

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

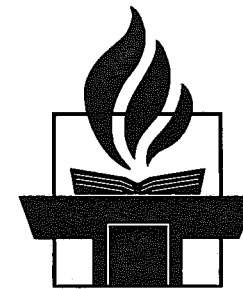
<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ref-rev-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php)

Reformation  
& Revival



---

A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 6, Number 2 • Spring 1997

---

# *Releasing the Hostage: Giving the Apocalypse Back to the Church*

---

Thomas N. Smith

**T**here are two equal and opposite errors about the devils into which our race can fall. One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”<sup>1</sup>

What Lewis said about devils is equally opposite to the book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of John. Obsession and skepticism reign.

I ought to know. I have been an example of both. My own relationship with the Revelation has been a pilgrimage from smug arrogance to doubt, from questions to skeptical know-nothingism, from renewed interest to renewed study, from reexposure to cautious confidence. The only alternatives in Christian faith and life are not, after all, smugness and skepticism. There is such a thing as a careful, studied, self-doubting faith, what someone has aptly called “proper confidence.”

127

## **The Apocalypse Held Hostage**

My own renewed interest in Revelation began out of a pastoral concern, or, rather, several pastoral concerns. Let me explain these.

In the twenty-three years I have been a pastor I seldom, if ever, have seen any profitable discussion surrounding the book of Revelation. Inevitably, discussion of the book ends up on speculative questions, rather than on matters that deal directly with the faith and life of Christians within Christian churches. And not only so, but often discussion of the “issues” involved in the interpretation of the book results in acrimonious arguments; I have even had people leave my ministry because it was not “sound” regarding the book of Revelation. A book which uniquely pronounces God’s covenant blessing on those who read, hear, and keep

---

the sayings of the book (Rev. 1:3), has become the source of much to the contrary. This has made me uneasy. It has made me walk away from all such discussions with the thought, "Somehow, we don't have it right."

And this creates yet another serious concern. This book is meant to be read, heard, and kept (Rev. 1:3). Yet, the most popular understanding of the book sees it lacking any *direct* application to contemporary Christians. An interpretation that makes large portions of the book irrelevant to its current readers has to be suspiciously lacking. And this became even more apparent when I began to inquire into the attitude of Christians to the book. Most Christians do not read, let alone study, the book of Revelation. To be sure, I have always known one or two people who spent a lot of time in the book of Revelation; I confess to a certain patronizing attitude toward them when they wish to enlighten me as to the identity of the Beast or other such things. I tend to go deaf in such controversies. But, it was all too apparent that the majority of the people under my pastoral care did not think the book was relevant to them at all, or, if it was, it was "too deep for me." Now a portion of Scripture which makes its goal to encourage the overcoming perseverance of the saints (see Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21, 21:7), is surely deserving of better treatment than this. Furthermore, a book which so gloriously sets this call to overcoming grace in the triumphant sufferings of the Son of God, in *His* overcoming (Rev. 3:21; 12:11, 17:14), ought to be better known and more profoundly treasured.

Little by little I came to the conclusion that the book of Revelation was being held hostage, being kept from its true family, the church of Jesus Christ. Just what things have led to this hostage situation began to occupy a considerable amount of my mental energies. I came to believe that three primary reasons have contributed to this deplorable set of circumstances: a general ignorance of the book, a man-cen-

tered ethos within the churches, and a respected, but erroneous theological interpretation of the book.

1) Our problem is one of ignorance. We simply do not know, do not know enough, and do not know that we do not know! This often is not appreciated in conservative Christian communities where everyone is expected to be a student of the Bible and to be able "to give an (exhaustive) account for the hope that is in us."

This ignorance is commonly evident in respect to the Bible as *literature* and to the variety of literary forms used by the biblical writers. Belief in the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures ala 2 Timothy 3:16 does not preclude an understanding that the Bible is the result of *human* literary art and craftsmanship. The Bible is not an "uncreated book" like the Koran; it did not fall from heaven on golden plates or even papyrus. Men, moved by the Spirit of God, thought, struggled, crafted, and formed the books that have come down to us as Scripture. They employed their training in the Old Testament, their awareness of nonbiblical writings and traditions, their familiarity with contemporary methodologies of spoken and written language, and a discerning awareness of their own historical setting, indeed, their own imaginations and experiences under the direct influence of the Spirit to produce the rich, colorful, and variegated material found in the Bible.

