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Honoring Our Mother: Thoughts on Preaching the Book of Revelation

by Larry Paul Jones

The prominence of apocalyptic thought in and behind the books of the Bible and the influence of apocalyptic thought on the early church convinced a noted theologian to declare, "Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology."¹ If that is the case, some of us find our mother more than a little embarrassing, especially when she shows up in the book of Revelation. The bizarre visions and often-gruesome images that characterize Revelation make many preachers loath to read it, much less preach from it. We cannot find the keys to open many of its symbols, and those we do understand reflect a world divided between the obnoxiously evil and the impeccably good. Even if it does feature our mother in its pages, how can we use such a book in the "real" world?

Others of us have come to terms with our mother, but find those who claim to honor her more than a little embarrassing. During the crisis in Kosovo, a televised preacher cited passages from Revelation to prove that the conflict in that country marked the imminent end of the

world. Later that week, an Internet site interpreted the 666 of Rev 13:18 as the practice of the Christian religion among Caucasians. Within that same month, a pamphlet arrived by mail that used Revelation to identify Bill Gates as the antichrist. We have enough problems in the church without dealing with assertions like those! Whether it features our mother or not, why bother with this peculiar and difficult book?

Actually, the many and widespread abuses of Revelation make it imperative that we bother with it. When we remain silent, we grant interpretative authority to those who will speak. We hand over our mother to people. These two practices, respect for the literary and historical context and expectation of a word that sheds light on the life of faith in our context, constitute a basic foundation on which to lay our interpretation of Revelation. That foundation does not make every passage easy to understand. Sometimes it has quite the opposite effect. Nevertheless, unless our interpretation stands on that basic foundation, it lacks integrity and validity.

Even when we stand on the foundation, the ground often seems to shake as we attempt to interpret Revelation. That frequently happens because many of the convictions about the nature, life, and practice of Christian faith expressed and reflected in Revelation differ from our own. These core convictions may challenge us as much as the symbols and images that are used to convey them. The following survey of five convictions characteristic of Revelation, while not exhaustive, expresses the core of its theological message. As we identify them, Revelation may not seem so strange after all. We may even discover that it has a great deal to teach us about honoring not only our mother, but also her—and our—God.

Conviction one

Revelation considers the prevailing culture to be against Christian faith and expects people of faith to encounter difficulty as they live in it.



Beginning with Julius Caesar, the Roman Senate regularly deified emperors after their deaths. Near the end of the first century of the common era, however, living emperors declared themselves gods before they died. They insisted that their subjects address them as *dominus et deus noster* (our lord and god) and offer incense to their honor in temples erected by the empire. For obvious reasons, Christians considered such actions blasphemous. Many Christians refused to make sacrifices to the emperor, to participate in public events during which people paid homage to the emperor, and to use money stamped with his image. As a result, they faced not only punishment by the state but also hostility from their neighbors. The emperor represented Rome. Anyone who dishonored the emperor also dishonored Rome. Loyal Romans considered Christians at best odd misfits who refused to accept social norms and at worst traitors whose treason threatened the security of the empire.

The author of Revelation considered all this proof that the world was not presently controlled by God and that worldly powers openly and defiantly opposed God. We often interpret hard times as an indication that we have not remained faithful to God. Revelation expects Christians to suffer as a result of their fidelity. It insists that God will ultimately triumph over the evil powers in the world but that until that transpires, the good will suffer. God calls Christians to persevere in their faith even when they suffer and to trust God to remain true to divine promises. In the words of the text:

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them." (14:12–13)

When we interpret Revelation, we must remember its assumption that evil has gained temporary control of the world. That assumption lies behind its repeated calls for the faithful to persevere and its vehement pleas for God to take drastic action. Remembering that assumption may not make the images of Revelation more appealing, but it will help us to understand and interpret them.

Conviction two

Revelation insists that people must make a decision about belief in Jesus.



The author of Revelation firmly believed that evil had become so powerful and prevalent in the world that God would soon intervene. As a result, a sense of urgency pulses throughout the book. Threats of imminent destruction and promises of everlasting blessings challenge readers and hearers to declare who or what lays the greatest claim to their lives. To the author, the times allowed no fence straddling.

For example, the letter to the church in Laodicea begins: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor

hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (3:15–16). Those words were spoken by one whose eyes were like a flame of fire, whose feet were like burnished bronze, whose voice was like the sound of many waters, and who had a sharp, two-edged sword issuing from his mouth (1:14–16). No thinking person could fail to take that Jesus seriously!

Similarly, in the epilogue of the book the angel warns, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near" (22:10). Then the Messiah adds, "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work" (22:12). Neither the messenger nor those who receive the message has room to doubt that God will hold them accountable for their response to what has been revealed.

We typically operate with a far lesser sense of exigency. Stated bluntly, we often seem unsure that it makes any difference whether we respond to God. We act as if God's unconditional love makes our confessions of faith less urgent, perhaps even unnecessary. That makes it hard, if not impossible, for us to hear the message of Revelation! Yet even if we do not expect the imminent end of the world, do we not remain accountable to God? While being tolerant and respectful of people of other faiths, isn't it possible (or even necessary) for us to accept God's ultimate claim on us in Jesus? To understand and interpret Revelation, we must come to terms with our answers to those questions.

Conviction three

Revelation expects the faithful to obey the moral and ethical imperatives of the gospel. Stated simplistically, Revelation assumes that what Christians believe about God should determine how they live.



Since Revelation declares the imminent end of the world, readers often conclude that it calls Christians merely to accept their lot and to hold on until the final day arrives. Revelation does assume that evil has grown so powerful that the faithful alone cannot thwart injustice, defeat oppression, or triumph over hatred. None of that can transpire without God's dramatic and decisive intervention. That does not mean, however, that the faithful have nothing to do. Quite the contrary: because the faithful believe in the ultimate triumph of God, as they live from day to day they prepare for and participate in that which God alone can do. Faith in God makes such hopeful and expectant living both possible and necessary.

