

Redeeming the Book of Revelation

Revelation Chapter 1

Scott B. Martin – February 25, 2007

Let's start this sermon with a little experiment. I am going to ask you a series of questions and I would like you to answer with the first word or phrase that comes to mind. Don't think much about it too much, just share what comes immediately to mind. Alright here we go.....

- “What comes to mind when you think of the book of Revelation?”
(give the congregation time to respond) (Chances are people will come up with such things as: Armageddon, rapture, weird creatures, mark of the beast, end of the world, plagues, four horsemen of the Apocalypse, etc.)
- Does there seem to be a common theme to what comes to mind?
- Do you read it often compared to other books of the Bible. Why? Why not?

Throughout Christian history people have had very mixed reactions to the book of Revelation. There are those find great spiritual significance in it and draw great hope and comfort from it. All of this is most certainly there. It is after all, as some have pointed out, the ONLY book in the entire Bible that purportedly was “written” by Jesus Christ himself! The book of Revelation opens with the line, **“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all he saw.”** No other book in the entire New Testament makes such a strong claim to divine inspiration. Indeed, most of the books in the New Testament make no claim whatsoever

to be divinely inspired. This was attributed to them later as Christians came to value more and more the message and content of these books.

Not everyone has been convinced of the value or the divine nature of the Book of Revelation. It is a fact that most biblical authorities would agree on, that the book of Revelation barely made it into the Bible! It was written around the end of the first century and yet some parts of the church did not accept it as being a legitimate part of the Bible for another five or six hundred years!

When Martin Luther translated the Bible from Latin into German, he was tempted to leave the book of Revelation OUT, saying, **“Christ is not taught or known in it.”**

President Thomas Jefferson Revelation was the “ravings of a lunatic!” Here is what some in our own time have said of the book of Revelation: The great New Testament scholar William Barclay said, “Revelation either finds a man mad, or leaves him so.”

Elizabeth Fiorenza has described it as “apocalyptic pornography.”

Northrup Frye called it “an insane rhapsody.”

George Bernard Shaw dismissed it as “a curious record of the visions of a drug addict...”

William Barclay says that as a result “Either it has been abandoned by the readers of the Bible as being almost completely unintelligible or it has become the happy hunting ground of religious eccentrics.” Unfortunately this is true on both counts!

C. G. Jung said no one should look at the book of Revelation “because no one believes in them and the whole subject is felt to be an embarrassing one.” But is this really true? In some ways I wish it were.

I was doing a series on Revelation in my last church and I read in the paper that a traveling evangelist was holding a meeting in the town of Newton, a town of about 15 to 20,000. He had rented a conference room in a hotel. He was not a well known name and was not connected to any local church. No church was sponsoring his visit or talk. His theme was the usual view of the book of Revelation as prophecy about the end times, the rapture and getting ready. He was giving a whole week long series of talks on this. Out of curiosity I decided to go to the first meeting.

It was a cold winter night. The Kansas wind was blowing. I wondered how many would come on such a night to hear someone they had never heard of. The time arrived. The room was packed. In fact they had to set up more chairs! People of all ages were there, many with Bibles in hand. They sat in rapt attention as the speaker flashed up his slides and talked of dispensations, prophecy, and the coming end times. Apparently Jung was very wrong. Many people are neither embarrassed by nor disbelieving when it comes to the book of Revelation!

A Time/CNN poll taken several years ago, found that 59% of the American public believe the events in Revelation will come to pass. 25% Even believed that what happened in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania on 9/11/2001 was predicted in the book of Revelation!

Last year we took a look at single book that had sold over 40 million copies and probably has sold millions since, *The Da Vinci Code*. Although a work of fiction it dealt with a whole host of religious issues and legends around Christianity, in particularly Mary Magdalene and Jesus and whether they had any children. In spite of the fact that the book contained outright factual errors and many premises were based on legends, not the Bible,

many people accepted it as the gospel truth. How many of you here have read the book?

Another publishing phenomenon is the *Left Behind* series. Like the *Da Vinci Code* it has produced a whole ancillary industry. To date over 63 million people have read at least one of the books! While a work of fiction, its authors have repeatedly expressed the hope that people would accept the theology in the books as being biblical and would change their lives accordingly. Needless to say millions and millions of people accept them as gospel truth, even though much of what is called dispensationalist theology that is espoused in the books is not the least bit biblical.

