

Introduction to the Ecclesiology of the Book of Revelation

Ekkehardt Mueller
Biblical Research Institute

The Book of Revelation has not only a rich theology—it focuses strongly on God the Father—and a strong Christology, but has also a lot to say about the church. John the apostle communicates a profound ecclesiology.

In this essay I will examine the names of and images representing the church, as found in the Apocalypse. I will ask where in the book the church is found and what is the significance. I will examine characteristics of the ideal church and tasks for the church as well as appeals and promises to the church. In Revelation the church faces tremendous difficulties. These are internal as well as external challenges. The external difficulties include opponents and a system called Babylon, which stands in contrast to the church. God's relationship to the church and his care for the remnant are important. Finally, the church is pictured as being victorious. Because she belongs to the Lamb, the Lamb will guarantee a positive outcome of her struggles. Some practical implications will be drawn.

I. Names of and Images for the Church

A church consists of a number of individual believers who together form a larger organism which NT writers call, in a metaphorical sense, a body. In Revelation, these individual believers and groups of believers form the Christian church; they are part of her or are in some way related to her. They are introduced with a variety of designations: (1) fellow servants, brothers, servants (1:1; 2:20; 6:11; 7:3; 12:10; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6), (2) the church (*ekklēsia*; 1:4, 11, 20; 2:1, 7, 8, 11, 12, 17, 18, 23, 29; 3:1, 6, 7, 13, 14, 22; 22:16), (3) priests and a kingdom (1:6; 5:10; 20:6), (4) lampstands (1:20); (5) the overcomer (2–3; 15:2; 21:7), (6) the remnant (2:24; 12:17), (7) those in white clothes (3:4–5; 6:11; 7:9, 13), (8) the saints (5:8; 8:3–4; 11:18; 13:7; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:8; 20:9), (9) the 144,000 (7:4–8; 14:1–5), (10) the great multitude (7:9–17), (11) the holy city (11:2), (12) the woman (12; 19:7; 21:9), (13) those that are called,

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

chosen, faithful (17:14), (14) my people and his people (18:4; 21:3), (15) the bride (21:9; 22:17), and (16) the twelve tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the Lamb (21:12, 14). The harlot (Rev 17) and the worshipers of the beast and its image (Rev 13–15) are contrasted with the true church.

It is interesting how many designations for the church or in relation to the church are found. These different names and titles point to different aspects of the church. We will now briefly focus on some of them.

1. The Term *ekklēsia*. The word *ekklēsia* is found twenty times in Revelation. In each case it stands for the group of believers. It is remarkable that this expression occurs nineteen out of the twenty times in Rev 1–3, i.e., right in the beginning of the book, and once in its conclusion. (Rev 22b). The Book of Revelation is a letter and a prophecy addressed to seven churches.

The distribution of the singular and the plural forms of this term is interesting. In Rev 1 only the plural is found. Four times we hear about the seven churches. This changes with Rev 2 and 3. At the beginning of each of the seven messages the singular is used in order to address the respective local church. However, at the end of each message the formula “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” connect the churches with each other. Church number four, the one found in the middle of the seven churches, contains an additional plural of the term *ekklēsia*: “And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve” (2:23).

In these passages we hear about local congregations. The church is a local entity. On the other hand, it is true that the number seven and the mix of singular and plural forms of the word *ekklēsia* in each message to these churches point to completeness and interdependence of the churches and tell us that there are not only local congregations but a universal church. The local congregations form one universal church. This is more evident in the apocalyptic part of Revelation (Rev 4–22a).

In spite of their shortcomings, these churches are still God’s church. The majority of them may have to face his temporal judgment, but they are not separated from Him. Thus, the term *ekklēsia* in Revelation always points to some sort of relationship with God. It also always refers to the *ekklēsia militans*, which toward the end of the book is depicted as the triumphant church, yet without the particular term *ekklēsia* being applied to her.

The term “overcomer” or “victor” is found in each of the messages to the seven churches, pointing to the fact that some church members may not belong to the church triumphant and that individual decisions are to be made. Church membership does not save. Whereas *ekklēsia* stresses the corporate aspect, terms such as overcomer point to the individual aspect.

2. Saints. The expression *hagios* (holy, saint) is used in Revelation for God (3:7; 4:8; 6:10), God’s city (11:2; 21:2.10; 22:19), God’s angels (14:10), and

MUELLER: ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

most frequently for the church (5:8; 8:3–4; 11:18; 13:7–12; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20–24; 19:8; 20:6–9; 22:11).

Holiness or sanctity is one of God’s attributes. Therefore, whatever stands in a relationship with God and is directed toward him is holy. Since God is holy and the believers, the church, is also holy, the special relationship between God and his people is pointed out, and it is emphasized that the church focuses on her Lord. Throughout the Apocalypse “holy” is a positive term, and all those who are thus designated belong together. In the center of the book the saints seems to be a synonym for the faithful end time remnant of God.¹

3. The 144,000 and the Great Multitude. As an answer to the question of Rev 6:17 “. . . the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” the 144,000 and the great multitude are introduced, a twofold scene in Rev 7. This is part of the sixth seal, which deals with the heavenly signs prior to and at Christ’s second coming and the Day of the Lord. Rev 6:15–16 portrays people who are not able to survive the day of the wrath of God and the Lamb. On the other hand, Rev 7 points to people who are able to stand it.

