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Preaching Revelation to the Secular Mind

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Introduction

The last book of the Bible has intrigued and fascinated multitudes of people throughout the centuries.¹ It seems to have a special appeal to our own society, which is speculating what destiny the year 2000 will bring to the individual as well as to the world.

From the perspective of the church the book is infinitely worth studying, for it reminds the Christian Church to remain faithful in times when life is an agony and many expect the end of the world as they know it—and yet still believe in some way that God is above the raging of men.² It assures the church that it will triumph through Jesus Christ its Lord.³

In this latter sense the teaching of the book, then, is not concerned exclusively with eschatology, that is, last-day events. Revelation was written not only for the purpose of revealing that which must shortly come to pass, but also to stabilize the life and testimony of believing Christians. It is—and has been—a definite source of spiritual strength for the church and individuals in all ages. Within its pages may be found the pattern for behavior along with exhortations to godliness and zeal.⁴

However, images of dragons, beasts, plagues, trumpets, a woman standing in heaven with white garments, the number 666 and the mark of the beast, angels flying with messages, seven plagues coming from jars held by angels, a woman sitting on a red beast drinking human blood, and a warrior-king dressed in a garment drenched in human blood, make a collage of interesting yet enigmatic images in the book of Revelation. They remind us that not only is the book of Revelation different, but that it is also notoriously difficult for the modern Christian mind to understand, a fact that is confirmed by the number

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of commentaries and varying viewpoints regarding the meaning of its symbolism. As a result of this confusion the book is sometimes abandoned or presented in such a way as to leave believers confused.⁵ For many, the Apocalypse, which means “unveiling,” has become the Apocrypha, which means “hidden.”⁶

If the book is difficult for Christians to comprehend, what about the “secular” person who often has had very little contact with or understanding of Christianity?⁷ How can this person, who lives in a scientific and often anti-religious world, be expected to receive any benefit from this maze of symbolic images?

To answer these questions is the focus of this article. Our study will affirm that the book of Revelation has indeed something to say to persons of a secular mind-set who feel that “science” and “humanism” have failed them in their quest for identity and meaning. In fact, one of the most amazing phenomena of our so-called “age of science” is the burgeoning occultistic and pseudosupernaturalistic cults and practices so commonly seen as the age of modernity fades into the post-modern era.⁸ Much of this attraction comes from these movement’s supposed ability to predict or even control the future.

The proliferation of astrologers, seers, mediums, and other later-day “prophes” can be directly attributed to the widespread dissatisfaction with present circumstances, the foreboding about what is going to happen in the year 2000, and the wistful desire of many to know the future. And this makes the understanding of the book of Revelation and the presentation of its truths to the secular-minded person of vital interest to the church, since the book itself, by its own admission (1:1, 10, 19), does deal with what is going to happen in the future.⁹

The task of sharing Revelation’s message itself, however, is not as easy as it seems, especially when the tremendous gap between the world of those who originally read its contents and the scientific mind-set of the contemporary world which is seeking to grapple with its own identity becomes apparent.

To bridge this gap and to communicate the message of the book of Revelation to secular persons requires a two-fold preparation. First, we must be familiar with the foundational message to be communicated, and secondly with the culture we are attempting to address. We must learn to communicate the gospel in Revelation in thought patterns intelligible to the people we are trying to reach in order to be effective in witnessing to them. Thus, the church which seeks to evangelize the secular world must understand it in order to evaluate it, resist its evils, and at the same time speak coherently and relevantly to it.¹⁰

Our study will deal first with the basic aspects of the message of Revelation. Second, we will take up the issue of the mind-set of the

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secular person and the world within which it works in order to find the hooks upon which to hang the truths of the book of Revelation. Third, we will suggest some specific ways in which the passages of this prophecy can be used to meet secular minds in such a way as to lead those persons to be confronted by the claims of Christ and to make a decision for Him.

The Foundational Message of Revelation

The Centrality of Christ. However we decide to interpret the book of Revelation, or whatever our eschatological scheme may be, we can agree that the person of Christ is of supreme importance in its message. Even in the chapters where signs and symbols seem uppermost, where the cataclysmic judgments of God eclipse all other interests, the person of Christ remains the central focus (see for example, 4-5; 14:6-20; 19:11-21). Christ is inextricably involved in the events that are affecting the world. He is the Arbiter of the destiny of both the church and the cosmos.¹¹

The structure of the book itself emphasizes the importance of Christ for this apocalyptic prophecy. After the introductory section (1:1-8), the very first vision the apostle John sees is not the terrifying and destructive forces of evil attempting to obliterate the name of God, His people, and His church. Rather, John first sees Christ standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands, watching over His church (1:9-20).

