

The Book of Revelation

No. 1 Introduction

For several months, God willing, we are going to study the book of *Revelation*. These notes are largely taken from William Hendriksen's popular commentary "More than Conquerors".

1. Why was *Revelation* written?

The book of *Revelation* was written to comfort God's people in their struggles against the forces of evil at work in the world:

- God sees the tear of his people (7:17; 21:4)
- The prayers of God's people really do influence world history (8:3-4)
- The final victory of God's people is assured (15:2)
- The blood of God's people will be avenged (19:2)
- Christ reigns right now in the interests of his people (5:7-8)
- Christ will bring his people into the new order of things (21:22)

Revelation speaks of future hope (22:17) but also emphasises present help (1:12-20).

2. What is the message of *Revelation*?

Christ's victory (and that of his church) over the dragon and his minions is the theme of the book. Christ is the victorious King who reigns over all (5:5; 6:2; 11:15; 19:16). He is victorious over death and Hades (1:18); the dragon (12:9-12); the beast, the false prophet and those who worship the beast (19:20).

"They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful" (17:14).

Things may look rather different right now (11:7-10), but the final victory is assured (11:11). This calls for patient endurance (13:10).

3. For whom was *Revelation* written?

Revelation was written for the persecuted believers of the churches in Asia Minor at the end of the first century AD.

There was no organised, empire-wide persecution of Christians at that time. Instead there was sporadic local oppression. John was enduring imprisonment (1:9); Ephesus (2:3) and Smyrna (2:9) were experiencing persecution. Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome in AD 65 was very fierce.

Asia Minor was an especially difficult place to be a Christian because Asia Minor was uniquely fervent in its emperor worship – it was the first province to initiate the emperor cult, and at the end of the 1st century it was the only province to have more than one temple to the emperor. The emperor Domitian took the title "our Lord and our God". A colossal statue to Domitian was erected in Ephesus, which became the centre of the province's emperor worship – this may be the "image of the beast" of Revelation 13.

4. Who wrote *Revelation*?

The author identifies himself as "John". Who was he? There are three possibilities: a pseudonymous writer; the author of the 4th gospel; someone called John the elder.

The first of these is very unlikely – the use of pseudonyms was uncommon.

"John" must have been so well-known that no "disambiguation" was necessary.

Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon (from Smyrna), Clement of Rome, Origen, Tertullian and Hippolytus all assumed that the apostle John wrote *Revelation*.

Analysis of motifs demonstrates greater commonality between the *Revelation* and the *Gospel according to John* than with any other New Testament author.

5. When was *the Revelation* written?

The consensus is c. AD 95 during the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96). A minority argues for a date before AD 70.

The date does not affect the interpretation of Revelation.

6. What sort of writing is *Revelation*?

(a) A Letter

Revelation is a letter addressed to seven Churches in Asia Minor. It has an epistolary framework of pre-script (1:4-5) and post-script (22:21). But between these, it is easy to forget that it is a letter.

The letter form of Revelation tells us that John is addressing contemporary issues and problems among the seven Churches. We cannot read Revelation as a book about events exclusively in the distant future.

(b) A Prophecy

The content and style of this letter is different from the other NT letters – it records a vision given to John on the isle of Patmos and is styled a "prophecy" (1:3).

Being a prophecy, *Revelation* uses picturesque language to convey its message – we are just not accustomed to reading prophecy in the NT. Revelation cannot be read "literally" – the book declares itself to be a book of signs and symbols.

(c) An Apocalypse

Apocalypse is a special type of prophecy which uses particularly bold imagery to convey its message. "Apocalyptic is not too different from prophecy, though it contains a heightening and intensified clustering of literary and thematic traits found in prophecy" (G.K. Beale).

The best way to understand the relationship between these three genres is given by Carson and Moo: "We may best view Revelation as a prophecy cast in an apocalyptic mould and written down in a letter form."

7. How is Revelation to be interpreted?

There are more references to the OT in Revelation than any other NT book (estimates range from 400 to 1,200). The vision of Christ in Revelation 1 takes elements of Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 10. The beast that rises out of the sea (Revelation 13) is an amalgam of the four beasts described in Daniel 7. The two witnesses of Revelation 11 refer back to the two olive trees Zechariah 4, the civil ruler and the priest. The plagues (Revelation 8-9; 15-16) which strike the persecutors of the Church echo the plagues which fell on Egypt.

Revelation cannot be understood except against this OT backdrop.

Revelation makes use of symbolic numbers, i.e. 3 (true and counterfeit divinity), 4 (earth and work of creation), 6 (one short of perfection), 7 (plenitude, perfection), 12 (the completeness of God's people), 666 (the number of man).

(a) The Preterist approach

This approach says that almost everything in Revelation except, perhaps for the last couple of chapters, is in the past. Most of the events of the book are taken as referring to the persecution under Nero in the mid-60s and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 – these are all dressed up in heavily symbolised language.

It is true that Revelation was written for the people of the 1st century, and it was written about events happening in their time – Revelation 1:1 says that it is about things that "must soon take place" and Revelation 1:3 that "the time is near".

But Revelation claims to be a prophecy (1:3) and there are parts that do point to the end of the world. Revelation 21-22 are impossible to read on the preterist scheme.

(b) The Historicist approach

This is the view that Revelation gives us a symbolical and continuous description of the history of the world from the first century to the Parousia, e.g. it includes the invasion of the West by the Goths, the rise of Islam, the reign of Charlemagne, the Protestant Reformation, the fall of Napoleon, etc.

Revelation does give insight into the course of history and its recurring patterns. But all the historicist interpretations tend to limit the scope of Revelation to Western Church history. There is a tendency to ignore what is going on in other places.

Writers who take this approach cannot agree which parts of history are described by Revelation – it tends to depend when they are living in history, and they all tend to predict the coming of Christ as imminent relative to their own time.

This approach would make Revelation irrelevant to the first readers.

(c) The Futurist approach

Everything from Revelation 4:1 (the beginning of the apocalyptic visions) to the end of Revelation is about the end of the world and the events immediately preceding the Parousia. Most of Revelation is future to us today. Nothing in Revelation refers directly to us.

According to the futurist approach, the vast bulk of Revelation was meaningless to the people to whom the letter was first sent.