The context of Rev 7 suggests that both the 144,000 and the great multitude are God’s end time people that is going to be saved. Obviously, the 144,000 and the great multitude which will be found before the throne of God in his sanctuary refer to the same group.²

Just as in Rev 5:5 John hears about Jesus as the lion, but in 5:6 sees a lamb, so in 7:4 he hears the number of the sealed, but in 7:9 sees the great multitude of the redeemed.

The answer to the question of who will be able to stand (6:17) is provided by the entire seventh chapter. Both the 144,000 and the great multitude have to go through difficult times. The 144,000 are sealed before the winds blow and have to stand the successive difficulties. The great multitude has come out of the great tribulation. Thus, the 144,000 are introduced as an immediate answer to

¹ See discussion below.

² See, for example, Richard Bauckham, “The List of the Tribes in Revelation 7 Again,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42 (1991): 102–103; Beasley-Murray, 139–141; Caird, 94–96; Charles, 1:201; J. Comblin, “L’Épître (Ap 7, 2–12): Le rassemblement de l’Israël de Dieu,” *Assemblées du Seigneur: Catechèse des dimanches et des fêtes* 66 (1966): 22–23, 25; Jörns, 77; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, The Moffat New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), 138–139; Krodel, 184; Ladd, 116; Lenski, 244–245, 254; Alfred Loisy, *L’Apocalypse de Jean* (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1972), 164; Beatrice S. Neall, “Sealed Saints and the Tribulation,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book I: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, ed. F. B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 6 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 245, 269–270; William S. Sailer, “Francis Bacon Among the Theologians: Aspects of Dispensational Hermeneutics,” *Evangelical Journal* 6 (1988): 80–81; Strand, “The ‘Spotlight-On-Last-Events’ Sections,” 206; Swete, 97; Cornelis van der Waal, *Oudtestamentische priesterlijke motieven in de Apocalyps* (Goes, Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre N. V., 1956), 116–117; and Wilcock, 80–81. This view is rejected, for example, by Bousset, 287; Kelly, 289–290; and Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 139–149. The different options are discussed by Neall, 267–272.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the question of 6:17, whereas the great multitude receives a more detailed description and is depicted as standing before God.

The 144,000 are the fullness of God's end time church on earth. The great multitude is the consummated end time church, which after the great tribulation is found in heaven. The sealing would be incomplete if it did not lead to the final consummation.

The 144,000 are "servants of our God" (7:3). The great multitude "serves" God (7:15). Both Greek terms are used for the same group in 22:3.³

These and other considerations support a symbolic understanding of the 144,000.⁴

The 144,000 are found again in Rev 14 in the context of the satanic trinity, which is specifically dealt with in the central vision of the Book of Revelation (11:19–14:20). In this section, the 144,000 of Rev 14 seem to be a synonym of the remnant of 12:17. Since this remnant apparently comes into existence after the 1260 days, which according to Adventist understanding ended in 1798 A.D., the clear connection of the 144,000 to the second coming of Christ as found in Rev 6 and 7 is not as obvious. This may be due to the fact that John does not see much time elapsing between the appearance of the remnant, the universal worship of the beast and its image, including the death degree for those who worship God only, and the final salvation and glorification of the faithful ones.⁵

The 144,000 enjoy a special relationship with the Lord. Being virgins, they have not defiled themselves with women—i.e., they have not entered into a relationship with false religion, or they have separated from it.⁶ They follow Jesus every step of the way (cf. John 10:27–28) and are transformed through God's grace. The Lamb and these 144,000 stand on top of Mount Zion. Those who have been condemned and persecuted in chap.13 now triumph with the Lamb.⁷ Instead of the mark of the beast on their foreheads, these people bear the name

³ For more information see, Ekkehardt Müller, *Microstructural Analysis of Revelation 4–11*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, Volume 21 (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1996), 254–269.

⁴ Here are some additional reasons: (1) The immediate context is clearly symbolic (7:1–3), as is the extended context (see, e.g., the four horses, the martyrs under the altar), and the parallel passage in 14:1–5 ("who have not defiled themselves with women," "virgins," "lamb"). Therefore, symbolic language is also expected for 7, 4–8. (2) The number is symbolic (12 times 12 times 1,000) and points to the fullness of the people of God (see, 21:12–14). (3) The enumeration of tribes is unusual. The tribe Dan is missing, whereas Manasseh should already be contained in Joseph. Ephraim is not mentioned; however, Levi is counted. Judah is found in first place. Such a list is not found elsewhere in Scripture. (4) Most of the twelve tribes no any longer exist today. (5) The NT knows about a spiritual Israel (Rom 2:28–29; Gal 6:16).

⁵ In Matt 24 a similar phenomenon is found. Jesus does not directly indicate that a huge time span lies between the destruction of Jerusalem and his *parousia*.

⁶ Cf. the woman in chap. 12 and the harlot in chap.17, Jezebel in 2:20; furthermore, 2:14 and 18:2.4.

⁷ Lohse, 84, labels Zion as "die Stätte der endzeitlichen Bewahrung" (the place of end time preservation).

