering, he became angry and slew his brother Abel (Gen 4:3-8; Heb 11:4; 1 John 3:12). This same spirit motivates spiritual Babylon.

Other evidence also points to the universal symbolism of the Harlot. In 17:18 the Harlot is described as “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.” The kings of the earth in this context are the heads and horns of the scarlet Beast (cf. vv. 9-10,12), which are kingdoms of earth through which the scarlet Beast historically exercised his authority on earth.³⁹ In the words of the interpreting angel to John, “The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while” (vv. 9-10 ESV).⁴⁰ This explanation makes evident that the heads of the Beast rule consecutively, not all at the same time, and between the seven heads and the ten horns they cover the whole period of the operation of the Beast in the history of the conflict between the covenant people of God and her enemies.⁴¹

The Harlot is described in this passage as seated on the seven heads of the Beast (v. 9), which is the same as saying in verse 18 that she reigns over the kings of the earth. In other words, she has been around as long as the kingdoms of the world have been around, and she has exerted a spiritual influence over them that is described as committing adultery with the kings of the earth (v. 2). She is also described as sitting on

³⁷ Johnson, 752, points out that the Greek word used here for “kill” (σφάζω) is consistently used for martyrs in Revelation, implying “all the persecution against God’s servants.”

³⁸ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 195-96.

³⁹ Stefanovic, 515; Kenneth A. Strand, “The Seven Heads: Do They Represent Roman Emperors?” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2: Exegetical and General Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 185-87.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of the critical issues in this text, see Strand, 186-191.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 187-191.

REYNOLDS: THE TRUE AND THE FALSE

“many waters” (v. 1). This image, drawn from Jer 51:13, is an allusion to the city of Babylon’s location on the Euphrates River, but is interpreted by the angel to John in very specific symbolic terms: “The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages” (Rev 17:15). Over these vast peoples and nations the Harlot has a powerful influence, for the angel tells John that “the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries” (v. 2; cf. 14:8; 18:3). In the end, the Harlot is judged by God, “for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes” (18:5).

In the two women of Revelation one can see the true and the false in religious systems.⁴² One system enters into covenant with God and chooses to remain faithful to the covenant. If there are lapses or temporary backsliding, when God sends his prophets and apostles to remind people of His claims upon them, they repent of their backsliding and respond appropriately to God. When the Bride has made herself ready, Christ marries His kingdom, the pure, glorified Woman, and the members of the kingdom are invited to the marriage feast (19:7-9). The other system knows what the claims of God are but does not care. It spurns and violates the covenant with God and lashes out in rebellion, attacking not only God but also His beloved people who remain faithful to the covenant. Like Jezebel, the false prophetess of Thyatira, it teaches falsehood and seduces God’s servants to compromise their beliefs and practices for the sake of blending in with the paganism that surrounds them. The wine of her fornication alters the judgment so that people do things they would not otherwise do. In the spirit of Cain, they even join her in persecuting those who are faithful to God (cf. John 16:2-3; 1 John 3:10-15). In her role as a leader in rebellion against God, the Harlot, along with her spiritual daughters (Rev 17:5), who behave just like her (Ezek 16:44-45), incurs God’s judgment.

A Remnant of Faithful Ones in the Church

An important passage reveals that before God brings final judgment on Babylon, He makes a stirring appeal to some who are still inside: “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues” (Rev 18:4). This call shows that until the very end God still has a “remnant” of His people even in

⁴² Johnsson, 35, says that the two cities “stand for more than political and national entities. They represent the religion of Yahweh and the false, counter religious system.”

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Babylon.⁴³ They have apparently been deceived by her but have not adopted the spirit of rebellion that defines her, and now God issues a clarion call to come out of Babylon while there is still opportunity. Once again, we see the concept of the remnant applied, this time to those who are even in Babylon.

There is not only a remnant in Babylon, but there is a remnant also among the offspring of the Woman. Just as the Harlot has daughters who are harlots, so Rev 12:17 indicates that the pure Woman has other children besides the Male Child. After the Serpent has pursued and persecuted the Woman, forcing her to flee into the wilderness for 1260 days (vv. 6,13-14), unsuccessfully trying to destroy her with a flood of water (vv. 15-16), we are told that “the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (v. 17). The characteristics of these other children of the Woman are significant,⁴⁴ placing them in the same category with the steadfast saints in 14:12, “who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus” (cf. 10:10).

The saints in Revelation not only obey God’s commandments, endure steadfastly, and hold to the faith or testimony of Jesus, but they also offer prayers (5:8; 8:3-4), suffer persecution at the hands of the enemies of God (13:7; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24), have righteous acts attributed to them (19:8), and are found in the beloved city of God at the end of the thousand years (20:9). These are those who remain faithful to the covenant and will receive the promises to the overcomer. They are equivalent to the “witnesses of Jesus” (NASB) who share their fate in 17:6 and to “their fellow servants and brothers” who share a similar fate in 6:10 (cf. 1:9; 12:10-11).⁴⁵

In Rev 7:4 John is told about a group of people who are sealed with the seal of the living God, referred to as “144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel” (ESV). The “sons of Israel” here apparently represent the corporate people of God, both Jew and Gentile (Rom 9:6-8; 11:26; Gal 3:29; 6:16), for the tribes of Israel listed here do not match

⁴³ The allusions to the prophecy of Babylon’s coming judgment in Jer 50-51 indicate that those who come out of Babylon are equated with “the remnant I spare” in Jer 50:21.

⁴⁴ See further on the context of these offspring of the Woman in Pfandl, 298-303.

⁴⁵ Beale, 860, states that “the καί [in 17:6] is best taken as explanatory (‘even’). Consequently, true ‘saints’ are those who are ‘witnesses to Jesus.’”

