

Preaching the Book of Revelation

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Friedrich Engels, the nineteenth-century communist colleague of Karl Marx, once wrote the following about the book of Revelation:

Christianity got hold of the masses, exactly as modern socialism does, under the shape of a variety of sects, and still more of conflicting individual views—some clearer, some more confused, these latter the great majority—but all opposed to the ruling system, to “the powers that be.”

Take, for instance, our Book of Revelation, of which we shall see that, it is the *simplest and clearest book of the whole New Testament* (emphasis provided).¹

In the context of Engels’ statement, the book of Revelation is about class struggle and is the earliest book written in the New Testament. With that lens, he incredibly asserts that the book is the easiest book to understand in all of the New Testament. Thus, he gives us another reason not to trust communists! Their perception appears to be somewhat lacking.

However, dispensationalists normally do not make the mistake of going to the other extreme – making the book of Revelation so hard to understand that only the technical elite among the scholars can interpret it for the rest of us in the pews of our churches. Instead the dispensational tradition has acknowledged the difficulties of interpreting such a book while at the same time believing that the common man can come to many right conclusions with a correct understanding of proper hermeneutics. In this light, what follows is a discussion of many specific issues that should assist in the understanding and preaching of the book of Revelation.

Hermeneutics, Literal Interpretation and Apocalyptic Genre²

Perhaps the first issue that needs to be examined is the claim that the apocalyptic genre of the book of Revelation makes it impossible to practice a straight-forward, literal hermeneutic.³ If this is so, then the preaching of sermons from this book is greatly affected. Sandy represents one approach to how apocalyptic genre should shift the interpreter’s eye:

¹ Friedrich Engels, “The Book of Revelation” in *On Religion* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (reprint; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1964), 206.

² In this section, I will not deal with the other genres that exist in the book of Revelation. Most commentators acknowledge that the prophetic and epistolary genres are also part of what the interpreter/preacher must skillfully handle; see nondispensationalist G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 37.

³ In my use of the concept of literal hermeneutics here in this context, I do not mean the use of a literal expression as opposed to the use of a figure of speech or symbol. I mean what is normally meant by dispensationalists, the practice of grammatical-historical interpretation where the meaning of the author as conveyed in the text is the aim of interpretation. In this approach, meaning is textually driven. However, in my reference to Brent Sandy below, the perceptive reader will see that he tends to use *literal* to refer to something different than figurative. So we are focusing on different uses of the term.

From Revelation 12-13 we learned that an apocalyptic vision may actually be a sermon in disguise. We must not focus on deciphering the bizarre details and miss the underlying message.

Reading apocalyptic, then, is best done from a distance. Like ancient hearers, we need to take in the sweep of the narrative. Apocalyptic uses allusions and symbols that may be peculiar but in the larger context combine to depict scenes of unusual vividness and emotion. But the message can easily be missed if the strokes of the painter's brush are scrutinized individually. What did the author intend to communicate? What did the audience need to hear? The truth comes through vividly when we view from a distance.

How does the language of apocalyptic work? It tends to be more allusive than precise, more impressionistic than realistic, more fantastic than literal. Consequently we will not understand the parts of the story until we have read the last page.⁴

The elements of Sandy's statement have implications for understanding and preaching. Interpreting the many details is to be avoided. He is worried that the reader will miss the big picture if he concentrates on trying to understand the meaning of the various seals, trumpets, bowls, and other symbols throughout the book. Every dispensationalist will agree that the holistic picture of the book and its various sections is important. However, the details matter and have been given for a reason. The whole is made up of these many parts, each contributing to the overall message. The various specific features have referential content that must be observed so that the text truly says something.

The symbolic woman in Revelation 12 serves as an illustration of Sandy's point. Sandy asserts that the woman could be Israel or it could be the Church. There is no singular reference. It is ambiguous.⁵ In his thinking, the identification of the woman as Israel or the Church is of no consequence and is an example of trying to interpret bizarre details in the text unnecessarily. An illustration of this can be found in Sandy's outline of the apocalyptic sermon found in Revelation 12-13 for which the details are of minor importance:

- Persecution is a *small part* of a big picture:
a cosmic battle rages between good and evil
Jesus was a victim (Rev. 12:4)
Jesus' followers are victims (Rev. 13:7)
- Persecution is a *big part* of our sanctification:
God is preparing his bride for a star-studded wedding
"This calls for patient endurance"
"This calls for faithfulness"
- Persecution is a *doomed part* of the future:
God will soon destroy every evil in every corner of the universe

⁴ D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 125. Sandy's claim here is based partly upon the understanding that Revelation 12:17 cannot apply to the Jews. But it is not unreasonable, in light of the 144,000 Jews who have already been mentioned in chapter seven, to see the offspring of the woman who follow God and Jesus in 12:17 to be Jews who have come to Christ during the tribulation period.