Revelation 15 marks the beginning of a series of events that leads to the final and climactic victory of God over the forces of evil on earth and in heaven. As those events unfold, 144,000 saints witness much of what happens, and other groups of the faithful praise God for what has happened, but God alone wages the war and wins the victory. Then comes a stirring vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation 21. The narrative makes it clear that the community of faith does not

create these new realities. They come down from heaven, where God has prepared them. Nevertheless, following the vision God declares:

Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. (21:7-8)

The faithful neither defeat evil nor create the new reality, but God expects moral and ethical action from them while it unfolds. Being faithful in the book of Revelation means not only believing the vision that God offers through the seer but also making it the plumb line by which to evaluate all attitudes and actions. The faithful cannot establish God's realm, but they can live as if it were here now even while they await it.

With this conviction, Revelation challenges both those who think that nearly everything depends on us and those who think that nothing depends on us. God does not need us, but believing in God means living now in response to God's ultimate triumph.

Conviction four

Revelation believes in Jesus as the crucified, resurrected, and enthroned Lord.



The Jesus of Revelation has been crucified. Even in the heavenly throne room he appears as "a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered" (5:6). Bearing the marks of the

slaughter even in heaven, the crucified Jesus reminds us that defeating evil costs God something. We prefer our crosses empty and the "blood hymns" purged from our hymnals. Revelation will have no part of it. The myriads of myriads in heaven sing in full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered" (5:11-12).

The Jesus of Revelation is also resurrected. He is active, vital, and fully alive in heaven and on earth. He represents the beginning of the new realities God promises to create. Believers can have confidence that God will triumph for them because God has conquered death in him. But the significance of this reaches much farther. Introduced in the first chapter as "the firstborn of the dead" (1:5), Jesus in the final chapter promises, "Surely I am coming soon" (22:20). The risen Jesus continues his ministry. Revelation reminds (and warns!) those of us who spend so much time wrestling with and even voting on what Jesus once said and did that he still speaks and does!

The Jesus of Revelation is also enthroned. He is the Lord, who holds the keys of Death and Hades (1:18), accepts the adoration of heavenly creatures (chapter 5), wears many diadems on his head, and has inscribed on his thigh the name "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:12, 16). As the enthroned Lord, Jesus represents the fullness and depth of the mystery of God. We often reduce Jesus to a sole characteristic such as love or a single function such as salvation. Once again, Revelation will have no part of it. Jesus is nothing less than our enthroned Lord. When offering him our love, we must also offer our obedi-

ence. When accepting his blessings, we must also accept his call to discipleship.

As we attempt to understand and interpret Revelation, the narrative will force us to spend some time reflecting on what we believe about Jesus. Revelation's tripartite insistence on the crucified, resurrected, and enthroned Jesus may make us a little less comfortable with him so that we can become a lot more faithful to him.

Conviction five

Revelation believes that God will prevail and, thus, that we always have reason to offer praise to God.



Despite its bizarre visions and often gruesome images, from beginning to end Revelation is a book of hope. As implied earlier, the author of Revelation considered the powers of the world so entrenched in their opposition to God that only dramatic divine intervention could bring an end to injustice, oppression, and hatred. Yet not even the worst that peoples and principalities can muster diminishes Revelation's confidence that God will do precisely that.

Perhaps the clearest picture of this comes in the narrative of the blowing of the seven trumpets (chapters 8–11). As the first six angels blow their trumpets, fire and blood crash into the earth, the sun and other heavenly lights diminish, and a third of the life in the sea and a third of humanity perishes. Despite all this, human beings remain unrepen-

tant (9:20–21). There seems no foundation for hope. God's investment in creation has gone for naught. Then comes the seventh trumpet, and, instead of despair and defeat, heavenly voices declare, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever" (11:15). Even the most despicable wickedness and obstinate recalcitrance the world can offer will not deter what God designs. God has sufficient power to fulfill every divine promise and intention.

The author of Revelation firmly believes that the fate of the world is limited neither to the best the good can do nor to the worst the wicked can do. As a result of that conviction, the narrative frequently breaks out in praise of God. The seven letters to the churches, with which the book begins, tell of a coming crisis. Yet in the fourth chapter, before any dreaded expectations are fulfilled, a door in heaven opens and a two-chapter praise service begins. Similarly, after the final verse of Revelation 6 declares a great day of wrath, in the seventh chapter a multitude of every nation, tribe, people, and language offers songs and other acts of worship to God. Such songs of praise and acts of worship appear repeatedly. Nothing on earth and nothing in heaven stops the worship of God.

We sometimes act as if we consider worship an optional activity. When we do not feel well, when we have too much to do, when our grief and worries outweigh our joy, or

when it is inconvenient, we consider it acceptable not to pause to worship God. Revelation will have no part of it. Whether we are at our best or our worst, we have reason to praise God, and God deserves our worship. As we attempt to understand and interpret Revelation, we must keep that in mind. Although this challenging book never hesitates to declare that all is not well, that candor never diminishes its willingness to praise God.

Although they may go farther than we would willingly follow, are these five convictions that foreign to our faith? Revelation may express them more adamantly than we do, and it certainly conveys them through some startling and often offensive images, but do not all five lie at the center of the faith we share and strive to have? Perhaps when it comes to Revelation, our mother is not so embarrassing after all. In fact, as we respect and wrestle with her in this context, she may lead us to a more convincingly Christian theology.

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Notes

¹ Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 102. Cf., in the same volume, "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," 137.

² Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).