What these two publishing phenomenon's, one from the left and one from the right, both demonstrate is that there is a real hunger out there for religious and spiritual truths. It also demonstrates that because people are so ill informed about the Bible and Christian beliefs they will fall for almost anything, hook, line and sinker, that is put in compelling story form.

I am not quite as concerned by those who swallow the *Da Vinci Code* uncritically as I am those who swallow the *Left Behind* series uncritically. The former may have negative effects on the person's personal spiritual life but the later will not only distort the person's spiritual life but I believe it can potentially have disastrous results in our society and world.

Let me give just two examples. First, can there be any doubt that the Middle East is one of the most troubled regions in the world and that the ripples from the conflicts there go worldwide. Certainly one of core problems in the Middle East is the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, particularly as it relates to the West Bank.

The US has supported Israel to the hilt. We provide over a billion dollars in aid to them every year. We run interference for them in the United

Nations. We sell billions of dollars of military equipment to them. Many see this not as being wise diplomacy, but as a Biblically mandated necessity. That same Time/CNN poll mentioned earlier found that 36% of the American public said we should support Israel “because they believe in biblical prophecies that Jews must control Israel before Christ will come again.” This has caused many to turn a blind eye to many of the legitimate concerns of the Palestinian people.

Such thinking not only exists in the general public but in the halls of power in Washington, D.C. Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey is on record essentially advocating ethnic cleansing for the West Bank, saying, **“Most of the people who now populate Israel were transported from all over the world to that land and they made it their home. The Palestinians can do the same.”** In other words the Palestinians get out and move to some Arab country.

Fundamentalist pastors like Hagee, LaHaye, and Falwell continue to pound away on such ideas. Frankly, I find this to be a barrier to true peace in the Middle East, but then again I’m not sure those with dispensationalist view of Revelation are really interested in peace, after all, their final scenario is the rapture and Armageddon!

Those with such an end time view also have some strange ideas about seemingly less catastrophic issues, like global warming, pollution, and the use of natural resources. If you believe the world is going to end soon there is little incentive to be good stewards of the earth.

Remember James Watt, the controversial Reagan era Secretary of the Interior. He was testifying before the senate on the issue of clear cutting forests and other unsustainable environmental policies. He was asked about preserving the environment for future generations. He shocked many of the

senators by saying, **“I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns.”** In other words, why worry about the environment, the human race won't be here much longer anyway!

Rabid conservative columnist Anne Coulter recently said, **“God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God said, “Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.”** Now does somebody want to tell me that theology is not important! It is very important we believe about the Bible and about God.

We have our jobs cut out for us as Christians. The book of Revelation is in the Bible. We can not ignore it. We dare not simply be embarrassed by it. The book of Revelation is one of the least understood, misinterpreted, abused and dangerous books in the Bible. As Christians we must work to redeem the book of Revelation. It is important not only for our own personal faith but also perhaps for the future of our world. We dare not let it become the “happy hunting ground for lunatics and religious eccentrics.” We need to be very careful whom we place in positions of power when it comes to foreign policy, environmental laws, and God forbid the nuclear button. Frankly I don't we can afford to have people in there whose world view is shaped by a vision of Armageddon and escapist theology built around the rapture!

It is very important that we “Redeem the book of Revelation.” In the coming weeks we will look at alternative views on Revelation. The good news is that Revelation contains great hope for individuals and our world, if one knows where to look. Our opening chapter speaks of “grace and Peace” coming to our world in Jesus Christ, who was and is a faithful witness to God, who “loves us and frees us from our sins”, who calls and equips us to be “kingdom of priests”, servants, serving God, doing God's will in the

world. We are promised that ultimately God is in charge, no matter how crazy and chaotic the world seems to be at times. Christ is the “Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come.”

A number of us are reading or have read Barbara R. Rossing’s book *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*. I highly recommend it. If you read no other book on Revelation, read this one! In her preface she writes, **“Revelation takes us on a journey – a journey not to war in the Middle East, but a journey into the heart of God, a journey into the heart of our world. Revelation’s way of seeing teaches us how to look at stories of our lives and the structures of violence and power in light of God’s shepherding Lamb. It teaches us to challenge oppression and to look for signs of hope, even when evil seems overpowering. It gives us an urgent vision for our future in which God dwells with us, on earth. This is a vision that can guide us in a post-September 11th world.”** Amen to that! May it be so!

Two books used in preparation of this sermon were:

A History of the End of the World by Jonathan Kirsch (chapter 1)

The Rapture Exposed by Barbara R. Rossing (preface, chapter 1, 3)