And nowhere is this more in evidence than in the book of Revelation. This is a work that evinces a thoroughgoing theological familiarity with the Old Testament, an awareness of the importance and limitations of the Jewish apocalyptic literary genre, the nature of prophecy, the art forms of contemporary literary style, a keen sensitivity to the religious-political-economic issues of the day, in addition to the pneumatic and charismatic experiences of the writer in an exalted visionary state. It is surely reasonable to expect that if such things went into the making of the Apocalypse

at the end of the first century then at least some familiarity with the same things is necessary if we are to understand its message today.

Ignorance of such things holds the Apocalypse hostage; it keeps it from the family circle where it belongs—within the faith and life of Christians within the church. And such ignorance leads us to make fools of ourselves in our outlandish impositions upon and interpretations of the Book, e.g., that the letters to the seven churches are a microcosm of church history from the apostles to the present day (with a whole church devoted to the reformation of the sixteenth century!), that Hitler, Mussolini, or Henry Kissinger is the Beast, that the Whore of Babylon is, in truth, the papal see, etc., ad infinitum. In the face of such ignorance, the call of the first reformers of *ad fontes*, “to the sources,” is a clarion call to us to study, to labor in the original languages, literary forms, and historical contexts of the Bible books in order to ascertain their timeless message.

But ignorance is a resistant, stubborn thing. It has natural allies within us such as fear, pride, and sloth. Literature has to be studied to be understood. Perhaps an illustration from the visual arts will help me make my point. Most people approach pictures with the idea, “I don’t understand art, but I know what I like!” This is why Norman Rockwell or the Impressionists are more likely to appeal to the popular imagination than, say, Picasso or German Expressionists. While not denying the validity of people liking Rockwell or Monet as painters, the fact is, there can be no real understanding or appreciation (which may not produce personal enjoyment of the work) of any serious painter without understanding the times he worked in, the forces he was reacting to, the historical continuum he was part of, etc. The fact is, most of us care little enough for the visual arts, and the sheer work involved in becoming able to “read” a painting is too much to ask.

A similar attitude is too often apparent in learning to “read” a book like the Apocalypse (or the epistle to the Romans, for that matter). Do we really desire to know it in a way that will drive us to study the Old Testament to the point that we are aware of the allusions John makes to it? Are we willing to have our prejudices overturned by exposure to views other than our own? Are we eager to engage in the labor involved in coming to understand the conditions of the Roman world at the end of the first century A.D.? Are we ready to invest the time and energy required to understand the meaning of prophecy and Apocalyptic? Do we want to wrestle with the theological meaning of history? Too often, the answer to these and like questions is “No.” And as long as this attitude holds, Revelation will remain hostage, hostage to ignorance, and a willful ignorance at that.

2) But there is another reason why the book of Revelation remains a hostage within the contemporary American church. This contemporary church is anthropocentric; that is, like the culture around it, it is man-centered. From its disdain of theology and worship, to its marketing and promotional power trips, to its lust to be accepted and attractive to the popular culture, to its drive to be politically powerful or correct, the contemporary church in America is not likely to find the environment of the Apocalypse a cozy place. This is true even when we find certain interpretations of the Revelation acceptable within evangelical churches. It is not surprising that such churches are usually nationalistic, xenophobic, politically conservative, if not right wing. Such churches are invariably a-theological, antiliturgical, and anticonfessional. They are frequently more concerned over middle-class standards of decency than ethics, more interested in saving souls than applying the Gospel to the whole man, more interested in getting to heaven than in a vital pilgrimage to heaven. Their

interpretations of the Revelation are not frequently allies in promoting this status quo.

The view of the exalted God found in Revelation is not likely to make such people comfortable at all. The perspective of witness as *suffering* found here is not even an imaginable possibility. "You may go through the tribulation, but I won't!" The apocalyptic view that sees *all* human government as suspect in respect to the Gospel is not likely to be welcomed in churches where the political system is seen as a valid means of achieving a moral agenda proposed by churches. A book that condemns the Babylonian city of Rome for its conspicuous consumption will not be welcomed among people where covetousness has become an acceptable vice. A book that speaks scathingly of "those [who] say they are Jews but are not, but are liars," and "Sodom and Egypt, where our Lord was crucified" is not likely to appeal to those who make as one of their cardinal religious and political points the validity of the current government of the State of Israel.