“The accuser of our brothers has been hurled down”

“They overcame him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony.”⁶

This summarization comes across like the sermons, dispensational and nondispensational, where the preacher runs to application before he has thoroughly done his exegetical work. Can the interpreter say with certainty that the identity of the woman does not matter? If the woman is a symbol for Israel like most dispensationalists admit, it changes the reading of the text dramatically. Only those who already reject the woman as definitely Israel can say that it does not matter.⁷ If the woman is Israel, then the role the Jews play in the overall scope of Revelation is affirmed and nationally so. Such a conclusion dovetails nicely with the focus on easily understood details such as Jerusalem and its temple given in the previous chapter.

What are we to make of such a discussion about apocalyptic genre forcing us to downplay the details? If we are truly dispensational, we need to avoid the radical nature of this approach. While we can certainly make sure that we understand and preach the big ideas that the intensified prophecies yield, we cannot cast aside exegetical details as of little consequence. Furthermore, in the particular example of the symbolic woman in Revelation 12, proper exegesis shows that she is not a small unnecessary detail after all. The passage shows Satan’s deep-seated anti-Semitism, something that does not really come out in Sandy’s sermon outline above. Thus, it may be a safe conclusion to say that overdosing on the nature of apocalyptic genre in such texts may lead the interpreter and preacher to miss necessary components that affect the sermon. In the end, preachers should not allow the category of apocalyptic genre to so color their thinking that they undermine the literal interpretation of the text.⁸ In addition, preachers should not let the so-called difficulties of such genre considerations scare them away from preaching such a large and pertinent part of the Word of God.

⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁷ I am leaving aside here the interpretation that some Roman Catholics give of the woman in Revelation 12 as Mary. One can see how the language of the text (a woman who has the Christ child) could be used for such a conclusion. However, such a reading is not comprehensive of the entire context. For example, Revelation 12:1 asserts that the woman is a symbol, which is difficult to fit into a Marian interpretation. That the Marian view is the official view of the Roman Catholic Church may be surmised by the following statement on the Vatican website: “The feast of the Assumption and the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary contain a reading from the Book of Revelation (12, 1-6), which describes the threat of the dragon against the woman giving birth;” for the context of this statement, see “Christian Faith and Demonology,” <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19750626_fede-cristiana-demonologia_en.html> (accessed 22 September 2012).

⁸ I often tell my students that literal interpretation of texts logically precedes genre recognition (this is not something original with me). The focus of dispensationalists on literal hermeneutics may make this more important for their tradition. However, the entire issue of genre definition and the meaning of the apocalyptic category are not settled questions in spite of all of the discussions involving them; see dispensationalist Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 23-29. Compare to nondispensationalist Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 12-18. It is probably best to suggest that genre *classifies* the reading of a text rather than *regulates* the reading of a text. David P. Scaer is surely correct when he states the following thesis: “Though in classifying genre, we use secular norms, ultimately a particular genre classification must be determined by how it fits the biblical data and not any outside rigid secular norms” (“A Response to Genre Criticism – Sensus Literalis,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, & the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1984), 212.