This view was unheard of before about 1830.

(d) The Idealist approach

Revelation is just a symbolic portrait of the ongoing cosmic conflict between good and evil – a kind of allegory in which the visions do not refer to events in history.

This approach discounts too quickly how the first readers would have read the book. Moreover, Revelation explicitly claims to be about real events.

(e) The Eclectic approach

There is no need to employ one of these approaches exclusively – we can pick and choose the best of each. Revelation is written for the Church of the first century (as per the preterists) – but it is also written for each succeeding generation, and time to come and for the very end – it is written for the Church in all the ages – this is signalled in the letters to the SEVEN churches.

8. What is the structure of Revelation?

- I. Christ in the Midst of the Lampstands (chapters 1-3)
- II. The Vision of Heaven and the Book with Seven Seals (chapters 4-7)
- III. The Seven Trumpets of Judgment (chapters 8-11)
- IV. The Persecuting Dragon (chapters 12-14)
- V. The Seven Bowls of Wrath (chapters 15-16)
- VI. The Fall of Babylon (chapters 17-19)
- VII. The Great Consummation (chapters 20-22)

The Book of Revelation

No. 2 The Unity of the Book

1. The two major parts of Revelation

Revelation comprises two major parts.

Part 1 (chapters 1–11) shows us the struggle between the people who follow Christ and the people who don't. The world attacks the church, but the church is protected, avenged, and victorious.

Part 2 (chapters 12–22) shows us that there is a deeper dimension to the earthly struggle. Behind the ancient animosity between the world and the church lies the "dragon's" attack upon the "man child", i.e. the rebellion of evil one against Messiah. When the dragon is cast down he directs his fury against the church. But when the dragon, the beasts, and the harlot attack the church, they are overthrown – first the harlot, then the beasts, and finally the dragon.

Part 2 does not follow Part 1 *chronologically*. Rather, the two parts are synchronous, and Part 2 reveals the deeper, spiritual background to Part 1.

2. The seven sub-divisions of Revelation

Part 1 (chapters 1-11)

(a) Christ in the midst of the seven lampstands (1:1-3:22)

Christ walks among seven lampstands which represent "the seven churches". Seven is symbolic of completeness. So, although John is directed to write seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (real, not symbolic, churches), the seven churches are representative of the whole church throughout the whole span of history from Christ's ascension to the end of the age. The theme of opposition and overcoming is repeated in the seven letters.

(b) The vision of heaven and the seven seals (4:1-7:17)

Chapter 4 introduces a new section ("After this I looked, and behold..." (4:1)).

John is called up into the throne room of heaven. God is enthroned, surrounded by beings who represent the whole of creation and the whole of the church. He holds a scroll sealed with seven seals – the plan of God. The Lamb takes the scroll and breaks the seals one by one, i.e. he executes the plan of God.

Again, this section spans the whole of history from the death and resurrection and exaltation of the Lord Jesus (he is the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" but also the Lamb who had been slain, 5:5-6) to the consummation (the full number of God's people, 144,000 (a symbolic number), are gathered and blessed).

(c) The seven trumpets (8:1-11:19)

This sub-division opens with the breaking of the seventh seal (8:1). Yet the seven trumpets which follow do so not chronologically (because the people of God have

entered the new creation at the end of chapter 7). Rather history is now retold from another perspective.

In chapters 8-9 six of the seven trumpets are blown – the theme is the judgement of God upon the earth, which is painted in apocalyptic colours and looks almost like de-creation (*cf.* the signs performed by Moses in the land of Egypt).

Chapter 10-11 show us an angel with a little book and two witnesses. These are pictures of the church and her mission to/conflict with the world.

Final judgement comes with the seventh trumpet.

Part 2 (chapters 12-22)

(d) The persecuting dragon (12:1-14:20)

This sub-division opens with the birth of the Christ (12:5) and closes with the second coming of the Christ (14:14-16). In other words, these chapters cover the same period of history as the other sub-divisions.

But now we see that behind the conflict between the world and the church there is another conflict – that between the Christ and the dragon. The dragon is served by two beasts and a harlot.

(e) The seven bowls (15:1-16:21)

Chapters 15-16 tell of seven angels with seven plagues and seven bowls of the wrath of God. There is a clear reference to the Exodus because the redeemed sing "the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb".

This sub-division appears to depict the final judgement rather than a period of history.

(f) The fall of Babylon (17:1-19:21)

Final judgements are executed on the enemies of Christ and the church, i.e. the harlot, the beast and the false prophet.

The sub-division concludes with *Hallelujahs!* God reigns and Christ comes for his bride, the church.

(g) The great consummation (20:1-22:21)

The dragon, and death and hades are finally and completely destroyed (chapter 20). The new heavens and new earth are established (chapter 21). The river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and the invitation to come and drink is issued (chapter 22).

Summary

The seven lampstands, the seven seals, and the seven trumpets report the same period of history – that between the first and second comings of the Christ. The dragon is the spiritual reality behind the persecution of the church. The seven bowls and the fall of Babylon depict the final judgement – as does the defeat of the dragon, death and hades – these are necessary before the great consummation.

3. The unity of *Revelation*

Revelation comprises two main parts and seven sub-divisions – yet *Revelation* remains one book, e.g.

- Christ walks among the 7 lampstands (1) and speaks to the 7 churches (2-3).
- The depiction of the authority of the risen Christ in ch. 1 is developed in ch. 4-5.
- The trouble experienced by and the promises extended to the seven churches in ch. 2-3 are further developed in ch. 6-7.
- The judgement on the human enemies of the church in ch. 6 is depicted more graphically in ch. 8-11.
- The cause of the struggle between the church and the world, and the victory of Christ, described in ch. 6-11 are further elaborated in ch. 12-20.
- The promises made to those who overcome (ch. 2-3) are repeated in ch. 21-22.

“The principles of human conduct and divine moral government are progressively revealed; the lampstands give rise to the seals, the seals to the trumpets, etc.” (Hendriksen).

4. The symbols of *Revelation*

It is not difficult to imagine *Revelation* being made into a cartoon animation – it is full of dynamic, graphic pictures which are constantly shifting and changing. The symbolism is unmissable. But what does it all mean?