The Apocalypse is decidedly *Theocentric*. It refuses to appeal to the egoism and narcissism endemic to contemporary American culture. It resists the manipulative intents of self-affirming psychologies and self-centered theologies. It rebukes the whining, complaining church of our day with its call to "repent, or else." It arouses a smugly secure religious ethos with its affirmation that

he who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death (Rev. 21:7-8).

Its Klaxon alarm sends a frisson of terror into our souls

as it reminds us that like our Lord, the faithful and true witness, who sealed His witness with blood, we, professed followers of the Lamb are called to do the same (Rev. 12:10-11).

And while it does all these things, Revelation never ceases to remind us in the most graphic and compelling images found in the New Testament that, despite the worst that fallen man and the Devil can do on earth, the true and triune God reigns in the heavens and shall reign on the earth. With calculated repetition it tells us that this reign is being conducted because of the triumph of the slaughtered Lamb, and that because of this triumph, the Lamb, and not the Dragon, shall finally prevail. It announces that the world shall not end in either a bang or a whimper, but the shout of the blood-stained, yet victorious King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It sets before us the eschatological hope that the destroyers of the earth will not succeed, but that the Creator will recreate the earth He loves as the eternal home place for the people He loves.

This ethical and eschatological vision is deplorably absent in the Christian church today. The church is characterized by extremes which the Apocalypse can correct. In those churches where an ethical and social concern is absent, the Revelation reminds us that the Gospel is doctrine and ethics. In those churches where experience is the chief preoccupation, this book tears our eyes from ourselves and forces us to gaze (albeit with downcast eyes) upon the enthroned God and His Lamb. Among Christians where interest in current political and social affairs has become the overriding passion, the Apocalypse summons us to root these concerns in the Gospel itself and in our responsibility to witness it. Among Christians who have become entranced with the ideal of "Christian America," the Revelation cautions them that the kingdoms of the world are always essentially hostile to the Gospel, and that

the demonic and political Beast is never more dangerous than when he takes on the characteristics of the Lamb (Rev. 13:11-12). Because of these and similar things, there is no book in the Bible more calculated to promote true reformation and revival than this book. The Revelation is held captive to our ignorance and man-centeredness, but can, itself, release us from these.

3) I wish to speak to yet another reason why the Revelation is not read, heard and observed within the contemporary church. Perhaps a prime suspect is a system of interpretation that presumes to understand the book and claims fidelity to an exalted view of God. This is the dispensationalist school of interpretation, popularized by such works as the *Scofield Reference Bible* and the best-sellers like *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. By leading multitudes of people to understand Revelation through this gridwork of interpretation, at least two things have resulted. First, it is commonly believed that there is no other possible interpretation of the book that is evangelical. Second, because of this school's insistence that only chapters 1-3 and 20-22 having anything *directly* to do with the Christian church, the theological and ethical message of the book as a whole is neutralized and the book ceases to be relevant and timely to the average church member at the end of the twentieth century. Such a view is pernicious and dangerous simply because it has this practical effect upon Christians and Christian churches. And while this view is without exception held by those who maintain the most rigid interpretation of *theopneustos*, "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), in respect to the inspiration of the Bible, it has apparently missed the apostle's whole point for stressing the inspiration of these "holy writings," i.e., they are "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." So while such an interpretation of the

Apocalypse claims fidelity to the Word of God, by placing the relevance of Revelation 4-19 in a future devoid of the church of Jesus Christ, it makes the Word of God found in the Revelation irrelevant to contemporary readers of the book. Contrary to the express purpose of God found in Revelation 22:10, this perspective seals up the book. This is most serious, and especially so in the light of the explicit warning of Revelation 22:18-19.

### Returning the Book of Revelation to the Family of God

What is needed is an overturning of this state of affairs that will release Revelation from captivity and return it to the bosom of its family. How can this occur?

In the simplest sense, we will return Revelation to the Christian church when we begin to take seriously the beatitude of Revelation 1:3. We must begin again to read, to hear, and to observe the sayings found in this book. But, this very easily becomes simplistic. The language, idiomatic speech, biblical allusions, historical, political, and theological perspectives of John at the end of the first century A.D. formed, after all, an altogether different worldview than that of most Christians in the United States of America at the end of the twentieth century. Therefore, if we are to come to any understanding of the book at all we must look, not to current events transpiring in our world, nor to the future and what it may or may not bring, but to the past. We must return to the form and shape of the Apocalypse itself and seek to understand its message in light of this shape. And what are the contours that make this shape and form?