MUELLER: ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

of the Lamb and of the Father. They belong to God. He keeps them. They are similar to Him. They are purchased. Even though they were unable to buy or sell (13:17), Jesus has bought them. They are the remnant of God that will survive the end time.

4. The Remnant. The term remnant (*loipos*) is found a number of times in Rev. In some cases it has no direct connection to the church, such as when talking about the remaining trumpets (8:13), the survivors (9:20; 11:13), and a group of people who are subject to judgment (19:21; 20:5). In several cases it is linked to the church. Once it is connected to the church in a negative sense (3:2), once possibly in a positive sense (11:13),⁸ and twice clearly in a positive way. There is a faithful remnant in the church of Thyatira (2:24) and God's end time remnant in 12:17.⁹

When we look at Rev 12, we notice that it comes in three parts. The first and the third part correspond and are in many ways parallel, although there are also differences.

A The woman, the son, and the dragon (12:1–6)

B Michael and the dragon (12:7–12)

A' The woman, the remnant, and the dragon (12:13–17)

In both of them the same time span occurs, namely the 1260 days or 3 1/2 years. A chronological outline looks the following way:

A 12:1–5 Early conflict between dragon and woman

12:6 Medieval conflict between dragon and woman

B 12:7–12 Conflict between Michael and the dragon in heaven

A' 12:13–16 Medieval conflict between dragon and woman (continued)

12:17 End time conflict between the dragon and the woman¹⁰

There is a descendant of the woman in the first part of Rev 12, and there is another descendant of the woman in the last part of the same chapter. The woman has brought forth Jesus, the Messiah, and the woman, the church, brings forth the remnant. In 12:17 we read about the "remnant of her seed." The term seed does not occur again in the Apocalypse. An identical phrase is not found in the entire Bible, but seed is mentioned quite often and may refer to the seeds of plants (e.g., Matt 13:24,27,32), to descendants or children (especially of Abraham and David, e.g., Luke 1:55; Mark 12:19–22; John 7:42), or to Jesus himself (e.g., Gal 3:16, 19). The first and last parts of Rev 12 allude to Gen 3:14–15. In

⁸ The survivors of 11:13 are terrified and give glory to God. In light of 14:7 they seem to turn to God and become a faithful remnant.

⁹ A faithful remnant is apparently mentioned in Rev 3:4. Yet the word in use here is not *loipos* but *oligos*—in the plural "some," "a few." See also Gerhard Hasel, "The Remnant in Scripture and the End Time," *Adventists Affirm*, Fall 1988:11, and "Who are the Remnant?" *Adventists Affirm*, Fall 1993:9. For a more detailed discussion on the remnant see Ekkehardt Mueller, "The End Time Remnant in Revelation," *JATS* 11(2000): 188–204.

¹⁰ Cf. William H. Shea, "Time Prophecies of Daniel 12 and Revelation 12–13," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, 349.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

both passages, the woman, the serpent, the seed, and the enmity between them are mentioned.¹¹ Rev 12, including its second section, seems to be the fulfillment of that promise in Gen 3. It may very well be that the seed in Rev 12:17 alludes to Jesus, since this verse is based on Gen 3:15. Jesus is the descendant of the woman. The remnant of her descendant is not only structurally juxtaposed to Jesus, but stands in a special relationship to him, the true seed.

Although Gen 3 lies behind Rev 12, this does not mean that the woman must be understood as Eve or Mary, even though she reminds us of them by verbal echoes. The time spans, to be understood according to the year-day principle and lasting for more than a thousand years, rule that out. John is creative in combining OT and NT imagery. The woman should be understood as the church.¹²

Thus, Rev 12 presents a survey of the conflict between the church and the dragon, the Messiah and the dragon, and the remnant—which appears only after the 1260 years—and the dragon. It thereby sets the stage for the next chapters. In the first part of Rev 13 the sea beast attacks the saints. The expression “remnant” is not found. The focus is on the time after 1798 A.D.¹³ Later the beast out of the earth follows, and those who do not participate in the universal worship of the beast and its image are threatened with death. They do not receive a specific name. Chapter 13 looks so bleak that one could fear that no faithful believer would be able to survive. Therefore, the first part of Rev 14 depicts the 144,000 in the presence of the Lamb.

Obviously the remnant, the saints, those who do not receive the mark of the beast and do not worship the beast and its image, and the 144,000 are the very same group. Why? The dragon went *poiēsai polemon meta tōn loipōn* (to make war with the remnant—12:17). The sea beast is given power to *poiēsai polemon meta tōn hagiōn* (to make war with the saints) and to overcome them (13:7). The two groups are linked on the literary level. Not only are Rev 12:17 and Rev 13 linked, but also the different parts of Rev 13 and 14 are connected. The formula “here is” appears at the end of each section.

- A. The beast out of the sea (13:1–10)
 - 1. “I saw . . . “
 - 2. Description of the beast and its activity
 - 3. “*Here is* patience and faith . . . “
- B. The beast out of the earth (13:11–18)
 - 1. “I saw . . . “
 - 2. Description of the beast and his activity

¹¹ Nestle-Aland lists Gen 3:14 and 15 with Rev 12.