There is a pitfall to avoid – the pitfall of over-interpretation – trying to find significance in the details of the symbols rather than in the symbols as a whole.

Do not focus on the detail of the symbols – stand back from them and look at them as a whole, and ask, *What is the entire picture and what is the main idea?*

(a) Symbols that pertain to the opening and closing of the present era

There are symbols which depict the incarnation (the Woman and the man-child, 12:1-5) and symbols which depict the Parousia and the final judgement (the two-fold harvest, 14:15ff).

(b) Symbols that pertain to conditions that obtain during the present era

There are symbols which depict conditions between the first and second comings of Christ, e.g. the seven seals, trumpets and bowls.

If these symbols refer to specific events then we are at a loss to interpret them. History is awash with events and we have no sure way of identifying one-to-one correspondences between the symbols of *Revelation* and these events.

For that reason, we look instead for principles that operate during this era, which correspond with the symbols of *Revelation*.

This allows us to deal with the scale of the symbols. For example, the “huge, blazing mountain” that was hurled into the sea (8:8) cannot refer to a single maritime disaster – but it can refer to all maritime disasters rolled into one.

Likewise, the trumpets effect the whole of mankind and not just a portion. This is most easily interpreted if understood as referring to all of God’s judicial dealings with mankind during this dispensation. It is much more difficult to interpret the trumpets as referring to specific acts of God with respect to specific nations.

The repeated use of the number seven – representative of completeness – “harmonizes very well with the idea that the symbols refer to principles of human conduct and divine government that are always operative, especially throughout this entire dispensation” (Hendriksen).

5. The interpretative approach to *Revelation*

(a) Events contemporary to the writing of the book

“The Apocalypse is rooted in contemporaneous events and circumstances. Its symbols should be interpreted in the light of conditions that prevailed when the book was written” (Hendriksen).

Revelation was sent to seven real churches in Asia Minor whose members were being tested in one way or another because of their faith in Jesus. Asia Minor was a hotbed of emperor worship – the “number of man” (666) may be a coded reference to Nero – Babylon built on seven hills alludes to Rome, also built on seven hills. This background to *Revelation* must be borne in mind as we read the book.

(b) The context of the story of redemption

“The Apocalypse is rooted in the sacred Scriptures. It should be interpreted in harmony with the teachings of the entire Bible” (Hendriksen).

There are literally hundreds of allusions to the Old Testament in *Revelation*, beginning with the book of Genesis (e.g. the serpent, the garden, the tree of life, the river). The apocalyptic writings of Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah are prominent. *Revelation* is set firmly in the context of the story of redemption. Bearing this in mind, it is best to proceed from what is most clear in *Revelation* to what is less clear.

(c) The origin of the book in the mind of God

“The Apocalypse is rooted in the mind and revelation of God. God in Christ is the real author, and this book contains the purpose of God concerning the history of the Church” (Hendriksen).

This will not help us interpret *Revelation* more clearly, but it does remind us that we must be humbly dependent and receptive in our interpretation, and not proud or wilful or inventive. Our interpretation is tentative, and when we are least sure of what *Revelation* means, we will be silent.

The Book of Revelation

No. 3 Chapter 1 – the Glory of the Son of Man

The message of *Revelation* has its origin in God – belongs to Jesus Christ – and has been given to the church through the apostle John. It is a message which concerns things that must “soon take place”.

1. Echoes of the Exodus (1:4-8)

In the opening chapter of *Revelation* we hear echoes of the Exodus:

- God is the One “who was and who is and who is to come” – *cf.* his self-designation as “I AM who I AM” (Ex. 3:14).
- The “seven spirits that are before his throne” are reminiscent of the seven branched lampstand that stood in the Tabernacle before the most holy place.
- The designation of Jesus as the “firstborn from the dead” reminds us of the firstborn who died during the original Passover.
- The wailing of the peoples is perhaps an allusion to the wailing in the land of Egypt when the firstborn were killed (Ex. 12:30).
- That Jesus “has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” draws on the freeing of the Hebrew people by the blood of the Passover lambs and their being brought to God at Sinai (Ex. 19:6).

Notice that this section opens and closes with the announcement that God “is the one who is coming”. This too may be an allusion to the Exodus, when God “came” into the land of Egypt for the deliverance of his people. God’s coming threatens judgement on his adversaries (hence their wailing) and promises salvation for his people.

2. John’s commission to write (1:9-11)

John was in exile on the island of Patmos when he received a commission to write to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

The word of God and the testimony of Jesus are important in *Revelation* – it is holding to these that marks people out as “martyrs” (literally *witnesses*) – and it’s as *witnesses* that God’s people suffer.

Remember that the vision John receives comes in the context of suffering – both his and that of those to whom he writes.



3. The vision of the risen Jesus (1:12-20)

(a) Jesus’ glorious appearance

John heard a voice behind him – turning round he received a vision of such radiant glory that he fell down stunned. The vision is of the divine splendour in the heavenly temple (brightness was one of the chief characteristics of Solomon’s temple – covered from floor to ceiling with fine gold – hence the aura of brightness in these verses). The robe and sash portray Jesus as a priest ministering in the sanctuary.

In Solomon’s temple the divine glory excluded the priests. In this vision, the divine glory (pure white hair, eyes of fire, feet of burnished bronze, his face like the sun shining in full strength) radiates out of the Priest as he ministers in the sanctuary.

Jesus is ministering to the lamps. One of the duties of the priests in Solomon’s temple was to keep the seven-branched lamp burning. The seven lampstands represent the Church. The Church shines because it bears witness to the world. But this is an exhausting task – a lamp consumes oil – hence the Church needs the high priestly ministry of Jesus.

(b) Jesus’ glorious titles

John heard “a loud voice like a trumpet” “like the roar of many waters.” The trumpet reminds us of Sinai and the sound of the heavenly trumpet which announced the descent of the LORD on the mountain. The voice like the roar of many waters takes us back to Ezekiel’s vision of the return of the divine glory to the temple (Ezek. 43:2). It is no wonder that when John saw him, he “fell at his feet as though dead” – Jesus is God incarnate.

It is as God incarnate that Jesus speaks comfort: “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one”; *cf.* Isaiah 44:6-8.

“First and last” = “Alpha and Omega” (v. 8). Jesus is the Lord God, the Almighty.