Literary Structure of the Book of Revelation

While there are always debates over the structure and outline of Bible books, the arguments over the book of Revelation in this regard appear at times to be bizarre. At an ETS workshop, I once heard Warren Gage of Knox Seminary argue that interpretation of the book of Revelation was tied significantly to Joshua by means of typology. The number seven was prominent as can be surmised. Beyond that, he argued that the whore of Babylon was the bride of Christ, the Church. If I understand him correctly, the way that works out is that Babylon is redeemed and becomes the New Jerusalem. A literal reading of the text would never surface such an outline or development.⁹

A more sane and familiar opponent to the literal approach is the classical amillennial recapitulation view (sometimes called progressive parallelism) often associated with Augustine.¹⁰ This view is not to be confused with dispensationalists who sometimes see some recapitulation particularly between the trumpets and the bowls. The amillennial recapitulation view sees seven sections in Revelation: 1-3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-14, 15-16, 17-19, and 20-22. Each of these sections essentially starts with the first advent. Thus, in the later sections, there is a return to a discussion of things beginning with the first advent so that the present age is recapitulated in some form. It is convenient for this view that Revelation 19 ends a section and chapter 20 begins a new one. That way the thousand years of Revelation 20 is a discussion of the present age which started when Jesus came the first time.

One should readily recognize that the difference in preaching would be astounding if the recapitulation structure is adopted. Several preliminary reasons suggest that the amillennial recapitulation view is untenable: (1) it does not match the outline given by the book itself in Revelation 1:19; (2) it does not match the Hebraic narrative feel for the book (the Greek word for *and* occurs over 1100 times reminding of the Hebrew *Waw*-consecutive), (3) it makes it more difficult to correlate with Daniel and the Olivet Discourse, and (4) it does not handle well the binding of Satan in Revelation 20. The dispensationalist will rest assured that his outline based upon 1:19 (within Revelation itself instead of forced upon the text) will yield structure that is much more easily outlined and proclaimed. The *things you have seen, the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things* give a rather simple outline. The remainder of the book, as every dispensationalist knows, follows this structure and maintains the futuristic posture of the book. Preaching can flow historically and consecutively as a result.

Nonetheless, this conclusion is not always accepted concerning the structure cited in Revelation 1:19. Beale comments,

⁹ There may be no individual book in the Bible for which its date affects interpretation more than the Apocalypse. This means that the pastor who is giving an expository series on the book of Revelation must do the detailed study in background issues. No doubt, structure is affected. A preterist is not likely to have a similar outline to a dispensational futurist. For a preterist view of the book of Revelation see R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 131-49. Due to space limitations, we will not address the dating question for this article. One can find the preterist arguments for an early date of the book in Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989). The counter arguments for a late date can be found in Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Defense of the Domitianic Date of the Book of Revelation," (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2005).

¹⁰ My first academic exposure to this view was Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 156-59.

Though this chronological perspective is undoubtedly a popular understanding of Rev. 1:19, making chs. 4-22 come alive with tantalizing insight into future world events, there are weighty problems with this understanding of the verse. The main objection is that it interprets Revelation without sufficient sensitivity to its literary form, giving a straightforward, literal reading of the book, rather than using a figurative approach, which would be more appropriate to the book's symbolic genre.¹¹

While there are excellent insights within Beale's commentary on Revelation – especially the encouragement for all of us to be steeped in the Old Testament background passages that inform the various passages in the book of Revelation¹² – this casting aside of 1:19 simply because there are a lot of symbols in the book largely misses the point. Even if there are many symbols in the book, the interpreter should still treat those symbols in a straightforward way. In addition, it is not at all an assured truth that symbols would change an outline. The structure of the book of Revelation does not rise or fall based upon any genre designation.

Therefore, when considering the preaching of the book in light of its literary structure, one can see great advantages to the literal approach with its outline found in 1:19:

1. The text itself determines the direction the interpreter will take as he moves along;
2. The overall structure helps to locate the details of the text while the details help to inform the whole;
3. There is no necessity to contriving an interpretation – it can all be textually based;
4. The actual exposition in this scheme makes absolute sense – there is nothing necessarily foggy about it;
5. Exposition is actually possible line by line and text by text.

The last point is quite serious. The dispensational preacher can stand in the pulpit or classroom and exposit with confidence, no matter what the non-literalist scholars say. So, we dare not leave out the book of Revelation on our preaching schedule.

Practical Advice for Preaching the Book of Revelation

In this section, several areas will be reviewed to give some pragmatic direction to the preacher of the book of Revelation. These points largely come from ministry experience in teaching the book of Revelation in local church settings and interaction with our current culture.