¹² Cf. Ezek 16, 23; Eph 5.

¹³ Cf. Ulrich B. Müller *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar, vol. 19 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1984), 247, who states that chap. 13 develops what is meant by the dragon cast out of heaven battling against Christians. This starts a final assault against those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus (12:17). See also Shea, 354–359.

MUELLER: ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

3. “*Here is wisdom . . .*”
- C. The 144,000 and the three angels’ messages (14:1–12)
 1. “I saw . . .”
 2. Description of the 144,000
 3. “I saw . . .”
 4. Three angels’ messages
 5. “*Here is patience . . . faith . . .*”

Furthermore, in Rev 12–14 three texts are interwoven that describe the main characteristics of the remnant. The references are Rev 12:17, Rev 13:10, and Rev 14:12. The last two belong to the “Here is” statements.

If it is true that the 144,000 and the remnant are the same group, then the characteristics of the 144,000 mentioned in 14:1–5 are additional characteristics of the remnant. We should keep in mind that the remnant, which seems to be a visible group, appears at the beginning of the 19th century, whereas the 144,000, although they represent the remnant, are those who live at the second coming—at least according to Rev 6 and 7. Probably John does not describe in a detailed way the passing of time since the appearance of the remnant. In Matt 24 a similar phenomenon is found. Jesus does not directly indicate that a huge time span lies between the destruction of Jerusalem and his *parousia*. Because of the information of Rev 7 about the 144,000, we may conclude that the 144,000 of Rev 14 seem to be that remnant that will experience Christ’s coming.

II. Places in Revelation Where the Church Is Found

The various designations for the church are found in many chapters of Rev. However, we also notice that there are chapters where we find a heavy concentration on the church, whereas other chapters contain little to nothing about God’s people.

1. Letter Frame and Apocalyptic Part. The term *ekklēsia* occurs only in the first three chapters and in chapter 22. This is the letter frame of the Apocalypse. This letter frame is somewhat different from the apocalyptic part of the book, which starts in chapter 4 and ends in chapter 22a. The letter frame contains fewer symbols than the apocalyptic part. When it comes to the apocalyptic part, *ekklēsia* is avoided and replaced with symbols and images, such as the 144,000 (7:4–8; 14:1–5); the holy city (11:2); the woman (12; 19:7; 21:9); and the bride (21:9; 22:17).¹⁴ In this case there is also a strong emphasis on the worldwide church, rather than on individual congregations.¹⁵

¹⁴ We observe a similar phenomenon in Christology. In the letter frame Jesus appears under this very name and is also called Christ. His specific and predominant name in Rev, however, the term lamb, used 28 times, occurs only in the apocalyptic part

¹⁵ Rev 1b–3 has connections to both sections. On one hand, it is part of the letter frame, because the seven churches are addressed similarly to the way Paul addresses his churches. The seven churches have already been mentioned in 1:4. On the other hand, this seven series reminds one of the other seven series of the book, which follow immediately, and somehow link the seven messages to

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

2. Spotlights on Last Events. A heavy concentration on the church is found in the so-called spotlights on last events. These are expansions of those sections of visions two to four that precede the respective last element, namely the culmination or glorious climax.¹⁶ The first spotlight on last events is Rev 7, the expansion of the sixth seal. It contains the 144,000 and the great multitude. On one hand, it is God's army opposed to the demonic army of 200 million beings under the sixth trumpet (9:16). On the other hand, it is the surviving church. The next spotlight is the expansion of the sixth trumpet in Rev 10 and 11a. John, with his sweet-bitter experience, seems to be a representative of the end time church. The stress is on the proclamation of the Gospel. The holy city in Rev 11:2 points also to the church. The last spotlight occurs in Rev 14a. It again depicts the 144,000 and presents God's end time message.

3. The Center of the Book. The center of the Apocalypse, Rev 12–14, contains the strongest emphasis on the church. It is a description of the attempt of the satanic trinity to destroy the church. Therefore the church, especially in the form of the remnant, is found in all these chapters.

4. The Eschatological Part. In the eschatological part of Revelation, i.e., in chapters 15–22a, Babylon is contrasted with the New Jerusalem. But Babylon and the New Jerusalem are not only cities. They are pictured as women. In addition to the woman of Rev 12, Babylon is a woman, a harlot, and the New Jerusalem is the bride of the Lamb. In other words, the church and her counterpart are featured in the second half of the Apocalypse.

This short survey shows us that Revelation has an extensive ecclesiology. This is all the more remarkable since the book contains a very elaborate theology, i.e., doctrine of God, and a very high and extended Christology. On the other, if the Lord is so much stressed, it is quite natural to focus also on those who belong to him. Secondly, in Revelation individual Christian congregations are addressed, though the stress seems to be on the church as a whole. Furthermore, the focus is not so much on the churches of the first century or on the church throughout history as on the end time church. Therefore, this book is relevant for our times. Finally, a conflict between Babylon, the satanic trinity, and the remnant is described, a conflict between apostate churches and the faithful community. Although difficult times are predicted, a positive outcome is promised.

III. Characteristics of the Ideal Church and Tasks for the Church

The Apocalypse describes the characteristics of the ideal church. These qualities are at the same time challenges and tasks for God's church on earth. Therefore, we will not sharply distinguish between them but list them together.

the other septenaries. Furthermore, Rev 1b–3, depicting the church militant, has a counterpart at the end of the book, the church triumphant.