The significance of this vision is reflected by the literary pattern of thought and expression found in this book. It begins with what it considers the most important. In this case it becomes obvious that Christ is central to everything that will occur in the prophecy, since the vision appears first in the narrative of prophetic events. As a matter of fact, it might be said that everything that follows Revelation 1:9-20 in the Apocalypse is related in some way or another to the first vision of Christ.¹²

The significance of the reference to the heavenly sanctuary should not be missed here. The presence of God dwells there, and it is from there He brings salvation to His people. The fact that Christ is walking among these lampstands indicates His constant vigilance for the purity and safety of His people and His church. There is nothing which takes place in regard to His people that Christ does not know or care about. There is an assurance that this world is not out of control, moving disconsolately to chaos. Human beings need not fear the future because no force, however destructive or Satanic, can eternally overcome the person who is protected by God. This truth removes the fear of our past,

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present, and future. This is the significance of Christ having the seven stars in his right hand (1:16,20).

Christ uses his right hand to reassure John that he need not fear (1:17). He need not fear anything that he is about to see because Christ lives forever and is forever working through the circumstances of this world to do His will and save His people who hold firmly to His hand. The future and the authority of the message is confirmed by God Himself, and, therefore, is sure. What God has said will come to pass. At the same time believers who know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior are assured that God can and will save them from any destructive force which appear on this earth. Hence, our future is sure because it is grounded in God, who never changes. We do not have to worry about what is going to happen.

Redemption. Christ's centrality to the book of Revelation underscores three great themes which are relevant to every human being. The first is the theme of redemption.¹³ Redemption reminds us that God really does care about each individual, since Christ willingly died for our sins so that we might have life. He made us priests in His kingdom so that we might tell others. Someone loves us in spite of ourselves. We do have value, and it does matter whether we live or die (1:5-6).

Judgment. The second is the theme of judgment. Regardless of how it may appear at the moment, men and women will have to stand responsible for their actions. But, this is not a time for believers to fear. While Christ must bring destruction to those who are destroying His people (11:18), He also provides His people with their eternal inheritance (cf. Matt 25:34). Furthermore, God provides the ability and power for all to become ethical people, power for permanent character change, since there will be no immoral people in His kingdom (21:6-8). In other words, all the injustices we endure in this life will ultimately be made right by God (18:6-8; 19:1-3).

Eternal Kingdom. Closely related to the previous two themes is the third, in which Christ again, because of His great love for us, will establish His kingdom. This means a new earth in which relationships with God, each other, and the natural world will once more be in balance (chaps 21-22). This kingdom will be one in which we will live without fear and enjoy the fruits of eternal life. The promised kingdom tells us that human life has a goal and purpose.

The Moral Purpose of Prophecy. The fact that Christ is the center of Revelation brings to light more clearly the very purpose of prophecy. While it is important to understand what the symbols mean, how they fit together, and what implications these have for our understanding of future events, the book of Revelation was not, as has

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been already stated, simply to tell us about last-day events. The prophecies also provide us with an opportunity for spiritual growth.

The apostle Peter provides a clue to explain the ultimate purpose of prophecy (2 Pet 1:19-21). We are told we should pay attention to prophecy “until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.” Turning to Revelation 22:16, we find that the Morning Star is none other than Christ Himself. The implications of this are significant. The main objective of prophecy is not to foretell the future, although that is a part of the process, but rather to lead us to Christ and to reproduce His character in our hearts so that we will be like Him and have confidence that He can do what He said He could.¹⁴

This is what may be termed the “moral purpose of prophecy.”¹⁵ In other words, studying and understanding prophecy should lead us to live an ethical life in which permanent character change is not only possible, but is accomplished through the operation of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:5-8). The saints, as represented in the apocalyptic prophecy, are moral, ethical people who are like Christ, because they have been changed by Him. They now inherit the kingdom prepared for them because they have God’s name (character) inscribed, as it were, within them, and they can now see Him face to face (22:1-5).

The foundational theme of the book of Revelation is the centrality of Christ. In His love Christ brings redemption, judgment in favor of His people, and the establishment of God’s eternal kingdom. These great truths should lead us to character change, because prophecy always has a moral objective. Now that we have a clearer understanding of the basic message of Revelation, let us turn our attention to the second part of our task: to understand the secular culture we are trying to reach.