Negativity and Hope

Years ago, one of my best friends attended an adult Sunday School class I was teaching. He served for a time as the head deacon of the church where I was the lead pastor. We spent several weeks going through the book of Revelation line by line, text by text. I tried to do justice both to the details and the big sweep of the message of the book. We were in the section covering the details of the tribulation, the largest section of the book (Rev. 6 to 19). After a few weeks in class slugging away through the seals, trumpets, and judgments, my friend asked me a question: “How long are we going to be in this section?” Then he commented, “We need to get

¹¹ Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, xix.

out of here and into something more positive. This is depressing!” I thought about that and about my preaching through some of the Old Testament prophets. These sections of the Bible could fairly be described as negative in tone. One pagan friend of mine characterized the Old Testament prophets this way: “Woe! Things are going to be bad!”

These kinds of responses forced me to reflect on my own bent to give the negative details. Yet God’s Word as a whole is certainly balanced. There is hope as well as judgment. Lament Psalms usually point to hope in the end. The prophets, although they overwhelmingly give judgment themes, often end up on a theme of hope (e.g., Amos 9). Could it be that my zeal for the judgment details of the book of Revelation was leaving a false impression? Was I communicating that I delighted in God zapping unbelievers? Worse – was I conveying the notion that God sadistically treats the earthdwellers in Revelation like an eight-year-old boy tearing wings off of flies?

Before you go too far in response to what I have just said, I am not trying to get you to follow Rob Bell.¹³ I have already said that the details of the text matter. This means *all* the details matter. Whether the specifics are negative or positive, they are all God’s divine revelation to us. We cannot duck the questions of overwhelming tribulation that brings death or the subject of the lake that burns with fire–forever. These are realities taught in the book of Revelation. We believe it is from God; so we believe it is the truth. Yet, we must be careful that we do not give the impression that we are ecstatic that the world is someday going to hell. True Christians, whether dispensational or not, must mourn the fate of those who do not share our faith in Christ. We rejoice that God’s will is done to be sure. But our love for people should still shine even when preaching texts like Revelation 6-19.

One way to make sure that we do this is to keep the hope of Revelation 21-22 in front of our audience every time we stand to speak on the book. Even when we are wading through the judgments, pain, and death of the tribulation, our churches need to hear about the hope at the end – and they need to hear it constantly perhaps by an overview at the beginning or end of sermons on the book. After all, the book was written to give first century Christians hope during the Domitian persecutions. A similar hope is available to every Christian since that time. As Walvoord reminds us, “No book of Scripture more specifically sets before the believer in Christ his eternal hope in the new heaven and earth and gives greater assurance of God’s triumph over wickedness, rebellion, and unbelief.”¹⁴ As a result of such considerations, I have made a conscious effort to improve my preaching of the harsh texts by appropriately highlighting future hope along the way.

Apologetics and the Book of Revelation

One of the major themes in the Apocalypse is theodicy although it is rarely preached in any definitive fashion. This is significant as a matter of apologetics as we encounter a culture that is increasingly negative toward the harsh things of the Christian faith or the teachings of Jesus. It is also important as a matter of exposition of the text. However, we sometimes get enamored with the overall progression of the book and forget that the text gives us answers to help believers and others reflect on these issues.

¹³ Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

¹⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 33.

Perhaps the best way to proceed is to remember the *New York Times* editorial from several years ago by Nicholas Kristof.¹⁵ In criticizing Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series, Kristof complains: "The 'Left Behind' series, the best-selling novels for adults in the U.S., enthusiastically depict Jesus returning to slaughter everyone who is not a born-again Christian. The world's Hindus, Muslims, Jews and agnostics, along with many Catholics and Unitarians, are heaved into everlasting fire." Kristof goes on sarcastically to note, "Gosh, what an uplifting scene!" Here the harshness of the Second Coming of Christ is highlighted. This is a truth that we cannot avoid in our preaching. It is harsh; when Jesus comes, He will kill people (Rev. 19). We should admit it instead of trying to get around it.

One should note at the outset of this discussion that a reasonable person might ask the question, "What gives God the right to pour all this negative judgment upon the world?" or "What gives God the right to kill people?" After all, He does not normally let us kill people when we want to do so. Fortunately, we find within the book of Revelation itself some keys to how we should respond to the negativity of the Second Coming and of all the tribulation period that precedes it. This provides a basis for how we defend our faith when unbelievers have such questions for us.