(c) Jesus’ glorious victory

“I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

“I died” places the revelation squarely in the context of real historical events. “I died” means, “I who am Alpha and Omega, the Lord GOD Almighty – I was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary – I suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.”

“I died” encapsulates the whole story of the gospel.

“I died” resonated with the suffering of the followers of Jesus.

“I died” is also set in the context of life. It rests between “I am...the living one” and “behold living am I, into the ages of the ages.”

“I am the living – I became dead – living am I.” Jesus’ death is swallowed up by Jesus’ life. His death was real – but it had neither the first word nor the last word. His life is first and his life is last. Having burst asunder the bands of the grave, he holds the keys of Death and Hades (*cf.* Genesis 22:17). He is in total command of the issues of life and death for his people.

This is Jesus’ glorious victory. He shares with us. Seven times he addresses weak, suffering, tempted, fallible Christians as conquerors (2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21).

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No. 4 To the Church in Ephesus

The importance of “the letters to the seven churches” is clear when we consider that phrases and pictures we encounter in the letters recur later in *Revelation*.

The letters follow (with small variations) a sevenfold pattern: greetings; Christ’s self-designation; commendation; condemnation; warning; exhortation; promise.

1. “To the angel of the church in Ephesus...” (2:1a)

Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor.

- A port city – set at the mouth of the Cayster River on the Aegean Sea, it flourished as a centre of commerce. It had a population of about 250,000. Three great in-land trade routes converged on the city.
- A free city – granted the right of self-government by Rome. The Roman governor in Asia Minor came regularly to Ephesus to try important legal cases.
- A cultural city – boasting a major stadium, a market place, and a theatre capable of seating 25,000.
- A religious city – the imperial cult flourished there (with temples dedicated to the emperors Claudius, Hadrian and Severus); the temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

2. “The words of him who holds the seven stars...” (2:1b)

Christ *holds* the seven angels – they are under his control.

He *walks* among the lampstands – he is present in the churches and knows about their circumstances, their conditions, and their conduct.

3. “I know your works...” (2:2-3)

As the one who is present in the church, Christ knows the works and the endurance of the Ephesians.

As the focal point of several trade routes, Ephesus attracted the attention of itinerant orators who were more than happy to wheedle their way into the church. Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that this would happen (Acts 20:29) and had sent Timothy to the city to set things in order (1 Timothy 1:3f). It would appear that the Ephesians had learned well, and had tested the false apostles, found them wanting, and rejected them.

Vigilance against false doctrine, and maintenance of good order in the church is exhausting – Christ commends their “toil”.

4. “But I have this against you...” (2:4)

But vigilance can also cause hardness. How many examples we all know of people who are “hot” for right doctrine, but also hard towards people. “Good works and pure doctrine are not adequate substitutes for that rich relationship of mutual love shared by those who have experienced for the first time the redemptive love of God” (Robert Mounce).

Love for one another is the distinctive badge of Christian discipleship – Jesus said, “By this all men shall know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Indeed, one cannot say that one loves God unless one also loves one’s brother (1 John 3:11-18).

5. “Remember... repent, and do...” (2:5)

Christ’s exhortation is not complex – reflect upon the widening gap between where you were and where you now are; turn around; and act again as once you did.

The alternative is to cease to be a church – the removal of the lampstand indicates the loss of the witness.

It is possible for a “church” to have the “marks of a true church” (preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline) and yet be no church at all because the whole has become loveless. This is the direction in which Ephesus was moving – Ignatius’ *Epistle to the Ephesians* indicates that the Ephesian church heeded Christ’s warning.

6. “He who has an ear, let him hear...” (2:7a)

Christ challenges the church with words similar to those he used often during his earthly ministry.

To have ears and yet not to hear – or eyes and yet not to see – was the condemnation and the judgment passed by the LORD upon disobedient, self-congratulatory, self-dependent Judah in the days of Isaiah (Isa. 6:9-13).

Hearing and heeding are to go hand-in-hand – to hear is to obey – to hear without obeying is not to hear at all, and to reject the Holy Spirit.

7. “To the one who conquers...” (2:7b)

But to hear – to remember, repent, and act – is also to overcome and to conquer. It is to walk in the ranks of those who follow the Lamb.

What is to be conquered is not the power of the world to persecute, but the power of sin to inculcate pride in doctrinal purity at the cost of love for all the saints practically expressed.

To those who listen and repent, Christ promises access to the Tree of Life (Gen. 2:9; Rev. 22:2) – access to the life of Christ which is the life of the new creation.

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No. 5 To the Church in Smyrna

1. “To the angel of the church in Smyrna...” (2:8a)

Smyrna (modern day Izmir) is the only one of the seven churches still in existence.

It lies about 35 miles north of Ephesus, on the coast of the Aegean Sea. It has a natural harbour, the entrance of which was so narrow it could be closed in time of war. A road running east from the city carried the produce of the valley of the Hermus river. In exports, Smyrna was second only to Ephesus.

The city was built in 290 BC by Lysimachus and Antigonos as a model city. It boasted a stadium, a library, and the largest theatre in Asia. It claimed to be the birthplace of Homer. Coins describe the city as “First in Asia in beauty and size.”

Mt Pagus rose 500 ft up from the harbour, and the acropolis built there was called the crown or garland of Smyrna. Around the base of Mt Pagus ran a thoroughfare called the Street of Gold, at either end of which were temples to Cybele and Zeus.

Smyrna was loyal to Rome and in 195 BC was the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honour of the “goddess Rome”. It also built a temple to the emperor Tiberius (23 BC).

The population in the first century was about 200,000.

2. “The words of the first and the last, who died...came to life” (2:8b)

The strong allegiance of the citizen of Smyrna to Rome and the presence of a large and antagonistic synagogue resulted in the persecution of the church of Smyrna.

It is appropriate, then, that Jesus designates himself as “the first and the last” and “the one who died and who came to life”.

As “the first and the last” he knows everything that happens and is in absolute control. As “the one who died and who came to life” he is able both to sympathize with his people when they face death and able to promise them resurrection life.

3. “I know your tribulation...” (2:9)

Jesus assures the believers that their suffer has not gone unnoticed.