### The Book of Revelation Is Theology

The book of Revelation is theology because its primary subject is God. The Revelation is not, primarily, about man. The Revelation is, like the rest of the Bible, a record of the saving acts of God (Acts 2:11). As such, the book is replete

with descriptions of the divine nature and character. He is the "I am" of Exodus 3 and 6, declaring five times that He is "the One who is, and who was, and who is to come" (1:4,8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5). As such, He is "the Alpha and the Omega" (1:8,17; 21:6; 22:13). He is the Creator of all things (4:11). This God is the true ruler of the universe, who will bring the world with its kingdoms under His gracious dominion (11:15). He through the bloody conquest of the slaughtered Lamb, the Redeemer of the nations, who will finally bring the redeemed to everlasting habitations of glory (5 and 21, 22). He is the Judge of the earth who will infallibly overcome the powers of darkness, both celestial and terrestrial (6-20). And this God is the triune God of Christian theology and worship (1:4-5). The triumph of this God in grace and justice is effected through the agency of the Lamb (chapter 5ff.), and the Holy Spirit (4:5; 5:6). The Revelation is the dramatic, visionary record of how this triune God will subjugate the demonic forces of His fallen creation and will bring this creation to its purposed glory, the glory of a creation where this God shall be all and all. Everything else in the Apocalypse is subservient to this, this grand theological and theocentric theme.

#### **The Book of Revelation Is Biblical Theology**

By this I mean that the Revelation is a part of that progressive unfolding of God's redemptive and judicial purpose revealed in the history of Israel, of Jesus Christ, and of the Christian church found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The Revelation is one part of that great *unity* found in these Scriptures, promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New. Indeed, the Revelation is the inscriptured *final act* in the process of promise and fulfillment. As such, we are not surprised to find the Revelation making more direct references and allusions to the Law and the Prophets than any other New Testament

book. This is why it is impossible to understand the book at all without reference to the Old Testament.

As biblical theology the Revelation is preeminently Christocentric. Jesus' own understanding of the Old Testament as a witness to Himself in His sufferings, glory, and conquest of the nations (Luke 24:27, 44-49) is brought to an elegiac and doxological pitch in this book! The slaughtered Lamb has entered His own glory and is in the process, through the sufferings and witness of His church, of bringing the nations to faith and judgment. The outcome of this process is not in doubt, for "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever" (11:15)! The realization of Psalm 2 in the triumph of the suffering, but faithful and true witness is, like many other Old Testament expectations, fully envisioned in the Apocalypse.

#### **The Book of Revelation Is Apocalyptic**

There continues to be considerable debate among New Testament scholars over the relationship of Revelation to Jewish apocalypses such as the book of *IV Ezra*.<sup>2</sup> Some New Testament scholars have preferred to emphasize the differences between the Revelation and other apocalyptic literature.<sup>3</sup> Still, there is little debate that Revelation has certain apocalyptic characteristics.<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham points out "two very broad ways in which Revelation stands in the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic literature."<sup>5</sup> First, there is what he calls "a disclosure of a transcendent perspective on this world." And second, "it shares the question which concerned so many of the latter [Jewish apocalypses]: who is Lord over the world?"<sup>6</sup> Now, these things are immediately timely and relevant to the Christian church at any time and within any culture. And because John chooses to employ the literary genre of Jewish apocalyptic, why and how the ancient apocalypists employed this genre becomes vital in



understanding how John “in the Spirit” used or modified such stylistic devices to communicate his message to the churches.

The book of Revelation is a view of history, world history, from the perspective of the throne of the triune God (Rev. 1:4-5; 4; 5; et al.). Here is a divinely given insight into the workings of the forces of history. The age-old longing of the human heart for “meaning” as we look at the vanity of all that is under the sun is given some satisfaction. And notice again, how utterly un-man-centered this view is! Most pathologies within Christians and Christian churches are related to an obsessive preoccupation with ourselves, our problems, sins, ministries, etc. Revelation gives us this apocalyptic vision that pushes the envelope of our experience so that we see, as we must be made to see, again and again, that we are part of something grander than our own circumscribed lives!

