

## IF YOU CONQUER

It is my hope that you have enjoyed our brief excursion into the Book of Revelation enough that you will not avoid it in your rounds of Bible reading and study. It is also my hope that you will not think that Revelation is a departure from the Message or the record of God's saving grace, or of God's dynamic interaction with individuals and with the faith communities that spring up in response to the nurturing and calling of the Holy Spirit.

The unusual imagery of Revelation has made it a controversial writing from the beginning. It squeaked into the canon of the New Testament by the skin of its teeth. It has never been well-accepted in the Eastern wing of Christianity.

In addition, The Revelation has always carried the stigma of being misused by those who wanted from it a prediction of coming events instead of a call to a deeper faith. Even within Revelation itself we learn of rival prophets and teachers who opposed John and his Message (2:2, 6, 14-15, 20-23). Montanus, a second-century leader of a heretic group, used The Revelation in such a way that it helped to prejudice "mainline" Christians against the book.

Many early leaders concluded that it could not have been written by the Apostle John and opposed its inclusion in the New Testament. (Gaius of Rome (210 A.D.); Dionysius, the Bishop of Alexandria (250 A.D.); Eusebius (340 A.D.); Cyril of Jerusalem (later part of the fourth century).)

Protestant reformers did not try to get it removed from the canon; they simply did not use it. Luther claimed that even though it was in the canon, it was not functionally canonical – it was theologically inadequate. (For him, it did not have enough grace, because it did not use that word. The book is *full* of grace, but like many others, Luther missed it.) Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, would not teach from Revelation and claimed it to be "no biblical book." John Calvin was eloquent in another way, though to my knowledge he never mentioned The Revelation. He wrote commentaries on twenty-six books of the New Testament. As any sixth-grader in this church can tell you, there are twenty-seven books in the New Testament.

To this day, Catholic and Protestant lectionaries choose very few readings from Revelation, and Greek Orthodox lectionaries omit it altogether. (All of this information is summarized by M. Eugene Boring on page 3 of his commentary on *Revelation* in the *Interpretation* series.)

Of course, those who found John's writing valuable eventually outweighed all this opposition, and so the book is in our Bible.

Christians who have wanted to be faithful followers of Jesus have always struggled with what that means in application to daily life. This has never been a road for the Lone Ranger. We pray, we talk with other Christian friends, and we try to learn from those who walked the WAY before us. The question is *always* how to separate the authentic messages from the false, whether in the thoughts of our minds while we pray, in the thoughts of others as we converse, or in the books we find to help in our quest for authentic discipleship.

Because there is such a wide spectrum of comment and literature constantly circling around this book, let me give you a simple rule of thumb: If the person or the author is saying that Revelation is speaking *about* our time, turn off and tune out. That is A-1 certified hooey. John wrote for Christians in his own time about what they were facing in their own time. Though he was extending the time of Jesus' coming, he still expected it to be relatively soon – that is, it would never have occurred to him that we would still be here two thousand years later. And *had* John been writing about events so far in the future, who would have read or preserved a book so irrelevant to its *own* time? So none of the imagery and none of the scenes you find in Revelation are predictions about specific events happening now. Most of you may already assume that. But if there are those here who still worry when somebody claims a plausible case connecting present-day events with what John was predicting, please reconsider and wake up. If you want to play Halloween, get new material.

However, if the person or the author is claiming that Revelation speaks *to* our time – that is, we can learn about being Christians now by paying attention to what some of them were going through and thinking back then – then it might well be worth your time and consideration. In case I lost you, the rule of thumb is this: Revelation does not speak *about* our time, but it can speak *to* it.

We live in very “Revelation-esque” times. Throughout your lifetime, you are going to hear a great many claims about this being the “end time” or the time about which Revelation was written. I hope you will remember the rule of thumb.

I love Revelation the most not because John is asking the big end-time question (though I very much like the way he does that) but because John is also asking the big/little present-time question: What is the will of Christ the Lord for His people – and for *this* person – in this present situation?

Do you like that question? I think that question is what makes it worth getting up in the morning. It lights the day, separates the wheat from the chaff, calms the nerves, energizes the adrenals. It connects us with everything important going on today, and with all those who lived by faith before us. And indeed it is the very question that John is asking. What is the will of Christ the Lord for His people – and for *this* person – in this present situation?

What was the present situation for John? I am of the opinion that Revelation was written about 96 A.D., near the end of the reign of the Emperor Domitian. Those were tough times for Christians, though in truth we have little information about the actual policies of Rome toward Christians during Domitian’s time. John believed that the emperor who would follow Domitian would be far worse and would introduce persecution of enormous severity for Christians. In this expectation, John was essentially – and fortunately – mistaken.

John’s fears, like most of ours, were way out of proportion. That is, following Domitian, Nerva became emperor for a little over two and a half years and then Trajan for almost twenty years. Christianity was a crime in the Roman Empire, punishable by death. But Rome was not pushing it; it only dealt with cases where people had been accused of this crime by others. Even then, an execution was not on the grounds of accusation alone, but only if the charge could be proved. (You remember the popular poke: “If you were arrested and accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” In John’s day, that was no joke.) I am not implying that the situation in John’s day was pleasant, but that the severity and aggressiveness that John expected do not come to pass.

We have this letter from Pliny the Younger, Trajan's ambassador to Asia Minor, written about 112 A.D., less than twenty years from John's book. Pliny is a little nonplused by this Christian business, and he writes to Trajan to make sure he is handling things in an acceptable manner. Here is a voice from out of the past about how it really was for our brothers and sisters before us.