The Secular Mind

The age that we live in can be characterized as an age of hopelessness and dissatisfaction. For the first time this century children will probably make less money than their parents, bringing with it a probable decrease in standards of living. Education is a given rather than a goal. As such it produces a certain amount of pessimism, since it is not providing the opportunities for financial stability, growth and security it once did.¹⁶

Contemporary society is overwhelmingly self-absorbed. At the same time, however, it exhibits a lack of self-esteem. This may be attributed in part to the media’s portrayal of violence, its lack of morality, and its promotion of promiscuous sex, which results in making the exploitation of men, women, and children appear as the norm for human living. We

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are continually and graphically reminded that if someone stands in our way, we can eliminate him or use him for our own advancement without having to take responsibility for the moral implications of our actions. Consequently, human life is degraded and devalued and means virtually nothing unless we can exploit it to our own advantage.

It should not surprise us, then, that there is a strong feeling of abandonment, alienation, and loneliness in this present generation. Latch key kids, for example, have endured life without family or friends, or have been victims of physical and sexual abuse and other such horrors. These conditions have resulted in a tendency towards agnosticism, cynicism, relativism, and pluralism in secular thinking.¹⁷ It is little wonder that this generation is seeking its own identity in things other than their parents' value systems, value systems which have resulted in problems of abuse and have produced the necessary conditions which actually encourage a pathologically low self-esteem and an uncertainty as to what it means to be human in the contemporary mind. These patterns of thought continue to fuel the search for identity in today's world.

The modern mind (baby boomers)¹⁸ optimistically believed that science had all the answers and lived comfortably in the economic growth and development that it appeared to bring. Post-modern minds (baby busters or the X-generation)¹⁹ have become pessimistically disillusioned with the answers to life's questions that science and scientific method/research have given.

The hopelessness and helplessness of life for secular persons have driven them in several important directions. They have abandoned the idea of universal truths and form their world view by consensus. They reject absolutes, opting for the rightness of the varying decisions made by society. All interpretation for them is really misinterpretation, since each individual is right in what he/she decides to believe.

This generation can be termed post-materialist, because it has discovered that things do not give identity. It emphasizes the spiritual and more human side of life, because life for them means more than the test-tube discoveries of science. There is a continual search for self-esteem, as the X-generation believes the individual is not merely an animal, but a personal being who needs to be in touch with a reality which lies outside and within the self, and in relationship with others.²⁰

The secular mind-set and thinking processes have raised a number of significant questions along the lines of existence, meaning, purpose, and spirituality of human life. These include such queries as, "Is there anything I can believe in?" "Who am I?" "Does it matter who I am?" "If I die, would anyone really miss me or even care?" "Is everyday work to

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make money all there is to life?” “What is the meaning and purpose of life?” “What is its goal?”

These questions touch on the heart of the human quest for personal identity, existence, and survival. These are the questions which must be answered by Christians in order to speak effectively to the secular mind. The answers, however, cannot come in the context of a sterile scientific formula or by an intellectual emphasis upon the meaning of symbolic language, because these are the very things the secular mind rejects as being irrelevant answers to the questions they are asking.

Consequently, their concerns must be answered within the context of a spiritual and ethical emphasis upon character development and the corresponding power to accomplish this development. Sharing from the book of Revelation, we must be cognizant of the deep needs of the secular person. The truth which can change lives permanently and give personal identity must be shared in a manner to meet felt needs.

The secular person must see the relevancy of prophecy for the individual life, and how to live it now. It is not so much the dragons and beasts and other symbols, as important as those are in the whole scheme of preaching Revelation, which are the most critical to share when first working with secular people. Rather, we must show how a person can be changed into a moral person by the power of Christ. The latter will open the door to share the former.

It is the emphasis upon the centrality of Christ and the moral purpose of prophecy in the book of Revelation which provides the key to preaching its truths in today's world. The prophecy does have answers to the questions raised by the secular person.

Revelation: The Answers to the Questions

In attempting to reach the secular mind, we need to exercise an “intentional” patience. This means that we must wait for the right question to be asked. Then we must answer it with the appropriate response from the book of Revelation. The prompter of the right questions is the spirituality and peace which should grace the life of the consistent Christian who lives what he/she believes and teaches. This challenges some of the fundamental presuppositions of the secular mind-set and its inability to find identity. It is the stepping-stone of our own personal story which leads the secular person to the real bridge to destiny: His story or Christ's story. Story telling—relating our own spiritual experience—is the context through which the post-modern person finds identity.

The book of Revelation is more than adequate to deal with the foundational questions raised by the secular person. Those individual

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questions can be grouped into four basic categories: (1) the knowledge of absolute truth; (2) the meaning of/in life; (3) identity; and (4) purpose. These fundamental categories are all touched on by the book of Revelation.