First, the book of Revelation reveals that the people who are judged severely in the book deserve it. Notice the wording found within the third bowl or vial judgment:

And I heard the angel of the waters saying, "Righteous art Thou, who art and who wast, O Holy One, because Thou didst judge these things; for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and Thou hast given them blood to drink. They deserve it." (Rev. 16:5-6)

This plain declaration is framed by the statement that God's ways are just and true (v. 7). This claim is made elsewhere as well – the song of Moses (15:3) and relative to the judgments upon Babylon (19:2). What gives God the right to do these judgments? People deserve it. God is absolutely right when He judges in the tribulation, at the Second Coming, and in the lake of fire. This will not necessarily convince unbelievers by itself. But the discussion here opens up issues of sin and guilt that the unsaved need to hear. It also allows believers to learn a concrete answer given by the text itself instead of languishing in a state of not knowing anything to say.

There are two other answers given to this question by the book of Revelation. They are found in Revelation 4-5. These chapters are often preached in terms of worship. There is certainly much in these chapters directly stated about our need to worship God. Preaching should take note of this textual observation. Nonetheless, this is not the main idea of these chapters. These two chapters are the introduction to the details of the tribulation that begins in chapter 6 and ends in chapter 19. In context, they answer the question, "What gives God the right to pour out the tribulation upon the earth?"

The first answer is that God is the Creator. We are told by the four living creatures at the throne of God that He is the Holy One who is above all things and who is everlasting (4:8). The

¹⁵ Nicholas Kristof, "Apocalypse (Almost) Now," *New York Times*, 24 November 2004; Internet; <http://donswaim.com/nytimes.apocalypse.html>; Accessed 7 July 2005. Kristof reacts to statements in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2004). I have responded to Kristof in Mike Stallard, "The Tendency to Softness in Postmodern Attitudes about God, War, and Man," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 10 (Spring 2006): 94-101. Some of the language here has been taken from my earlier article.

crescendo of the chapter ends with the worship statement of the twenty-four elders who are casting their crowns before God's throne. The declaration is something we sing in our churches:

Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created (4:9).

To be sure, the entire chapter highlights the fact that God is worthy of our worship. However, notice the reason that is given. He is the Creator of all things. It is His will that governs the existence of those on the earth, not their own wills. In the context of the book of Revelation at this point, this chapter is part of the introduction to what Jesus called in Matthew 24:21 the worst time ever (cp. Joel 2:2, Dan. 12:1). The placement here of the reminder that God is the superior One who creates by his own will shows that God has a right to pour out his wrath in the manner described in chapters 6-19.

Chapter 5, however, gives a clearer statement of these aspects of theodicy. The scroll sealed with seven seals appears in the right hand of God (v. 1). The question, "Who is worthy to open the book (scroll) and to break its seals?" is proclaimed by a strong angel (v. 2). No one was able to open the scroll or even look at it (v. 3) so that the apostle mourns (v. 4). We are then told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah from David's line has overcome so that He can open the scroll (v. 5).

The following section of chapter 5 gives the well-known portrait of this Davidic personage, not as the Lion, but the Lamb who was slain. This, of course, is Jesus Christ our wonderful Lord. The worship song is given here much like it had been in the previous chapter:

Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth (v. 9-10).

What is often missed in our preaching is the focus at the beginning of this song. Christ is worthy to take the book and open its seals. In context, just what does this mean? Does it mean He has the right to read what is on the scroll? This would be part of it, but it is much more. Breaking the seals in chapter 6 launches the terrible and awesome content of the scroll. To break a seal is to unleash those particular and horrifying judgments upon the earth. Therefore, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" is a question that could be worded, "What gives God the right to pour out His wrath upon the earth?" Only Christ the Redeemer who shed His blood for us can do that. But in the book of Revelation, Christ is clearly God. So, chapters 4-5 introduce the tribulation period by reminding us at the outset that God has the right to pour out His judgments because He is the Creator, and through Christ, He redeems. This gives all believers a practical witness since the horrors of the Cross are brought into the discussion at this point.

To summarize the theodicy aspect of the teaching of the book of Revelation, we have seen that God has the right to pour out His wrath upon the earth for three reasons:

1. The people on earth deserve it;
2. God is the Creator who can do with His creation what He desires;
3. God through Christ provides redemption by the death of Christ.