I have made it a rule, my Lord, to refer everything to you about which I am in doubt. For who could better provide direction for my hesitations or instruction for my lack of knowledge?

I have never been present at the interrogation of Christians. Therefore, I do not know how far such investigations should be pushed, and what sort of punishments are appropriate. I have also been uncertain as to whether age makes any difference, or whether the very young are dealt with in the same way as adults, whether repentance and renunciation of Christianity is sufficient, or whether the accused are still considered criminals because they were once Christians even if they later renounced it, and whether persons are to be punished simply for the name "Christian" even if no criminal act has been committed, or whether only crimes associated with the name are to be punished.

In the meantime, I have handled those who have been denounced to me as Christian as follows: I asked them whether they were Christians. Those who responded affirmatively I have asked a second and third time, under threat of the death penalty. If they persisted in their confession, I had them executed. [You know how people were executed under Roman rule. Brings new meaning to old words and phrases, doesn't it? "Confess the Lord Jesus Christ."] For whatever it is that they are actually advocating, it seems to me that obstinacy and stubbornness must be punished in any case. Others who labor under the same delusion, but who were Roman citizens, I have designated to be sent to Rome.

In the course of the investigations, as it usually happens, charges are brought against wider circles of people, and the following special cases have emerged: An unsigned placard was posted, accusing a large number of people by name. Those who denied being Christians now

or in the past, I thought necessary to release, since they invoked our gods according to the formula I gave them and since they offered sacrifices of wine and incense before your image which I had brought in for this purpose along with the statues of our gods. I also had them curse Christ. It is said that real Christians cannot be forced to do any of these things.

Others charged by this accusation at first admitted that they had once been Christians, but had already renounced it; they had in fact been Christians, but had given it up, some of them three years ago, some even earlier, some as long as twenty-five years ago [Domitian's reign]. All of these worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ. They verified, however, that their entire guilt or error consisted in the fact that on a specified day before sunrise they were accustomed to gather and sing an antiphonal hymn to Christ as their god and to pledge themselves by an oath not to engage in any crime, but to abstain from all thievery, assault, and adultery, not to break their word once they had given it, and not to refuse to pay their legal debts. They then went their separate ways, and came together later to eat a common meal, but it was ordinary, harmless food. They discontinued even this practice in accordance with my edict by which I had forbidden political associations, in accord with your instructions. I considered it all the more necessary to obtain by torture a confession of the truth from two female slaves, whom they called "deaconesses." I found nothing more than a vulgar, excessive superstition. [Rome did not understand the "body and blood" of the communion meal.]

I thus adjourned further hearings, in order to seek counsel from you. The matter seems to me in need of good counsel, especially in view of the large number of accused. For many of every age and class, of both sexes, are in danger of prosecution both now and in the future. The plague of this superstition has spread not only in the cities, but through villages and the countryside. But I believe a stop can be made and a remedy provided. In any case it is now quite clear that the temples, almost deserted previously, are gradually gaining more and more visitors, the long neglected sacred festivals are again regularly

observed, and the sacrificial meat, for which buyers have been hard to find, is again being purchased. From this one can easily see what an improvement can be made in the masses, when one gives room for repentance.

I chose to read this entire letter in the hope that some of you would pick up copies later and muse on it for a while. Each time I read it, it illumines The Revelation, the realities of my spiritual forebears, and even some of my own deep convictions. The Emperor's reply is quite tame and reasonable, in comparison to what we might expect:

My Secundus! You have chosen the right way with regard to the cases of those who have been accused before you as Christians. Nothing exists that can be considered a universal norm for such cases. Christians should not be sought out. But if they are accused and handed over, they are to be punished, but only if they do not renounce their identity as Christians and demonstrate it by the appropriate act, i.e., the worship of our gods. Even if one is suspect because of past conduct, he or she is to be acquitted in view of repentance.

Anonymous accusations may not be considered in any trial, for that would be a dangerous precedent, and does not fit our times.

(Pliny the Younger, *Letters X:96-97*, translated by M. Eugene Boring.)

What is John's answer to the question: What is the will of Christ the Lord for His people – and for *this* person – in this present situation? John's answer is surprisingly simple. It matches much that we hear in Pliny's letter: Go on worshipping. Go on meeting and being the church with and for each other. Do not engage in any crime. Abstain from all thievery, assault, and adultery. Do not break your word once you have given it. Do not refuse to pay your legal debts. Moreover, and in addition to that, if any power or person on earth or in Heaven or under the earth tries to claim or insist that you cannot thus live and worship or that you must worship any other gods, goals, values, purposes, or persons – then CONQUER.

For John, to CONQUER means what? To die. You belong to *Arnion*. This love is for keeps and this love is unto death, if it comes to that. In this kind of world, if you do not put it on that basis, you will not keep it for very long.

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John saw that most people who lived in his time were orienting their lives to the “Great City” – to Rome. He wanted his fellow Christians to orient their lives to the “Holy City” – the spiritual reality. (New Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven.) “The present situation is so unjust, and the righteous so powerless to correct it, that humanity’s only hope is in the intervention of God.” (Boring, page 42.) Christ is with us in the midst of our troubles – not only at their end. Christ is with us, and that makes all the difference.

So our question today is: What is the will of Christ the Lord for His people – and for *this* person – in this present situation? I believe we must each rewrite the contract according to what we truly believe it should be. But it is also very helpful to be able to compare ours with The Revelation. Aside from the vocabulary, our vows may not end up being so very different. I hope that is so.