The knowledge of absolute truth is not possible according to the secular mind; hence the question “Is there anything I can believe in?”. The book of Revelation does provide an answer to this question. The description of God as the Alpha and Omega (indicating that He is the beginning and the end, and encompassing everything between, 1:8; 21:6) and the declaration that He is the One who is, was, and is to come (1:8) affirms that there is definitely something and Someone to believe in this world. God is the one who holds the keys of history past, present and future. He commands John to write the things he has seen, because they are to happen shortly. A study of history will confirm the great prophecies given in this book, providing a basis for saying there is absolute truth, because what God says will come true, does come true.

The primary concern of Revelation, however, is not with social and economic conditions, but with the spiritual interpretation of life, one of the primary quests of the contemporary person.²¹ Revelation presents the two acts of God which give meaning to human existence—creation and redemption—with an overwhelming emphasis on the absolute truth of the latter.²²

If God does not exist as Absolute Truth, then we must acknowledge all is lost, and God has abandoned His world to the destructive forces of evil. But God has not done such. In order to cure the problem of evil, however, He must provide a way to stop humankind from endlessly producing the means of their own destruction and release them from the tyranny of demonic forces (see for example, Rev 15-16, 19, 20, 21, 22).²³ And this is precisely the truth that the book of Revelation is attempting to get across. God has limited what evil can do. We can fully believe in this, because He sent His Son to die for us that we might have life.

The Scriptural emphasis upon the creation of the world by a personal, omnipotent God who superintends the cosmos explains the order and design in the universe. It also provides the answer to the question, “Who am I?”²⁴ This creator God, often referred to in Revelation, reminds us that we mean something to Someone. Creation by God gives personal identity over the modern world view which perceives the human being as a biological organism struggling for survival. The book of Revelation reminds us that we are the crowning act of creation and as such, we have intrinsic value.

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The secular world also sees us as the pawns of circumstances, consequently, we have no responsibility for our acts of violence against each other. Persons who stand in our way we crush so that we may make our mark on the world. This leads us to view each other as “things” to be conquered, rather than as human beings with value. Someone is good only as long as we can use them.

But Revelation reminds us that we are ethical beings, initiators of our own actions and fully accountable for their results. Because God treats us as human beings created in His own image, we should treat others the same. People are not to be used or abused so we may get our own way. Rather, they are to be seen as they really are—created by God and valuable no matter what. The truth that Someone cares is illustrated in the Revelation by Christ’s walking among the lampstands, keeping close watch over everything that happens.

Revelation also teaches us that in order to be independent we must be dependent. Autonomy is not a noble characteristic, as held by the secular thinker. We live in connection with each other and with God. Our needs are met by Him; He provides for us. We need not work continually to acquire things which are supposed to give us identity. We are valuable because we are God’s. Humans are the creation of a personal God and made to reflect His character, which is the norm for value and concepts of good and evil. Thus, Revelation’s world view accords great meaning to human existence, great worth to human life, great responsibility for human choice, and great importance to human character.²⁵

Personal identity and purpose in life are interrelated, both needs of which the prophecies of John speak. The former is confirmed by the fact that the Lamb who holds the scroll in His hand is the Lamb who was slain for us from the beginning of the world (5:6-14). Our value cannot be underestimated at this point. Does it matter if we die? For the book of Revelation, the answer is an overwhelming “yes.” Does anyone care? Again, the answer is an overwhelming “yes.” God cared enough not only to die for us but to live for us in heaven. He cared enough to warn us of His approaching judgment so we might be ready. He cared enough to give us the invitation to come into His city (18:1-4; 20:11-15; 22:11-17).

He gives direction to our lives by making us priests in his kingdom with the expressed purpose of sharing His love not only here but also forever (1:5-6). Ultimately, we will go where He goes, and live where He lives. We are here for a purpose, and we must fulfill that purpose. The ultimate goal of life is to see God face to face because we are like Him (22:4). We have become so, not because of who we are, but because of who He is. Such a perspective can give a secular person real hope, hope for something better, hope for permanent change, hope for the future.

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Conclusion

Dragons, beasts, plagues, the mark of the beast, the number 666, and trumpets can be and are relevant to the secular mind and can be shared with evangelistic fervor and power. But it must be done from a felt needs approach which takes into account both the message of the book of Revelation and the cultural milieu of the secular world.

The emphasis should be upon Christ, who is the center of the Revelation. It is He who is in control, who is absolute truth, who provides redemption after creation and who leads us to permanent ethical change. It is Christ who gives us our value, not what we or others think.

We need to return to the emphasis upon the moral purpose of prophecy. Our preaching should not deal primarily with the meaning of every symbol, although that is certainly a part of the message. It should especially deal with the change in ethical behavior which Christ brings to every believer. Studying the prophecies should lead to character formation and not simply intellectual formulation. The approach to reach the secular mind, should not be on the mechanics of prophecy, but on its life-changing message.