This theodicy angle in the book is often forgotten. In light of the postmodern tendency to reject biblical teaching at points where it appears harsh, dispensationlists need to spend a little more time here.

The Deity of Christ

Another matter of apologetics is the doctrine of the deity of Christ which is prominent in the book of Revelation. This is not surprising in light of the Apostle John’s involvement in the book of Revelation and the similar focus in his Gospel. The Jehovah’s Witnesses always compel those who hold to the deity of Christ to deal with Revelation 3:14 where Jesus is called “the beginning of the creation of God.”¹⁶ The response is easy enough. The term *beginning* used by the KJV and NASB can also carry the idea of source or ruler.¹⁷ If Jesus is the source of creation, He is the Creator, a credential that moves in the direction of his deity.

Other features in the book of Revelation reinforce the notion of the deity of Christ. The sum total of the references highlights the fact that this theme of Christ’s identity is a major point in the Apocalypse. For example, the portrait of Christ in the midst of the seven churches given in the first chapter (1:13-15) correlates to the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7 rather than the picture of the Son of Man from that Old Testament account. Notice the table below.

Ancient of Days (Daniel 7)	Son of Man (Revelation 1)
Hair like pure wool (v. 9)	Hair is white like wool (v. 14)
Vesture like white snow (v. 9)	Hair is white like snow (v. 14)
A river of fire was coming was flowing and coming out from him (v. 9)	Eyes like a flame of fire (v. 14)
His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were a burning fire (v. 9)	Feet like burnished bronze, when it had been caused to glow in a furnace (v. 15)
	Voice like the sound of many waters (v. 15)
	Golden girdle on his breast (v. 13)

One cannot escape the conclusion that the Apocalypse is identifying Jesus Christ as God. Added to this stark comparison, other features exist in the book of Revelation to show the same truth:

- The statement by God that He is “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8) while Jesus also calls Himself “the first and the last” (1:17);¹⁸
- Christ accepts worship without chastising John (1:17-18), while an angel from God refuses to do so (22:8-9) commanding the worship of God only;

¹⁶ For an example of Jehovah’s Witnesses literature dealing with this passage, see *Should You Believe in the Trinity* (Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1989), 14.

¹⁷ For the range of evangelical understandings of Revelation 3:14, see Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 138; Osborn, *Revelation*, 204-05; Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 297-301. The same title of “beginning” used in Revelation 21:6 in the overall construction “the beginning and the end” suggests that the deity of Christ is not diminished by the term.

¹⁸ There is a textual problem with Revelation 1:11. The TR version adds “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last.” This would provide an additional reference to be compared to 1:8.

- Christ's name is the Word of God (19:13). Within Johannine theology this implies the deity of Christ (cp. John 1:1);
- Jesus, the Lamb of God, appears to sit with the Father on His throne (Rev. 3:21; cp. Rev. 5:6).¹⁹ This idea would be akin to blasphemy if Jesus were not deity;
- In Revelation 20 there is the continued "closeness" of Christ and God (see v. 6) that reminds of the earlier teaching that the Lamb of God was on the throne of God. This teaching is also seen in the use of Temple imagery. Both God and the Lamb constitute the temple in the eternal state (21:22). This makes no sense apart from the full deity of Christ;
- Near the end of the book, Jesus once again declares Himself to be "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (22:13; cp. 22:16). Since God Himself is called the "Almighty" associated with the above descriptions and since He is referred to as the Almighty in the book at least nine times (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22), the Alpha and Omega label for Christ cannot escape the thought of deity.

Thus, the dispensational (or any evangelical) preacher must include the accurate identity of the One who is pouring out the events of the tribulation. As Arno Gaebelein once wrote,

It is here where many expositions of Revelation have missed the mark. Occupied chiefly with the symbols of the Book, the mysteries, the judgments and the promised consummation, they have neglected to emphasize sufficiently Him, who throughout this Book is pre-eminently the center of everything. The reader of Revelation does well to read first of all through the entire Book with this object in mind, to see what is said of our Lord, of His Person, His present and His future Glory.²⁰

Focus on the judgments themselves should not divert attention from the One who gives them. While the book's purpose is to give hope to its readers today in light of tomorrow, it does so by elevating the One to whom we must look for our coming deliverance.

