

## Christ and the Book of Revelation

*By Rich Gilbert*

**I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book (Rev. 22:18).**

Every time something big happens in the news (especially if it involves the Middle East) it seems a new set of books, reinterpreting the book of Revelation, is published. It is therefore no surprise when the reader begins to get the impression that the book of Revelation is a very dark, mysterious book that is difficult, if not downright impossible, to understand; and despairing of his own ability to make sense of it, he often avoids the book altogether. This is tragic, and need not occur, for the difficulty in understanding the book of Revelation has less to do with the book itself, than with its interpreters.

There were two things, concerning the Scriptures, that the Reformers were certain of. The first was that the basic message of the Scriptures is clear to anyone who can read them (this is in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church which taught that the Scriptures were a dark book, and that you needed a priest--ultimately, the Pope--to interpret them for you). This does not mean that every part of Scripture is equally clear. Some passages are, indeed, difficult to understand and it helps to have the consensus of the Church through the centuries to correctly interpret them. But the basic message of what man's condition is, who Jesus is and what He's done for us, and how I can be saved, is perfectly clear. The second thing that they were sure of was, the Scriptures are about Christ. This is no less true of Revelation, than it is of any other book of the Bible. Again, this is not to say that everything in Revelation is as plain as the Gospel of John, nor do I claim to understand everything in it perfectly (for that matter, that's true for all of the Scriptures as well). After all, the book of Revelation is part of the genre known as apocalyptic literature, that is to say, it is full of symbolism. It employs numbers and images that were very familiar to 1st century Jews and Christians to get its message across. To understand the book of Revelation it is essential to have some knowledge of what these numbers and images represent.

Most people are familiar with some of these already (3 is the number for the triune God, 4 is the number for creation, 6 is the number for man, 7 is the number for perfection, 12 represents the tribes of Israel or the apostles, 1000 is a number for completeness--so when a number like 666 is used it means always coming short of perfection, or a number like 144,000 is 12 squared times 1000 meaning a great multitude, everyone who's meant to be included is, with no one left out). But Revelation, like the rest of Scripture, is about Christ, and any interpretation that ends up with something else as central (either intentionally or unintentionally) has not only missed the entire message of the book, but, to put it simply, is wrong. By, "about Christ", is meant that it is about His person (He is both fully God and fully man), and His work (His life, death, and resurrection) on our behalf, and not merely about His second coming. (Usually, these books treat the doctrine of the return of Christ as, at best, merely a side note to the events that are supposedly leading up to His second coming. It's easy to get the impression that these books could be written without mentioning that Christ is coming again, and not significantly change their content.) Well, it's fine to say that Revelation is "about Christ," but it remains to be shown how it is "about Christ."

It is important to note first the circumstances under which this letter was written. What was John's purpose? This letter was written during a time when the Church was increasingly being persecuted (John was himself exiled to the island of Patmos under this persecution). The power of the state was beginning to be used with great force against the Church. Christians were being tortured and killed for their faith. They were watching their friends

and their family members die horrible deaths. Doubts were beginning to arise about the wisdom of being a Christian. Christ had promised them that the gates of Hell would not prevail against His Church. Now they were beginning to wonder if it actually might. So John writes a letter to encourage them. He shows them how all things are still in God's all-powerful hands. Christ, to whom "all power and authority has been granted" will ultimately triumph over the forces of evil arrayed against the Church. This is so because He has, in fact, already defeated them.

John does not set forth a chart book of the end times for his readers; he sets forth Christ. Christ is "the Almighty," "the First and the last," "the Beginning and the End," "the Alpha and the Omega" (1:8; 21: 6; 22:13). In short, He is God Himself, the one "who is and who was, and who is to come" (compare 1:4 with 1:8). He is "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5).

The believer can take courage, whatever happens to him (even death), because his eternal destiny is in Christ's hands. Christ has done it all for him. Recognizing this, the elders around the throne lay their crowns at His feet (they realize that they can take no credit for either being there, or for receiving their crowns, and that they owe all to Christ alone). Christ is "the firstborn from the dead" (1:5). He "was dead" yet is "alive for ever and ever" (1:18). By His death on our behalf He "has freed us from our sins" (1:5). How has He done this? By emptying the wrath of God onto Himself, and dying in our place, the just for the unjust, He has satisfied the justice of God, and cancelled the debt we owed. Thus He disarmed Satan of his greatest weapon against us, his ability to accuse us of our sins before God (cf. 12:10). By His resurrection He "holds the keys of death and Hades" (1:18). It is Christ who, alone, is found worthy when none of us were (Ch. 5). The Christian is righteous because he has washed his robe and "made it white in the blood of the lamb," i.e., because Christ's death has covered his sins. The fine linen that the bride (the Church) wears, to the wedding feast, is a gift. We are told that this fine linen represents righteous deeds. Our righteousness is something given to us. It is not our own. It is, to use a word the Reformers used, an alien righteousness. It is Christ's righteousness given to us (19:7-8). This is meant to give courage to the Christian undergoing persecution, because, if Christ has been able to do all this, then surely, all things in this world are in His hands as well.

Ultimately, the forces of evil, arrayed against the Church, will be defeated completely, and all their deeds will be punished. Satan will no longer be able to attack the Church. He will be cast down and bound forever in the lake of fire. His access to God will be cut off. God will put all enemies under Christ's feet and He will establish, fully and forever, the reign He now already has over all things. Then, there will be a new Heaven and a new earth where there will be no more suffering, no more death, no more tears, for He shall wipe away all tears, and the Christian shall be with Him forever. The great truths of the Reformation are affirmed in the book of Revelation. Christ is central. We are saved by Him, not by anything we have done to deserve it. His righteousness is imputed to us, and it's on this basis that we have any standing with the Father.

This is the message of Revelation. It is not about a tribulation. It is not about a rapture. It is not about the European Community uniting or a one world government. It is not about Russia attacking Israel. It is about Christ, and what He has done, continues to do, and will do, for us. And, just as we must not take away anything from the message, we must not add anything to it by our interpretation, or the warnings contained therein will apply to us. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.