Secular persons need to know that there is absolute truth, that they personally are valuable, that it does matter if they die, that Someone does care for them, that there is more to life than being identified by things, and that their lives may have purpose and can make a difference in this world. They need to hear about the spiritual side of life, which in turn promotes an ethical lifestyle. These are all issues which Revelation addresses. And this is the message we must proclaim. Let everyone who is thirsty come and drink freely of the water of life (22:17).

Notes

1 Henry Morris, *The Revelation Record* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1983), p. 17. Furthermore, Morris reminds us that "More commentaries have surely been written and a greater variety of interpretations published about this book than any other in the canon of Scripture." Hence the book is either greatly sought or greatly feared.

2 Barclay, *The Revelation of John, Vol 1* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 20.

3 G. R. Beasley-Murray, ed, *The Book of Revelation in The New Century Bible*, ed. by Matthew Black (London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1974), p. 45.

4 Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 197-199.

5 Barclay, p. 1.

6 Morris, p. 20.

7 A secular or secular-minded person in this study is understood to have a mind-set that has little connection with or understanding of a Christian world view or of Christianity itself.

8 There have been a number of recent works describing this phenomenon. See for example, Thomas Oden, *After Modernity, What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 1993), esp. pp. 13-20 and Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology, Vol 1, Prolegomena* (Unpublished manuscript), pp. 237-305. While the age of modernity might well be called the age of empirical truth, i.e. that absolute truth can only be gained by what one can

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observe in a laboratory, the age of post-modernity might be termed an age of a quest for renewed interpersonal relationships and spiritual fulfillment (Oden, pp. 195-199). Sensing the frustration of ever increasing isolation from human relationships the sterility of technology has produced in its wake, the post-modern world is turning more and more towards introspection, personal spirituality, and interpersonal relationships, marking a return to the key elements which help to make life fulfilling that were eclipsed when science determined the direction of life and world views.

9 Morris, pp. 17-18.

10 Beatrice Neall, *The Concept of Character in the Apocalypse with Implications for Character Education* (Washington, D.C.: University of America Press, 1983), pp. 203-204. In fact, most missionary training, including language, cultural, historical, religious and world view studies of the culture, is done for the purpose of preparing the missionary to diagnose the ills that afflict it and find in the alien culture hooks to hang the gospel on (ibid.).

11 Tenney, pp. 29, 117.

12 See for example the description of the seven churches in Rev 2-3. Each church's ill finds its remedy in one of the specific characteristics describing Christ in 1:9-20. Again, the second coming of Christ described in Rev 14:14-20 likewise is connected with this first image of Christ as well as the Rider (Christ) on the white horse in Rev 19:11-21. The connecting thread of these examples, then, appears to be Christ as He appears in the initial vision.

13 Tenney, pp. 29-30.

14 See Rom 4:20-21. This is the basic definition of faith. We believe that God has the power to do what He said He could do. This was the kind of faith credited to Abraham as righteousness.

15 This term was coined by Louis Were in his book *The Moral Purpose of Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, MI: First Impressions, 1981). The moral purpose of prophecy refers to the intent of Bible prophecy (under the Holy Spirit) to bring about changes in the ethical behavior of the reader.

16 Gulley, *Prolegomena*, 301-302.

17 For more information and explanation of the phenomena which characterize the post-modern mind, see Norman Geisler, *The Apologetic Importance of John's Gospel*, James Sire, *Worldviews in Sociological Perspective*, and Norman Gulley, *The Challenge of Postmodernity to Evangelical Theology*, (all these papers are unpublished manuscripts presented at ETS 1996 Southeastern Regional Meetings, March 15-16, University of Mobile, Mobile, Alabama).

18 Baby boomers are the post WW2 children born between 1945 and 1965. They make up one of the largest groups in American society and will become the largest retiree group in the next century. They are now middle-aged and probably one of the most wealthy of all groups.

19 Baby busters, or the X-generation, are those children born between 1961 and 1981. They are those who are just finishing college and entering the work force. They have had all the economic advantages provided by their parents and are most interested in their own identity rather than financial security.

20 See Steve Clinton, "Apologetic Methods and Post-Modernism," an unpublished paper presented at the 1996 ETS Southeast Regional Meetings, March 15-16, University of Mobile, Mobile, Alabama, and Gulley, *Prolegomena*, pp. 242-257.

21 Tenney, p. 23.

22 Neall, p. 203.

23 G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 295-296.

24 Neall, pp. 196-197.

25 Neall, pp. 184, 205-206.