¹⁶The expression "spotlight on last events" was coined by Kenneth Strand in "The 'Spotlight-On-Last-Events' Sections in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 27 (1989): 201–221.

MUELLER: ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The church has high privileges. Great promises are given to her. Along with the privileges come responsibilities:¹⁷

Being Saved (1:5; 5:9). The church is freed from slavery to sin. Its members are purchased by the blood of the Lamb. The church is the community of those being saved.

Being a Kingdom and Reigning as Priests (1:5–6; 5:10; 20:6). The church is God's kingdom and has priestly functions. Her reign is one of mediation between God and the world. She lets the world know who God is and how God is. In the name of God the church addresses those who dwell on earth in order that many may repent and turn to God.

Love (2:4–19). The church in Ephesus is reprimanded because she has lost her first love. Jesus expects his church to manifest love.

Works and Service (2:1, 3–5, 19; 19:8). The church serves both God and humans. Thus she brings forth good works. Because Jesus has saved the church and has made her a kingdom and a community of priests, it is natural that the church produces works. She is motivated by faith and love. She serves because Jesus has served, and she tries to serve in the same way Jesus has served. Therefore, the term servant is used quite frequently. Believers are servants of God (7:3; 19:2; 22:3) and fellow servants (6:11). The church consists of those who serve each other and the world. According to 19:8 the bride of the Lamb is clothed with the righteous deeds of the saints.

Patience (2:3,19; 13:10; 14:12). Patience is stressed in two passages, in the letters to the seven churches as well as in the vision about the evil powers or satanic trinity. The church is characterized by perseverance.

Dissociating from Heresies (2:6). For example, the Nicolaitans are mentioned. The church of Ephesus dissociates itself from them. Jesus praises that church. The idea that the church is a pluralistic society in which some may believe in God and in certain biblical doctrines and others do not, in which church members have life styles totally opposed to each other, is not biblical. Certainly there is some latitude, but there are also limits and boundaries. Not everything is possible. The church challenges heresies because she believes she has found some gems of absolute truth. If there is no truth any longer, if everyone is correct, heresies cannot be opposed any longer.

Overcomers / Victors (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7). The topic "victory" runs throughout the entire Book of Revelation. It is prominent in the messages to the seven churches. It is characteristic of the redeemed standing around the sea of glass. It is found at the end of the book and in other places.

¹⁷ Cf., 1Pet 2:9. In this verse Peter first lists the fourfold privilege of the NT church, privileges originally given to the Israel of the OT. They are contained in the main clause. The subordinate clause continues to describe the responsibilities resulting from the privileges: "that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Faithfulness until Death (2:10; cf. 6:9). The church is faithful to Jesus, even if members are required to lay down their lives. This deep commitment to the Lord is a response to his ultimate commitment until death.

Holding on to Jesus and Professing Jesus (2:13, 25; 3:8). The church does not deny Jesus. She does not give in easily. The church holds on to Jesus. She professes the Lord even under difficult circumstances.

Faith (2:19; 13:10; 14:12). Right in the beginning of Revelation as well as in its central part dealing with the satanic trinity faith is mentioned as one of the characteristics of God's church. Biblical faith in Jesus and His teachings is one of the characteristics separating the church from those who worship the beast and its image.

Prayer (5:8; 8:4). The church prays. She turns to God in confession, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession. She expects him to do great things. Prayer is not a nice addition to the activities of the church. Prayer is not merely an appropriate part of the worship service. Prayer must be a kind of ministry of the church.

Living as Brothers and Sisters (6:11). The church is special because her members are brothers and sisters. The church is a family, and its members serve, support, and encourage each other.

Worshipping and Praising God (7:9,10; 14:3). Worship and praise of God characterize the church in this age as well as the age of the triumphant church. In 15:3–4 God's children stand around the sea of glass and sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb: "Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!" Therefore, Revelation contains many hymns. A church without worship is unthinkable. Her center is always the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb.

Fearing God, Reverence (11:18). To fear God describes the right kind of relationship with God. Reverence and respect and accepting God as the supreme Lord may be implied. While the church fears God, she proclaims to the world: "Fear God and give him glory . . ." (14:7).

Testimony (12:11) and Testimony of Jesus (12:17; 20:4). The overcomers have conquered the dragon "by the word of their testimony." The church proclaims the gospel and is a witness of Jesus. This may also be alluded to by the statement in the beginning of the book when the seven churches are compared to lampstands which have the function to give light to the environment. In addition, the church has the testimony of Jesus. She treasures the prophetic Word of God, and the gift of prophecy is found within her ranks.

Keeping the Commandments (12:17; 14:12). In the vision of the satanic trinity the issue of worship and the law of God play an important role. While the saints persevere and keep the commandments and the faith of Jesus, the rest of humanity makes a decision to worship the beast and accepts its mark. The church is obedient to her Lord.

MUELLER: ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Virginity (14:4). The 144,000 are, symbolically, virgins, and thus the church is made up of virgins. That means she is not engaged in religious or political systems that in the end damage the church's relationship to its Lord. The church stays away from what her Lord would avoid. Her thinking and her life is directed towards Jesus.