Furthermore, John deals with this historical perspective in a God-centered and Christ-centered way. And he does so in a manner that is both highly imaginative and profoundly dramatic. “Who is Lord over the world, over these historical processes?” While John is in no doubt, and actually lets us see the sovereign God and His Christ enthroned in heaven (chapters 4, 5), yet he is at pains to show us that in order for this sovereignty to be actualized and realized fully in the world, then the Lamb must overcome the forces of the world, the Devil, the Beasts, the Babylonian Whore, etc. This is a Lordship dearly won, indeed, so dearly won that the Conqueror retains the marks of His conflict even in the glory of heaven (cf. 5:6, “as if slain,” and 19:13, “a robe dipped in blood”). But, because of this victory, the slaughtered Lamb alone is entitled to open the war scroll that will bring history, indeed, all the creation back to its Creator and Lord in judgment and salvation. Then, but *only then*, will the ultimate anthem be sung: “The kingdom of the

world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

It is this distinctive apocalyptic vision of history and its true Lord that made G. Campbell Morgan say,

There is no book in the Bible to which I turn more eagerly in hours of depression than to this, with all its mystery, all the details which I do not understand. I go back to it, to the throne, to the Lamb as it has been slain, and my puzzled mind and my troubled heart feel the healing virtue; and I hear the song, and I am ready for another day's fighting, for I know that Jesus shall reign.

#### **The Book of Revelation Is Prophecy**

The book of Revelation is prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19). As such it is part of a revelational continuum that began with Moses (Deut. 18:18-19), and in a less technical sense, even before (Gen. 20:7).<sup>7</sup> Jesus, who is the fulfillment of the word given to Moses in Deuteronomy 18 (cf. Acts 3:19-26), established the ongoing nature of this continuum in appointing the apostles as prophetic conduits of His works and words (John 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15). It has often been said that a prophet is more of a forth-teller than a fore-teller, but this can lead to simplistic and distorted views of the function of the prophets, first in Israelite society, and then in the Christian church. The fact is, the predictive element in biblical prophecy is substantial and essential (cf. Acts 2:30 with Deut. 18:22). The book of Revelation itself unhesitatingly claims to be a vision of “things that shall take place after these things.” But, it is just at this point where many people go wrong in their interpretations of the Revelation.

The prophets were men who saw, heard, and proclaimed the Word of God. Whether that Word came to them as promise, warning or comfort, whether its form was predic-

tive or ethical, the purpose was always a practical one. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of the Law" (Deut. 29:29). Compare this with Revelation 1:3: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." The point is clear: Prophecy is meant to lead people of God to respond to Him in a faith that works by love. In order to accomplish this work, the prophets were ethical preachers. They brought the Word of God to bear upon the ungodly culture and practices of their times in denunciation and warning of the judgments of the true God. Moreover, they warned the covenant community of the dangers of slipping into the mindset and practices of the pagan cultures around them, promising the most terrible recompense for unbelief and unrighteousness (cf. Deut. 27-29 with Rev. 22:14-15, 18-19). When failure ensued within that community, the call became one of "Repent, or else. . ." (cf. Ezek. 14:6; 18:30 with Rev. 2-3).

In all these senses is the Revelation a prophecy and John a prophet? He has seen and heard God and brings this prophetic message to the Christian churches living under the pressures of an idolatrous, sensual, and materialistic culture at the end of the first century, A.D. In true new covenant and prophetic fashion he writes for the "edification, exhortation, and comfort" of the churches of Christ (1 Cor. 14:3). In this way John's message is an open and timeless message to those churches in every age until Jesus returns (Rev. 1:3; 22:9-10). Any interpretation of the book of Revelation which does not honor this prophetic tradition and purpose must be viewed as suspicious and must reckon with the explicit warning of Revelation 22:18-19.