Setting Dates and Sensationalizing the Prophecy of the Book of Revelation

As has already been mentioned, dispensationalists are futurists. This approach to the book of Revelation flowing from a commitment to literal interpretation means that dispensationalists believe that the events described in Revelation 4-22 are in the future from the current historical perspective. The events have not been fulfilled in the past leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (preterism). Christians today are not living inside the bubble of fulfillment as we experience God's ongoing fulfillment of the seals, trumpets, and bowls in history (historicism). The teachings of 4-19 are not just elaborate expressions of portraits of the battle between good and evil that occurs in every generation (idealism). The book teaches a *future* tribulation, Second Coming, millennium, and eternal state (futurism). If this is so, then it is paramount that dispensationalists honor who they are. A futurist does not set dates. A futurist

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of this issue in the book of Revelation, see Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 388-90.

²⁰ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Annotated Bible* (New York: Publication Office "Our Hope," n.d.), 4:195.

does not spend hours upon hours of time trying to fit the details of prophecy into current events or vice versa.

The issue is a sensitive one. The above description is not meant to put a damper on interest in the prophetic Word. Dispensationalists should be excited that Jesus is coming again and that it might be soon. Current events like those we constantly contend with in the Middle East have a place in our hearts and minds. It is possible that we are living in the setup for the end time days. Israel is in the land and must be so for the tribulation (Rev. 6-19), Second Coming (Rev. 19), and kingdom (Rev. 20-22) to come on the scene of history. We should all be filled with hope and excitement that we may soon see our Lord face to face in the pretrib rapture. But...if the Lord delays His coming for us beyond what we desire, we must continue our hard work for his coming kingdom while accepting the Divine decision.

The real problem comes from knowing that the people in our churches are reading all kinds of literature and watching all kinds of television preachers. Many of them now have what can be called a “syncretistic prophetic mind.” Their eschatological beliefs are in disarray. Then if we who preach to them show the least little bit of hesitation about our conviction in literal interpretation and its consequence of futurism, we will make the problem worse. At best we will be “a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.”

Terminology Overload

A few years ago as I was teaching a seminary class on the books of Daniel and Revelation, I surveyed several modern evangelical commentaries on how they understood the term *angel* (messenger) in Revelation 1-3 and the expression *elder* in Revelation 4-5. To my amazement, most of the scholars held that the angels were elders and the elders were angels! Think a minute about how that might come across in an expository series of sermons to those who have not been trained in theology. I have no problem with this interpretation necessarily. I am currently writing a commentary on Revelation. You can buy my book when it is done to find out how I decide!

However, when you explain the meaning of these terms in a church sermon, you must do your homework. Caution is in order. It is quite easy for parishioners to think they are getting some so-called expert gibberish. The preacher cannot rush to conclusions but must weigh the options. Terms like this as well as others in the book lend themselves to a lack of clarity or confusion even if one preaches them correctly. If the preacher gives too little detail, people will leave scratching their heads. The presence of so many figures of speech and symbols intensifies this problem. Therefore, the dispensational preacher must pay attention to the possible communication problems he will have by the nature of the terminology that is being used.

Conclusion

The book of Revelation is a rare treasure that sometimes scares people. Wrestling with its pages in the context of a wrong hermeneutic can lead to the voicing of strange words. A case in point is the historicist understanding of Revelation given in a book titled *I Want To Be Left Behind*.²¹ This is part of the problem with the book. Many preachers have avoided it due to its

²¹ Ted Noel, *I Want To Be Left Behind* (Maitland, FL: BibleOnly Press, 2003). Noel is a Seventh-Day Adventist.

imagined difficulty and strangeness. The challenge of the book should be acknowledged but not surrendered to. H. A. Ironside opens his lectures on Revelation this way:

It is certainly cause for deep regret that to so many Christians the Book of Revelation seems to be what God never intended it should be – a sealed book...it is clearly evident that this portion of Holy Scripture was given for our instruction and edification, but thousands of the Lord's people permit themselves to be robbed of blessing by ignoring it.²²

Perhaps the Lord in His wisdom knew the difficulties we would have so He pronounced a blessing early on to those who would read, hear, and obey the words of this marvelous book (1:3). It is the Bible book, after all, that contains God's greatest promise: "He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (21:4). Why would a preacher not want to preach this book?

²² H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (reprint; Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1973), 7.