Following the Lamb (14:4). Jesus is the center. The church follows Him and tries to imitate His life to a certain degree. We talk about "a certain degree," because the life of the Savior was and will always be different from that of the saved ones. What He was required to do is different from the requirements for his disciples in important aspects.

No Deceit, Blameless (14:5). On one hand, even believers commit sins and sometimes make terrible mistakes. In themselves they are not perfect; only in Christ are they perfect. This is also true of the church. In Jesus the church is perfect; in herself she is not. On the other hand, this phrase may call us to live a holy life and pursue sanctification (Heb 12:14).

Interestingly enough, the just listed characteristics and tasks are normally connected with the church or groups of believers representing the church rather than individual believers. Therefore, the Apocalypse does not strongly stress spiritual gifts and different functions in the church.¹⁸

IV. Appeals and Promises to the Church

1. Appeals. In the Apocalypse, God addresses his people and calls them to certain actions, to changes of attitudes, and to maintaining their relationship with him.

Listening to the Holy Spirit (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). First of all, Jesus calls the churches to listen to the Holy Spirit. Seven times this appeal is made: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Remembering the Previous Situation (2:5; 3:3). Sometimes it is better to let the past rest. Sometimes, however, it is wiser and more helpful to remember previous times. That it might grow in faith, the church is challenged to look back to when she received the gospel, when her relationship with the Lord was still vibrant, and when she considered it a joy to serve God and fellow human beings. Such a look back may motivate the church again and may lead her into a renewed connection to the Lord.

¹⁸ The gift of prophecy is referred to in the Apocalypse. The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (19:10). However, the prophetic gift is connected to the entire church. In the church the gift of prophecy is manifested, yet not in such a way that each individual believer possesses this gift. Functions that are listed in Rev are apostles, elders, and prophets. However, the apostles (18:20; 21:14) are predominantly the Twelve. The elders (4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4) are limited to 24 and are found in heaven only. Prophets (10:7; 11:10, 18; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:6, 9) are, with the exceptions of the false prophetess Jezebel (2:20), understood in a positive way. This is also true for the words "prophecy" (1:3; 11:6; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19) and "to prophesy" (10:11; 11:3). The frequent use of this word group shows that John in Rev stresses the Prophets more than any other group within the church.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Repenting (2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19). Repentance means to turn around, to turn away from whatever is wrong and destructive, and to turn toward God. The challenge to repent is not only addressed to the world, but also to the church.

Doing the First Works (2:5). Not only quantity is asked, but even more so quality. The church has to evaluate her ministry and service. The question is how much she is involved in mission outreach and in care for fellow humans. But the issue is also the motif of her service. She must ask herself whether or not this motif is love toward God and humans.

Fearlessness (2:10). In spite of persecution, the church does not need to be afraid. Jesus knows her, and his promise of everlasting life is valid.

Faithfulness until Death (2:10). Believers may not be able to escape death, but the second and eternal death does not affect them. Jesus guarantees eternal salvation to those who remain faithful.

Keeping and Not Losing the Crown (2:25; 3:11). The church is called to keep what has been bestowed upon her and not to lose the crown of victory which already has been given to her. This certainty of salvation is very important and must not be given up. In spite of surety of the church's salvation, the motto "Once saved, always saved!" is not true for individuals unless they persevere.

Waking Up and Strengthening the Others (3:2). We are responsible not only for our own life, but also for others. Christians are not content to care for their own little world, but turn toward others.

Purchasing Gold, White Garments, Salve for the Eyes (3:18). To purchase gold, white clothes, and eye salve means to accept God's good gifts and not to rely on one's own works or righteousness. The church recognizes her dependence on God.

Separating from Babylon (18:4). This call is directed to God's people within Babylon, not to the remnant, who are not part of Babylon. However, God's church does not enter into questionable relations.

Joy (18:20). Finally, the church may rejoice over the judgment, not because she enjoys the punishment of the evil ones, but because judgment means liberation from all enemies and final salvation.

2. Promises. Appeals are important. Promises may be even more crucial. The Apocalypse contain not only God's calls and charges, but his promises.

Jesus' Second Coming (1:7; 2:25; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). The immediacy of Christ's second coming is the first, last, and most frequent promise to the church. The second coming brings about fellowship with God in an unprecedented way. At the same time it starts the eradication of all that is evil and undesirable.

Eating from and Partaking of the Tree of Life (2:7; 22:2,14). The church can be sure of everlasting life.

No Second Death (2:11). The church is not affected by the second death, because Jesus has suffered this death in her place.

MUELLER: ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Manna, a White Stone, and a New Name (2:17). God grants spiritual and everlasting life. Believers become new creatures in Christ.

Power over the Nations, Receiving the Morning Star (2:26–28). The church participates in Christ's rule. According to Rev 22:16, the morning star is Jesus himself.

White Garments, Name in Book of Life, Jesus Confesses Their Names (3:4, 5). Again final salvation is promised to the church. The repetition of the promise of salvation by using new symbols manifests how important it is.