And what a glorious vista is opened by this prophetic understanding of the book for preachers, pastors and the

people of God given to their care! Whether we will ever understand all the symbols, the types, and allusions found within the Apocalypse (and we will not!), we can see the broad contours of John's intention: History belongs to the true Lord and His Christ, who through His faithful witness and bloody conquest has won the right to direct it toward His own purposed end and glory. Though the forces of the world, the flesh, and the Devil shall oppose this purpose, and at times will prevail against the saints, the church must itself overcome, not fearing the terrors of these powers, nor falling before the seductions of a sensual and materialistic culture, but by fearless witness join Jesus in His own sufferings and triumph (cf. Rev. 12:10-11 with 3:21). Failure at either point will prove to be absolute and final (cf. Rev. 22:10-15 with 2:7,11; 3:5). Victory will be glorious and endless (Rev. 2:17, 26-27; 3:5,12, 21; 21:7).

In a day when church leaders are universally lamenting the erosion of faith, love, hope, and the moral timbre that comes of these, the prophetic message of the Apocalypse speaks clearly, astringently, even terrifyingly to a church that has become a friend of the world, a colleague with the civil government, and a consort to the woman dressed in scarlet. But, it also speaks bracingly, encouragingly to those who have the God-born desire to "wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14; 22:14), and overcome the world through their faith. We earnestly need to hear and heed the prophetic word contained in this marvelous book. We need to restore such a book to its true family circle, the church of Christ!

#### **The Book of Revelation Is Pastoral**

The book of Revelation is as pastoral in design and purpose as the epistles to the Corinthians or the Philipians. This is often missed completely. Indeed, the Apocalypse is a pastoral letter. It is not simply a book containing pastoral

letters, i.e., the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2 and 3), but is in its entirety a pastoral letter. There are several ways that this is indicated. First, there is the beatitude of Revelation 1:3 to which reference has already been made. This entire work was designed to be read to Christian churches. Then there is the author's introduction: "I, John, your brother, and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom of Jesus Christ. . ." (1:9). John is clearly writing as a pastor to encourage and strengthen the churches of Asia Minor. Furthermore, the seven churches themselves are best thought of as representative of the whole Christian church, not only in Asia, but throughout the world. The number seven, as is well known, represents completeness. The seven churches are representative of the universal church of Christ.

But, as we have already seen, the Revelation is replete with pastoral concerns, pastoral directives, pastoral admonitions, in a word—with pastoral theology. It is the failure to see this fact—one that is on the surface of the book—that has led to much excessive and fantastic treatment of the book through the centuries. Bauckham makes this point when he says, "But many misreadings of Revelation, especially those which assume that much of the book was not addressed to its first-century reader and could only be understood by later generations, have resulted from neglecting the fact that it is a letter."<sup>7</sup> That the early Christian church had no similar misgivings on this point is evident in the way that Revelation, like other apostolic writings, came to be copied and treasured in churches far away from Ephesus or Sardis. And the patristic church, following the lead of the apostolic fathers, came to include it in the Canon of the Christian Scriptures. We have in Revelation a piece of apostolic writing in the form of a circular, pastoral letter that was treasured by the early church for its prophetic and pastoral beauty and power. If we are to return the

Revelation to the church this perspective will go a long way in bringing this about.

And just what are the central pastoral concerns addressed in the book?

John is writing to Christians under pressure from the world. Tribulation or pressure is a recurring theme in the Revelation (cf. 1:9; 2:9-10; 7:14). Before the threat of a pagan state that sees itself as the embodiment of the divine and demands divine worship, the early Christian communities were called to be faithful to death to overcome, to suffer, and to fearlessly witness to Jesus. The pressures, psychological, physical and financial, were great. Many look to the coward's way out (note that the "fearful" or "cowardly" are excluded from the new heavens and earth and the New Jerusalem and are assigned to the lake of fire and brimstone, the second death (Rev. 21:8). John, from the penal colony on Patmos and because of the "witness of Jesus" writes as a fellow-partaker in the tribulations, kingdom, and perseverance which are in Jesus" to the churches. This, in itself, is a powerful incentive to Christians under pressure to prove themselves unto death. And this call to faithfulness, to perseverance under pressure, to "overcome," becomes the central ethical theme of Revelation (2:8, 11,17,26; 3:5,12,21; 21:7).