Notice the way in which Jesus links tribulation and poverty. Poverty came upon Christ’s people in three ways. First, they would have found securing employment difficult – the craft guilds were closed to them. Secondly, mob violence would have destroyed their property. Thirdly, they faced fines imposed by the state and confiscation of property.

Poverty is not easy to bear. It brings a burden of insecurity and humiliation. But Jesus asserts that the Smyrnans are rich! Rich in faith (*cf.* Matt. 6:20; 2 Cor. 6:10; Jas 2:5). Poverty is a significant test of faith!

The Christians also faced slander from the Jews. Assuming that the *Revelation* was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, then the breach between the church and the synagogue was final and Christians could no longer find refuge under the designation of Judaism as a “licit” religion. Defamation of Christians by local Jews to the Roman authorities would have been easy for the Jews and brought great hardship to the Christians.

Jesus disowns the Jews of Smyrna. They do not behave as descendants of Abraham (John 8:31ff). Rather they are a synagogue “of Satan”, i.e. they behave the way the “slander/accuser” behaves.

4. “Do not fear what you are about to suffer...” (2:10)

Jesus does not say, “Do not be afraid – you will not suffer.” He says, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”

Behind the persecution of men is the hand of the devil.

In the ancient world prison was the place people were sent while they awaited execution. The most famous martyr among the early church fathers was Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. When he refused to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, he was placed on a pyre and burned (died AD 155).

The period of suffering will be intense but also limited (“ten days”).

5. “Be faithful unto death...” (2:10b-11)

As “the one who died and came to life” Jesus is in a position to promise his people the victor’s crown (the Smyrnans knew of crowns awarded at the games in their stadium, and the “crown” on Mt. Pagus). But the crown Jesus promises is the crown of life – not to be touched in any way by the second death, i.e. to enter into the resurrection life of the age to come.

Jesus values the faithfulness of his people – the public confession that *he* is Lord, and the lifestyle of obedience that follows.

This sort of faithfulness comes into collision with (a) the secular world which confesses other lords (e.g. political ideology, scientism, cult of celebrity, consumerism), and (b) the religious world, which is happy to serve the secular world and gets annoyed when Christ’s people call it out for being fake.

In the collision, Christ’s people get hurt. So they need to know that tribulation, poverty, slander, imprisonment and death are not ultimately able to “hurt” them because the One they confess is the Lord (“first and last”) who lives, and he will give them victory/honour (the *crown* of life) and riches/freedom/ (the crown *of life*).

The Book of Revelation

No. 6 To the Church in Pergamum

1. “To the angel of the church in Pergamum...” (2:12a)

Pergamum was the capital of the senatorial province of Asia.

Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) called Pergamum “by far the most distinguished city in Asia.” The city was built on a cone shaped hill amidst the Caicus River valley, ten miles inland from the Aegean Sea. Pergamum means “citadel”. In the early second century BC Pergamum became “the finest flower of Hellenic civilization.” It had a library of over 200,000 books.

The upper terrace of the citadel comprised spectacular temples and palaces, the most remarkable being the altar of Zeus which jutted out near the top of the mountain. Pergamum was a centre of the four most important pagan cults: of Zeus, Athene, Dionysus, and Asclepius. Asclepius was god of medicine and was designated *Sōtēr* (Saviour). Galen, one of the most famous physicians of the ancient world, was a native of Pergamum and studied there.

Pergamum was the official centre in Asia of the imperial cult, and was the first city of Asia to receive permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a *living* ruler (in 29 BC, “to the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma”).

2. “The words of him who has the two-edged sword...” (2:12b)

The proconsul Asia had the “right of the sword”, i.e. the power to execute at will. As the one who has the two-edged sword, Jesus reminds the church in Pergamum that the ultimate power of life and death is his.

3. “I know where you dwell...” (2:13)

Jesus acknowledges the difficulty of living in a centre of the imperial cult. This is the meaning of the phrase “where Satan’s throne is” – the temple built to Augustus, and a second to emperor Trajan, was like an official chair of state, clearly opposed to the rule of Christ. Pergamum had become the centre of Satan’s activity in the East.

But the church in Pergamum had remained true to Christ and had not burned incense to emperor or confessed that “Caesar is lord.”

Antipas is the first martyr in *Revelation*, and it is fitting that he is given the same title as Christ, “the faithful witness” (1:5) – Christ claims him as his own.

4. “those who hold the teaching of Balaam...” (2:14-15)

Balaam was the gentile prophet who embroiled Israel in apostasy by counselling Balak, king of Midian, to seduce the men of Israel with Midianite women and Baal worship (Num. 25; 31:16). Since “food sacrificed to idols” and “sexual immorality”

continued to be characteristics of pagan worship, it is probable that the charge levelled by Jesus against some of the members of the church is literal and not metaphorical; these things were aspects of the cult “where Satan’s throne is.” An antinomian group within the church had accommodated itself to the religious and social practices of the city.

5. “Therefore repent...” (2:16)

The fault of the church of Pergamum was the opposite of the fault of the church of Ephesus. In Ephesus the church had rooted out the false teachers, but had lost its love for believers. In Pergamum the church had failed to root out false teachers.

The command to repent is directed at the church, not the Balaamites or the Nicolaitans. The church must repent of its lax attitude towards church discipline. If it doesn’t, then Christ will come and exercise severe discipline himself, fighting against them (the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans) with the two-edged sword of his mouth.

6. “The hidden manna... and a white stone...” (2:17)

Manna is the “bread of angels” with which God fed Israel in the wilderness.

The “hidden manna” may be a reference to a tradition that, before the destruction of the first temple, Jeremiah took the jar of manna which had been placed in the ark and hid it at the foot of Mount Nebo. Tradition said that at the coming of Messiah, Jeremiah would reappear and restore the ark and the manna to the new temple.

Jesus promises to feed the people who have rejected the food sacrificed to idols. His food is clean and spiritual, as opposed to unclean and carnal. He will sustain his people in their wilderness.

He also promises a white stone with a new name written on it. In the setting of the messianic feast, this is best understood as a token for admission to the banquet. Such tokens were given to the poor in Rome to ensure a regular supply of food, and to gladiators who had won the admiration of the crowd and had been allowed to retire from combat.