Kept from Hour of Trial, Pillar in God's Temple, Designated with the Names of God, the New Jerusalem, and Jesus (3:10–12). Jesus promises spiritual protection and a place in God's immediate presence. The pillar may also remind of strength and stability. Furthermore, God identifies with the church. She belongs to him and has a special relation with him.

Dining with Jesus, Sitting with Jesus on His Throne (3:20, 21). Jesus offers his friendship and fellowship, which will be fully realized at the marriage supper (19, 9). But even before that the church experiences Christ's love. Finally, she is allowed to participate in his rule.

Being a Kingdom and Reigning as Priests upon the Earth (5:10; 20:6). What in the perspective of the world may look small and insignificant counts a lot in God's eyes. His people are depicted as the real rulers of the earth. A similar formulation was already found in 1:6 and may go back to Exod 19:6, which Peter then takes up in 1Pet 2:9. John notes that the church has been set in a new state.

Sealing (7:3). Being sealed means to be property of the one who has initiated the sealing. At the same time it points to protection. Before the last crisis on earth takes place the church is sealed. This does not mean believers do not have to face difficult times, but that they are protected spiritually. Furthermore, God's wrath does not affect them.

Being before the Throne of God, No Hunger, Thirst, or Heat Any More, Living Water, Tears Being Wiped Away (7:15–17; cf. 21:3–7; 22:1–5). Whatever is negative will be done away with. The last verses of Rev 7 remind us of the first verses of Rev 21. However, there is a difference. Whereas in Rev 7 the redeemed are pictured before God's throne in his temple, Rev 21:22 informs us that in the New Jerusalem no temple was seen and that God and the Lamb are the temple. Rev 7 may therefore refer to the time during the Millennium, whereas Rev 21 describes the time after the Millennium.

Reward (11:18; 22:12). This reward may be final destruction or final salvation. The faithful church will experience the latter.

Standing on Mount Zion (14:1). It is not only important to be saved but to be in the presence of the Lamb. Then a new song will be sung. The end time church will have won the victory over all evil powers.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Standing at the Sea of Glass (15:2). The sea of glass is already mentioned in 4:6. It is located in front of the throne of God. Now the redeemed are found there presenting their song of redemption.

Judgment over the Persecutors of the Church (14–19). It is part of God's justice that he executes judgment. For his enemies the judgment is terrible. For his own people it means liberation from all oppression and all oppressors.

New Earth and New Jerusalem (21–22). Rev 21 and 22 is much more detailed than is the last part of Rev 7. At the beginning and end of this long passage the close fellowship of the believers with God is stressed. The new earth and the New Jerusalem will surpass our wildest imagination and all of our expectations.

Seven Beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). (1) Blessed is the one who reads and hears the Apocalypse and keeps its words (1:3). (2) Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on (14:13). (3) Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes (16:15). (4) Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:9). (5) Blessed is the one who takes part in the first resurrection (20:6). (6) Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the Apocalypse (22:7). (7) Blessed are those who wash their robes so that will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city (22:14).

V. Difficulties for the Church

As we have already seen, the church has to face difficulties. To belong to God does not mean to be free of all problems and challenges. Oftentimes the opposite seems to be true. Jesus had to suffer, and his children are not exempt from suffering. Unfortunately, suffering is quite normal. The church has to face internal and external difficulties. They can be quite threatening. Both kinds must be mastered, and God offers his help. In the case of internal difficulties, Jesus points to the problems and thus allows for a change of behavior. In the case of external challenges, God oftentimes intervenes or gives strength to cope with them.

1. Internal Difficulties. Internal difficulties include a lack of love (2:4; Ephesus), false teachers and false doctrines (2:6, 14, 15, 20–24; Thyatira and Pergamum), spiritual death (3:1; Sardis), lukewarmness (3:15, 16; Laodicea), and self-deception (3:17; Laodicea).

2. External Challenges. Internal difficulties of the church are reported in Rev 2–3, namely in the letter frame of the Apocalypse. External difficulties, however, are found in both the letter frame and the apocalyptic part of Revelation. They include blasphemy (2:9; Smyrna), tribulation and persecution (2:9, 10; 6:9–11; 7:14; 12:13–17; 13:7, 16, 17; 17:6; Smyrna), and death and martyrdom (2:10; 6:9; 13:15).

Just as the term "*ekklēsia*" is limited to the letter frame, so are internal difficulties. They are not found in the other part of Rev. On the other hand, external challenges to the church occur throughout the book. Although they start already

MUELLER: ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

in the letter frame, these difficulties are intensified in the prophetic-apocalyptic section of Revelation, where oftentimes rich and vivid imagery is used.

3. Opponents of the Church. A number of opponents of the church occur in the Apocalypse. Of special importance is the satanic trinity. We have already noted that Satan persecuted the church and turned his wrath in a special way toward the remnant of the true church. He continues to work against the saints through the sea beast and against those who do not accept the mark of the beast and do not worship his image—actually the same group—through the land beast.

These three evil powers we call the satanic trinity because they imitate the divine trinity of Rev 1:4–5. The false trinity will force humanity into universal false worship, probably a mixture of genuine and false elements. Those who do not participate are going to be persecuted.