REYNOLDS: *THE TRUE AND THE FALSE*

any list of the tribes of Israel in the Old Testament,⁴⁶ and when John turns to look at what has been described to him, he sees “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (7:9). John is shown this same group again in 14:1: “Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. This group, he says, “were redeemed from the earth” (v. 3) and “were redeemed from among men” (v. 4). Yet they do not represent the whole of the visible, corporate people of God represented by the “sons of Israel,” since only 12,000 from each tribe becomes a part of the 144,000 who are redeemed from among men.⁴⁷ The rest of the “sons of Israel” implicitly are not redeemed. Not only are the tribes of Dan and Ephraim excluded from the tribes making up the 144,000,⁴⁸ but all others above and beyond the twelve thousand from each of the named twelve tribes are excluded from the 144,000. The implication is that it is not enough to be one of the “sons of Israel”; one needs also to be sealed with the seal of God in the forehead (7:3-4). This seal is apparently represented in 14:1 by the names of the Lamb and the Father written in the forehead, signifying the holy and spotless character which they have obtained (vv. 4-5; cf. Jer 2:3; Rom 11:16), by virtue of which God places His seal of approval, identification, and ownership upon them (John 6:26; 2 Cor 1:21-22; 2 Tim 2:19).⁴⁹ It is the “remnant” of the “sons of Israel” who are finally sealed and saved (cf. Rom 9:27; 11:5).⁵⁰

⁴⁶ David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 464-65; and Beatrice S. Neall, “Sealed Saints and the Tribulation,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 6 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 262.

⁴⁷ Beale, 416-17, argues for this. Understanding “Israel” as a symbol for the “new Israel,” which includes all of God’s people, he states, “Yet the whole nation is not portrayed as saved. The sealed are the full number of redeemed Israelites who have been saved *out of* the twelve tribes as a remnant” (417). Again, he says of the 144,000 on p. 416, “This group is identified further as a remnant of Israelites who have been saved from out of the whole nation.”

⁴⁸ Stefanovic, 262, notes that Dan and Ephraim were both described in the Old Testament as apostate. “This suggests that the unfaithfulness of these two tribes may account for their exclusion from the list of tribes of the eschatological Israel.”

⁴⁹ Cf. Neall, 275.

⁵⁰ Beale, 416-17.

Theological Implications

The evidence we have examined from the book of Revelation strongly suggests that while the visible, organized Christian Church is defectible, there is an invisible Church, a “remnant” of the visible Church, that is indefectible, that will be faithful to the end.⁵¹ This conclusion has to do with the Christian Church as a whole. It does not address the question of a “visible remnant” which has been raised in some studies based on interpretations of Rev 12:17.⁵² Nor does it address the related question of a “remnant within the remnant,” a concept that is not strictly biblical, but which some would like to propose. The evidence of this paper is not exhaustive, due to the limits imposed from without, but it suggests that the visible, organized Christian Church would expand to encompass a significant segment of the world’s population and would extend its power and influence into the political and civil sphere to the point of world-wide influence. In so doing, it would become increasingly secular and corrupt, failing to meet the purpose of Christ for His Church. Although Christ calls the Church to repentance and reformation, it fails as a whole to respond appropriately. Only a relatively small number of faithful believers remain true to the principles of Christ and His covenant and become a part of the “remnant” which constitutes the invisible people of God. These are characterized as the saints who become faithful witnesses, steadfastly enduring even to martyrdom for the sake of obedience to all of God’s requirements and holding on to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. Although some aspects of this group may be perceived as visible, at least at particular periods, since they would not otherwise be recognizable to function as witnesses for their faith, they should not be confused with the visible Christian Church at large.

It is God’s purpose that His people shall be able to discern the true from the false. This is so not only with respect to the world at large but also with respect to that which purports to be in close association with Him. The book of Revelation is greatly concerned with what is true and what is not. Jesus presents Himself to the churches as the Faithful and True Witness (3:14). His name is also Faithful and True (19:11). Jesus or His Father are pronounced true and holy or true and righteous five times

⁵¹ Strictly speaking, the concept of an invisible Church may also include many who are not a part of the visible Church. However, since we have been studying only the language of the Church or the corporate people of God, those outside of that group are not a part of this study, so it would not be proper to draw conclusions about them within the scope of this study.

⁵² See Lichtenwalter, 32-33, and Mueller, 205, 215.

REYNOLDS: THE TRUE AND THE FALSE

(3:7; 6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2). And three times the reader is assured that the words that have been communicated are true and trustworthy (19:9; 21:5; 22:6). Everything in the book is affirmed by the testimony of two witnesses that cannot lie—the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (1:2). Nothing is to be added to it or taken away from it, on pain of dire plagues and death (22:18-19). Those who stand at last with the Lamb before the throne of God have no deceit found in their mouths (14:5), while deception is the chief characteristic of the devil (12:9; 20:3,8) and is also a mark of his agents (13:13-14; 16:13-14; 18:23; 19:20), and all who love and practice falsehood and deception will be excluded from eternal life in the kingdom of God (21:8; 22:15).

It is evident, then, that God would have His people discriminate the true from the false, even with regard to that which makes a pretense of being true but is not, namely the professed people of God, the Christian Church. One of the key purposes of the book of Revelation is to aid the reader or hearer in making those distinctions clear so that he or she can make wise and discriminating choices in regard to what is true and what is false, what meets the test of faithfulness to God and what does not, what is genuine worship of God and what is counterfeit. The blessing pronounced upon the reader or hearer is for those only who “take to heart what is written” in the book (1:3).

Edwin Reynolds is Professor of New Testament and Greek at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. He also serves as editor of *JATS*.
reynolds@southern.edu