The “new name” is best understood in light of 2:17 and 3:8,12. In 3:12 the name is that of “my God” and “the city of my God”, and “my [Jesus] own new name”. The whole thing speaks of right of access to God and enjoyment of his presence (22:3-4). Compare Luke 10:22 where Jesus says, “All things have been given to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and to whomever the Son wills to reveal him.” Thus the name is “the ineffable name of God, which no one knows save he who has received it.”

The Book of Revelation

No. 7 To the Church in Thyatira

“The longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important, and least remarkable of cities” (Colin Hemer).

1. “To the angel of the church in Thyatira...” (2:18a)

Thyatira was a centre of manufacturing and hosted a large number of trade guilds. Inscriptions found in the ruins of the city mention woodworkers, linen workers, makers of outer garments, tanners, leather workers, potters, bakers, slave traders and bronze smiths.

Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth whom we meet in Acts 16, was from the city of Thyatira. Clearly Thyatira was able to access the markets across the Aegean Sea in Macedonia. Since Thyatira was about 50 miles inland from Smyrna, the dye which Lydia used was probably a reddish colour made from the madder root which grew abundantly in the Lycus valley, rather than the classical murex shell purple.

The god Tyrimnos (Apollo) was the city’s guardian and patron of the many guilds.

2. “The words of the Son of God...” (2:18b)

Jesus calls himself “the Son of God” – this title is suggested by Psalm 2:7 and it is notable that Jesus quotes from Psalm 2:9 in verse 27.

In pagan mythology Apollo was the son of Zeus. The emperor was considered to be Apollo incarnate, and therefore also the son of Zeus. Both are frauds.

The description of Christ is taken from 1:14-15. His eyes penetrate – nothing is hidden from him. His feet are bronze – he comes swiftly and crushes his enemies.

3. “I know your works, love, faith, service, endurance...” (2:19)

The works of the Thyatiran believers are love, faith, service and endurance – *cf.* the common Pauline thanksgiving for the churches’ faith, love and hope.

Jesus praises the Thyatirans not only for their works, but also because their works had increased – not only did they love, but they loved more than they had – unlike the Ephesian church.

4. “But...you tolerate that woman Jezebel...” (2:20-23)

Jezebel was the Tyrian wife of Ahab, the promoter of the worship of Baal in Israel, and a woman of proverbial wickedness; her death was dishonourable (2 Kings 9).

It appears that the Thyatiran “Jezebel” was a prominent female member of the church who claimed the gift (and the consequent authority) of prophecy.

Confession that Jesus is Lord made it impossible for Christians to take part in the trade guilds which engaged in guild meals in the pagan temples – this would have involved the Christians in tacit acknowledgement of the pagan gods, and probably also have led to sexual promiscuity. However, without this sort of engagement with the guilds, Christians could not ply their trades, and they suffered economic loss as a result. “Jezebel” probably stated with “prophetic” authority that their scruples were unnecessary and they should indeed go to the pagan feasts.

“Jezebel” had been given opportunity to repent, but had not. Her time was up and she was going to be cast into a bed of suffering. Those who followed her are commanded to repent – if not, they too shall suffer like her.

Jezebel’s “children” are those who followed her example wholeheartedly.

The relevance of this to the sexual ethics and gender politics of today hardly needs to be pointed out. The church cannot compromise with the world on these matters without attracting first the warnings and then the vengeance of Christ.

5. “Hold fast what you have until I come” (2:24-25)

Jesus requires no more of the Thyatiran church than that it holds on to what it has until he comes, i.e. that it continues in love, faith, service and patient endurance. This is ordinary, Christian discipleship – it isn’t marching on the spot – because the “latter exceeds the first” (v. 19).

Jesus honours simple Christianity which maintains the priority and the practical expression of faith, love and hope, especially in the face of the opposition of the world and the subterfuge of the evil one.

6. “To the one who conquers... I will give authority” (2:26-29)

We have seen how Ephesians 2:6 reflects Ephesians 1:20, i.e. God has raised us up and seated us with Christ in heaven just as God raised Christ himself and seated him at his right hand. Christ’s people reign with him. But this is conditional on their conquering, i.e. maintaining their discipleship unpolluted by the world.

The authority of the conquerors is over the nations, which they rule with a rod of iron, Psalm 2:9. The context of Psalm 2 is that of the rebellion of the world against Yahweh and Yahweh’s Messiah. The conquerors are those who have not joined in the rebellion, but have submitted to and sought refuge in Christ.

Christ calls God “my Father” (v. 27) – *c.f.* “Son of God” (v. 18).

The “morning star” is a symbol of messianic rule (22:16). This is “confirmed from Num. 24:14-20, where the future eschatological (c.f. v. 14) ruler of Israel is described as a ‘rising star’ and ‘sceptre’... who will ‘crush the princes’ of the ‘nations’..., ‘rule’ over them, and receive them as an ‘inheritance’” (G.K. Beale). It is interesting that the morning star (Venus) was a symbol of sovereignty in the ancient world in general and Rome in particular.

The Book of Revelation

No. 8 To the Church in Sardis

1. “To the angel of the church in Sardis...” (3:1a)

Sardis was far past its prime. Six hundred years previously it had been the powerful capital of the kingdom of Lydia, of which Croesus was the fabulously rich king – gold and silver coins were first struck in Sardis. But by the first century AD it was living on the prestige of its former glory. An earthquake in AD 17 destroyed the city and it was rebuilt with help from the emperor Tiberius.

One reason for the city’s former power was its acropolis (citadel) which was built on a spur of mount Tmolus, atop vertical rock walls which rose up 450 metres.

The lower city included an exceptionally large temple dedicated to Artemis. This temple had been built originally by Croesus, but was destroyed in 499 BC; its restoration was never completed. Artemis was believed to possess the power to restore the dead to life.

Twice in the history of Sardis the acropolis had fallen to an enemy because the defenders had failed to be vigilant and “thieves” had stolen into it, climbing up the cliff above which it sat, and opening the city gates from the inside.

The church of Sardis is severely censured. If it faced any opposition, it is not mentioned. Instead, the church was corrupted from the inside by complacency and compromise. Like the fig tree of Mark 11:20, it had leaves, but no fruit.

2. “The words of him who has the seven spirits of God...” (3:1b)

Christ designates himself “the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (*cf.* 1:4, 16, 20).