In Rev 14 Babylon occurs for the first time by name. Obviously, Babylon is nothing else than this satanic trinity.¹⁹ It is presented as the great city and at the same time as a woman. There are four important women figures in Revelation: Jezebel, the woman of Rev 12, Babylon, and the New Jerusalem. Two are found in the first half of the book, the historical part, and two in the eschatological part. In each part one is negative and the other is positive. Three of them belong to the apocalyptic part. Thus, Babylon is bordered by the true church of Rev 12 and the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb as found in Rev 19, 21 and 22. Babylon is the evil counterpart of both women and resembles them in many ways.²⁰ Clear parallels and contrasts can be found between the woman of Rev 12 and the harlot of Rev 17 and the bride of the Lamb and the harlot. The latter two are also contrasted as cities, the great city and the holy and beloved city. The New Jerusalem has a precursor and an opponent in the present time. The precursor is the holy city of 11:2, which is nothing else than the woman of Rev 12. The opponent is Babylon. The book clearly distinguishes between the church and Babylon, or the remnant and Babylon. Therefore, the remnant should not be called Babylon. It is not the remnant that is called to go out of Babylon, but “God’s people” who are still in Babylon (18:4).

VI. God’s Relationship to the Church and Her Final Victory

We need to ask one more question, namely how God the Father and Jesus relate to the church. Indirectly we have already touched on that topic. Let us therefore briefly summarize!

Jesus Loves the Church (1:5). Jesus’ love to us has led to our salvation. Jesus has given us tremendous privileges and responsibilities.

¹⁹ Its sudden appearance in the message of the second angel (14:8) suggest that it comprises the before mentioned evil powers. This seems to be supported by Rev 16.

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion, see Ekkehardt Mueller, “Babylon”, unpublished document.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jesus Stands in the Middle of His Churches (1:13, 20; 2:1). Jesus cares for his local churches. He praises and reprimands them in order to help them. Christ's love is evident even when he announces judgment. He wants us to return to him.

God Answers Prayers (6:10–11; 8:3–4). Prayers of the saints are mentioned in 5:8 in connection with the Lamb. In 6:10 the martyrs turn to God in prayer. In 6:11 they are given a preliminary answer. A further answer is the trumpet judgments upon those who dwell on earth.

God Seals His Church (7:3–4). God commands the sealing of his church. He intervenes for her. He does not want anybody to be lost.

Jesus Has Saved the Church (7:14, cf. 12:11; 14:3). Salvation is possible because Jesus has shed his blood for us. He came so close to us that he died on the cross in our stead. Now we should come close to him.

Jesus Is Shepherd of His Church (7:15–17; cf. 21:3–4). He provides more than what we need.

Jesus Comes Forth from the Church (12:2, 5). His incarnation points to his closeness with his saints.

Because of Their Relationship with the Holy One, the Believers are also Holy (16:5–6). Again a close relationship is indicated.

God Raises the Faithful Ones in the First Resurrection (20:4, 6). The church follows Jesus in suffering, but also in the resurrection. God gives eternal, incorruptible life and allows us to take part in this rulership.

The Church Will See Her Lord Face to Face (22:3–4). This is the final goal. This promise can comfort in difficult times.

All these statements point to the fact that God loves his church, he enjoys her fellowship, and he will secure her final victory. The church will triumph because Christ has triumphed.

VII. Practical Implications

Finally, what are the practical implications?

(1) *Revelation Points to the Importance of the Church.* Although the book contains the individual aspect, there seems to be a strong accent on the corporate aspect. The author seems to take it for granted that a Christian cannot live his or her Christian life in self-chosen or self-inflicted isolation. Christians are members of Christ's church. God oftentimes works through his Church. She is his army on earth. Thus, we are challenged to take it seriously and willingly get involved in mission outreach and caring relations.

(2) *In Revelation the Church is a Local Congregation and the Universal Church.* A congregational approach to church structure does not seem to be in harmony with the Apocalypse. There are local churches in Revelation, and yet there is a worldwide church to which the others belong. Therefore, the unity of the church must be promoted. E.g., we should be careful not to create national, racial, and gender-based theologies that hinder the unity and progress of the

MUELLER: ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

church. Believers will support their local congregation as well as the fellowship of the sister churches.

(3) *In Revelation the Church is the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant.* The struggling church with her weaknesses may catch our attention today and may irritate us. Therefore it is useful to contrast Rev 1–3 with Rev 19–22. We need the larger picture. We need to see the final outcome. As a church we do not excuse sins and mistakes, but confess them. As individuals we support the church in spite of her shortcomings. These are our shortcomings!

(4) *In Revelation the Church Seems to Be Visible, though Parts Seem to Be Invisible.* The church and the remnant are basically visible entities. Characteristics help to identify the remnant. Time prophecies support that. The church must be visible for others to join it. But the group of Rev 18:4, called “my people,” is obviously not a visible entity. Our concept of the church must allow for the visible and invisible aspects.

(5) *Revelation Emphasizes the End Time Church.* Ecclesiology is a pressing topic today. It is very important for all of us, as we draw nearer to the end of time. This is precisely what Revelation tells us. The Bible can prevent us from building our own constructs of ecclesiology. We need to listen to her voice.

(6) *Jesus loves His Church.* So do we!

Ekkehardt Mueller is an Associate Director of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. 104474.1476@compuserve.com