But pressure to conform comes in other ways as well. There is the pressure from false teachers such as the Nicolaitans to adulterate the Gospel (2:6,14-15). There is the pressure to succumb to the financial problems and seductions inherent in Roman mercantilism. This is the likely meaning of the Babylon the Great in Revelation 17—19 (see especially 18:1-3, 9-15). The temptations of statism, sensuality, and conspicuous consumption were, then, as now, powerful threats to the perseverance of God's people in the faith. From this perspective, the whole Apocalypse is directed toward warning Christians of these dangers and

urging them to steadfastness in faith and holiness. And what incentives are urged upon these suffering, tempted people? Several. There is the repeated and blunt declaration that failure to overcome will not mean simply the loss of reward, but, rather the loss of eschatological salvation (2:2,7,11; 3:5, etc.). There is no cheap “eternal security of the believer” in the Apocalypse! The elect are known in these desperate days by an overcoming faith (cf. Rev. 17:14 [“called, chosen, and faithful”] with 1 John 5:4-5). In this, John is in harmony with dominical and apostolic witness found elsewhere in the New Testament. Furthermore, there is the example of the faithful and true Witness (Rev. 1:5; 3:14; 19:11) who overcame through suffering—the Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 3:14, 21). As Jesus overcame through the suffering of death, so those who would be faithful and true must do likewise (Rev. 2:10,13; 12:11; 17:14).

Most gloriously, John sets before these tested saints an unrivaled future in Revelation 21 and 22. The Beast with all his power and glory is negatively compared to the Lamb (cf. Rev. 13:11-12); he has “two horns (power) like a lamb,” he receives “worship,” he has “authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation,” and “makes war with the saints,” he “marks” his followers “in the hand or forehead,” he has a “fatal wound that healed”—in every way a true Antichrist. By turning their backs on The Beast, John’s readers are promised a worldwide reign, a metropolis (mother-city), the New Jerusalem (in contrast to Babylon the Great), freedom from the fate of the Beast and Harlot and Devil, and the *summum bonum*, “God shall be their God” (Rev. 5:10; 20:6; 22:5; 21:1-5; 22:1ff; 2:11). What an unspeakably glorious incentive is this!

The recovery of this vision of the Revelation—as theology, biblical theology, apocalyptic, prophecy, and pastoral theology, will go a long way in recovering the book for the Christian church in our day, in releasing it from its captors.

It is the growing conviction of many of us who are the children of American evangelical fundamentalism that, while it has on crucial issues stood for “the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus,” it has, nevertheless, failed. It is my personal conviction that one of the sources of this failure is to be found in its relationship to the book of Revelation. Such failures have made way for the hedonism that is rampant in our society at large and not unknown within the evangelical churches. We have become friends of the world though we would not dare to consider ourselves enemies of God. Anyone daring enough even to suggest this is likely to be thought of as insane or, at least, fanatical. The Revelation surgically exposes us as we are and graciously calls us to repent. The Revelation is not a schemata, a “blueprint of the ages” detailing for us the church age, the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Millennium in a tidy package; it is not a “Jewish book” having nothing to say to the church from chapters 4 through 19; it is not a kind of “psychic news network” that we read our daily newspaper with in order to understand both better. In reading the book in this way, these friends of the Apocalypse have done the unthinkable: they have taken it hostage, they have abducted it, bound and gagged it, kidnapping it from its true family, the Christian church. It is time it was returned to its true home where it can be properly loved, and where it can play a supportive role in the life and survival of that family. Nor is this a plea for millennial partisanship. In times of national crisis partisanship is wicked and unacceptable. The church of Jesus Christ finds herself in such times, times not unlike those depicted in the Revelation. In such times as these we need to hear the timeless message of this grand and neglected book. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

**Author**

---

Thomas N. Smith is pastor of Randolph Street Baptist Church, Charleston, West Virginia, and associate editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

**Endnotes**

---

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948), 9.
- 2 Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5. See also chapter 2, "The Use of Apocalyptic Traditions," in Bauckham's *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).
- 3 Walter A. Elwell, ed., G. E. Ladd's article, "Apocalyptic" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 64.
- 4 Bauckham, op. cit., 6.
- 5 Ibid., 6.
- 6 Ibid., 7-8.
- 7 Ibid., 12.
- 8 Walter A. Elwell, ed., A. Lamorte and G. F. Hawthorne's article, "Prophecy, Prophet" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

**Recommended Reading**

---

- 1 *The New International Version Study Bible*, notes on Revelation.
  - 2 Bauckham, Richard, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation and the Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge University Press.
  - 3 J. G. Machen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Banner of Truth.
  - 4 Commentaries on Revelation by Caird, Metzger, Morris, and Mounce.
-