The “seven spirits of God” is a reference to the Holy Spirit, *cf.* the sevenfold Spirit of Isaiah 11:2 which rests upon Messiah. This is an allusion to the seven lipped menorah of Zechariah 4:2-7, and the word of the LORD to Zechariah that the temple was to be rebuilt “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit.”

The church of Sardis was in a state of disarray. Christ, who holds and therefore exercises divine authority over, the seven angels of the seven churches, has the sevenfold Spirit of God, by whom alone the church can be reconstructed. There is in his self-designation, therefore, the implication of help if only Sardis will repent.

3. “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (3:1c)

The church in Sardis was in a perilous state. It had the reputation of being alive and yet was actually spiritually dead. It was a “nominal” church – Christian in name only.

This is always a danger – to listen too carefully to what people say about you, and so to rest on your laurels. E.g. to boast in the title *Reformed* Presbyterian, and yet not to adhere with any particular understanding, affection or commitment to the reformed faith – to care more about a political vision of the application of the 1638 and 1643 covenants than about approaching God with joy and reverence on the

basis of the New Covenant – to emphasise correct *forms* of worship while neglecting the correct *spirit* of worship.

4. “Wake up, and strengthen what remains...” (3:2-3)

Clearly the Christians of Sardis had begun well enough. But lethargy had cut the nerve of discipleship. They needed to become alert and watchful once again. It is a sad fact that many Christians (like Solomon) enjoy great privileges and begin well, but fall into deadly worldliness as they grow old and cold.

Like the unfinished temple of Artemis, the works of the church fell short of completeness. Incomplete works suggest complacency. Soiled clothes (v. 4) suggest compromise. Complacency and compromise go hand-in-hand are sure a major stumbling block for the church in the West.

If the church does not listen to Christ’s rebuke, and repent of its complacency, Christ will come “like a thief in the night” – he will visit them with sudden judgement – *cf.* Matthew 24:42-44, but also the manner in which Sardis had twice been captured.

5. “Yet you have still a few names in Sardis...” (3:4)

Nevertheless, some members of the church in Sardis had not “soiled their clothes” by accommodating their behaviour to the pagan culture around them.

In Revelation 7 a great multitude dressed in white robes is led by the Lamb to springs of living water. In Revelation 14 the 144,000 “follow the Lamb wherever he goes.” In v. 5 those “clothed in white garments” do not have their names removed from the Book of Life. Thus “walking in white” describes those who are justified.

White garments also speak of purity, and in Roman culture white garments were worn to celebrate victory.

6. “The one who conquers will be clothed in white garments” (3:5-6)

Three promises are made to the conqueror:

(a) He will be clothed in white garments. White clothes are appropriate to those who have not compromised with the world. They are also appropriate to those who have conquered. They are also appropriate to those who stand in the presence of God and of the Lamb (*cf.* 4:4; 6:9-11; 7:9-14).

(b) Christ will never blot his name out of the Book of Life. The Book of Life is an allusion to the city register. Ancient cities kept registers of citizens, and one of the punishments for significant crimes was to have one’s name removed from the register. This promise acts as a severe warning to those who refuse to repent of their complacency and compromise.

(c) Christ will acknowledge him before his Father and his angels (*cf.* Matt. 10:32; Luke 12:8). Christ will read out the names of the Book of Life in the presence of the “city council”, acknowledging the veracity of each entry and therefore the citizenship of those registered. Compromise in Sardis was probably an attempt at securing citizenship, and complacency followed the success of the strategy. Jesus makes clear the cost of this ploy – it means lost citizenship in the only city that matters.

The Book of Revelation

No. 9 To the Church in Philadelphia

There is neither disapproval nor reproach in this letter, only commendation and promise. The letter to Philadelphia is comparable in this respect to the letter to Smyrna – indeed both letters follow the same pattern and cover the same ground.

1. “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia...” (3:7a)

Trade routes to Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia departed from Philadelphia, and the imperial road from Rome via Troas passed through the city – it deservedly earned the name “the gateway to the East”.

However the city was located near the fault line of in a region prone to earthquakes. An earthquake and subsequent tremors destroyed the city in AD 17.

Philadelphia was remarkable for its many temples and festivals. The region was suitable for grape growing, and the city’s main cult was that of Dionysius (the pagan god of wine).

2. “The words of the holy one... who has the key of David...” (3:7b)

The “holy one” was a Jewish title for God. Jesus is also the “true one” – in 6:10 the Sovereign Lord is also called “holy and true”. “True” can also mean genuine and faithful. As the “genuine one” Jesus is the true Messiah (contra the accusations of the unbelieving Jews). As the “faithful one” Jesus promises never to desert his people.

The “key” is the sign of authority (*cf.* Matt. 16:19). Jesus has authority over the house of David, i.e. he controls access to the Messianic kingdom of heaven (*cf.* the message of Isaiah concerning Eliakim in Isaiah 22:22).

3. “Behold, I have set before you an open door...” (3:8-10)

The believers in Philadelphia were (probably) few in number and (certainly) lacked social influence. If they were Jewish believers in Jesus, they had been cast out of the synagogue. If they were Gentile believers, they were scorned by the local Jews for belief in a crucified messiah (which to Jews was a contradiction in terms, 1 Corinthians 1:23).

But they had faithfully kept Jesus’ word – they confessed him as Christ and obeyed him as Lord – they had not denied his name. So Jesus-the-keyholder reassures them that he has set before them an open door that no one can shut, i.e. he has granted them access into his kingdom.

The appellation “synagogue of Satan” with which Jesus brands the Jews who opposed the Christians in Philadelphia is severe. The word “satan” is from Hebrew and means “to be or act as an adversary”. There is undoubtedly allusion to both

John 8:44 (“You are of your father the devil...”) and Revelation 12:10 (“the accuser of our brothers... who accuses them day and night before our God”).

But while the Jews had slandered the Christians, Jesus promises to cause the Jews to acknowledge that Jesus the Messiah loves the Christians.

The promise of protection in the “hour of trial” is the promise of spiritual protection – *cf.* Revelation 6:9-11 – the history of the world is too full of the sufferings of the church, especially in these days, for this to be a promise of immunity from physical suffering.

The “hour of trial” is the “three and a half years” of the rule of anti-Christ (13:5-10) – three and a half is the number seven cut short – hence the trial will not be permanent but only for “an hour”. The trial is described in the judgements of chapters 6-7.

The hour of trial is “coming on the whole earth to try those who dwell on the earth”, i.e. it is directed at the whole non-Christian world. But the believers will be kept from it by the presence of Jesus standing by his people and delivering them from evil.

4. “I am coming soon...” (3:11)

Once again we see that Jesus commends not social influence, great gifts, or magnificent works, but ordinary faithful discipleship – holding fast to what we have.

Jesus’ coming was a threat to the churches of Ephesus, Pergamum and Sardis – it is a boon for the church of Philadelphia, because it will confirm their crown, i.e. their membership of Christ’s kingdom as those who have won the race.

“I am coming soon” cannot be chronologically literal since the second coming of Jesus has not been soon – certainly not in the lifetime of the believers to whom these words were addressed. Perhaps it means that Christ’s coming will not be delayed. But it is more likely that Jesus means that he will increase his presence in the Philadelphian church in a fashion which affords them protection during the tribulation advertised in verse 10.

5. “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar...” (3:12-13)

Jesus explains his promise to “make [the one who conquers] a pillar in the temple of my God” – it means that the conqueror will never leave the temple. This is a promise of stability and permanence (which is what a pillar needs to be). Unlike the temples in Philadelphia which were destroyed in AD 17, the temple of God will not fall despite the “earthquakes” that will shatter the earth (*cf.* Psalm 46).

Jesus also promises to write on the conqueror the name of God, the name of the city of God, and his own (Jesus’) name. This is a promise of full membership of the kingdom – Christ’s people are sealed as belonging to him.

Notice the final words – “He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” – the point is that the message to each church is also a message to all the churches.

The Book of Revelation

No. 10 To the Church in Laodicea

The letter to the church in Laodicea is probably the best known of the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor. The church's failure, and Christ's rebuke and promise echo down to our own day, and contemporary and personal application are obvious.

1. "To the angel of the church in Laodicea..." (3:14a)

Like Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia, Laodicea sat on the road from the provincial capital (Pergamum) down to the Mediterranean coast. Its sister cities were Hierapolis and Colossae.

In Roman times Laodicea became the wealthiest city in Phrygia. It was famous for the soft, glossy black wool of its sheep, which was in great demand.

The city was devastated by an earthquake in AD 60, but such was its wealth that it was rebuilt without imperial aid. Tacitus (AD 56-120, senator and historian of the Roman empire) wrote, "Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us."

Laodicea was famous for its medical school and the use of medicinal compounds, including an eye-salve made from "Phrygian powder" mixed with oil.

Strangely, Laodicea did not have an adequate source of water, and water had to be piped in from springs six miles to the south.

2. "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness..." (3:14b)

In Isaiah 65:16 Yahweh is designated "the God of Amen". In Hebrew, the words "amen", "faithful" and "true" are all related. Here Jesus speaks as the One who is utterly reliable, whose testimony against the downgrade in Laodicea is true, and whose faithfulness is in stark contrast the church's faithlessness.

Jesus is also the "ruler/beginning of God's creation". The word *archē* can mean both ruler and beginning. It is the term used to designate Christ in Colossians 1:18. He is the source of all created things, and the ruler of all created rulers. Hence, Someone of unparalleled dignity and authority is addressing the Laodicean church.

3. "You are neither hot nor cold..." (3:15-17)

Hierapolis was famous for its hot, medicinal springs, and Colossae for its cold, pure waters, while Laodicea had to pipe in water through stone pipes three feet in diameter, which was probably lukewarm by the time it arrived in the city. It is possible that Christ's rebuke means that the Laodicea church provided neither refreshment (*à la* Colossae) nor healing (*à la* Hierapolis) – Laodicea's works were barren, ineffectual and distasteful to Jesus.

The explanation is given in v. 17 – the church felt secure because of its affluence.

This is a common problem – when we prosper in ordinary things, we imagine that we have also prospered in spiritual things, when in reality we are "wretched and pitiable and poor and blind and naked."

The problem is compounded by ignorance – "you do not *know* that you are wretched, etc." It is, therefore, a great mercy that Christ speaks to us about our true condition. Since the way he speaks is through the reading, and particularly the preaching of the Word, we see the importance of the ministry of the Word in regularly drawing us back to the faith and obedience of the Saviour.

4. "I counsel you to buy from me gold..." (3:18)

The city of Laodicea was proud of its wealth, textile industry, and eye-salve. Here, with biting irony, Jesus counsels the church of Laodicea to purchase from him true gold, clothing and eye-salve.

This admonition is reminiscent of the call of Isaiah 55 – "Come... buy and eat... without money, and without price." The offer must be taken seriously and acted upon in faith and repentance – otherwise we remain thirsty, hungry, naked, blind.

5. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline..." (3:19-20)

Jesus emphasises the motivation behind the reproof – if he disciplines his people, it's because he loves them (*cf.* Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:5-6).

What does Jesus look for? Zeal and repentance. The call for repentance uses a tense which indicates a definitive act, and thus speaks of a decisive break with past attitudes and ways of behaving; the call for zeal uses a present tense and thus speaks of an ongoing life of devotion.

In verse 20 Jesus addresses the church as though he had been excluded from its fellowship! He stands outside the congregation which cannot live unless he stands at its very centre. But in astonishing condescension, rather than turn away, he requests admission and seeks to re-establish table fellowship with his people.

6. "The one who conquers I will grant to sit with me..." (3:21-22)

Christ's final word of promise to the church recalls the pattern of his own walk. He humbled himself and became obedient, even to the point of death upon the cross; but for that reason, God raised him and seated him at his right hand on high. Jesus compares the life of his disciples to this – to be faithful to him is to humble yourself: indeed, to take up your cross and to die to yourself. But Christ will honour such faithfulness by inviting all such to sit with him upon his throne. This is an astonishing promise, given the cosmic, historical, redemptive and eschatological centrality of "the throne of God and of the Lamb" depicted by the chapters of the book of Revelation which follow (e.g. 4:2ff; 5:1ff; 7:9ff; 21:3ff; 22:1ff).