

REVELATION REVELATIONS

Scripture Lesson: Revelation 1:1-9

Text: Revelation 1:1ff

Songs: PH469; 430 1,3,4; "I'll Fly Away;" "150th Anniversary Hymn;" R383

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus Our Lord,

There are few books as fascinating as the book of Revelation. And misunderstood!

In spite of the fascination, John Calvin refused to write a commentary on Revelation. The greatest commentator in the history the Christian church decided it was too risky a venture. Many have said that was part of Calvin's genius.

That is also the primary reason so few sermons have been preached from Revelation in the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches. Many of us use John Calvin to get our creative juices going. Once we have read through Calvin, we have oodles of ideas how to develop the text into a sermon. Such is the strength and character of Calvin's commentaries and his Institutes of the Christian Religion. Since Calvin never wrote on Revelation, where do we get our beginning inspiration?

I am going to be very up front with the sources that I use in studying Revelation. My biggest help is the great Protestant Reformed theologian, Rev. Herman Hoeksema. For one year every Sunday night he preached through the book of Revelation. He did this twice, once right after World War I, and again during World War II. We are taking six months. There is another difference: When Rev. Hoeksema preached both times through Revelation people stood in the aisles of that huge church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. All year long they stood to hear him preach on Revelation. I don't expect people to stand in the aisles for our services, but I think more people will hear these messages because of general interest in Revelation. Then I also depend a great deal on Dr. Robert Mounce who wrote the commentary in the New International Commentary series, the best Reformed Commentaries in existence today. Dr. Mounce studied Revelation 13 years before he wrote the first word of his commentary. It is a gem. I also use Dr. Leon Morris commentary and that of Dr. Abraham Kuiper. Of course, all of us are indebted to Dr. William Hendricksen for his short overview of Revelation, More Than Conquerors. This is the fourth time I am preaching through Revelation, though the first two times I started with chapter 4, so in a sense this is the second time I am going through the whole book. I have added another reference for study: Days of Vengeance written by David Chilton from a post-millennial position. The late Rev. Gerrit Vander Plaats recommended the book. So while Calvin is silent, there are some key resources for us who preach on Revelation in the Twenty-first Century. It is my prayer that God gives me the wisdom and grace to make many of these puzzling texts plain and simple for you, and that each morning when you go home you will be able to say, "I sure learned a lot about God and His goodness from Revelation tonight."

So let's begin. "Revelation 1:1a." There are many people who try to understand Revelation as apocalyptic literature. This is a literature in which the author uses a pen name, is abstractly visionary, uses symbolism extensively, has a world history framework, and focuses on the coming Messiah. It is true that parts of Daniel and Revelation have all those characteristics except the first--we know who the author is!--yet in both there are a number of differences from true apocalyptic literature. The first is that Revelation is prophecy, "to show what must soon take place." Apocalyptic literature obscures the author, but John is very open about his vision and writing about the Lord Jesus Christ. The opening sentence is John's statement to the world that what the Holy Spirit is revealing to him is different from apocalyptic literature. Notice, too, that the opening sentence ties Revelation to the rest of the Bible. Many people think the "normal" Bible goes through Jude and then we have

this rather wild, fantastic book which is like the wild wagging of a dog. John stresses that Revelation is part of the Bible, “Revelation 1:1a.” David Chilton in his book Days of Vengeance shows how Revelation follows the

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same pattern as Deuteronomy: As Deuteronomy is to the Old Testament, a statement of God’s covenantal presence, so Revelation is to the New Testament a statement of God’s covenantal faithfulness to His people in all circumstances of history. We are often told that Revelation is most like Daniel, but I come from the point of view that Revelation is more like Deuteronomy, another book we seldom read or understand.

John goes on. “Revelation 1:1b,2a.” One of our local news channels makes a great deal of the fact that their news is “eye-witness” news. While we know that every TV channel has its reporters out there, there is something enticing about knowing an eyewitness is reporting the news. In John, we have an eyewitness to the events that are to come. More than that, we have the Holy Spirit who is taking those eyewitness accounts and recording them perfectly for us. At times when John was overwhelmed with the vision he saw, the angel would say to him, “Write.” That’s the writing that we have in Revelation.

In verse 3 we come to the first of seven beatitudes in Revelation. “v. 3.” We take great comfort from these words as we begin our journey through Revelation. We are reading the words of this prophecy, every one. We are also hearing it explained. All that we have to add to get the blessing is to take the words to heart. I trust the very fact that you are here or listening today, you are planning to take these words to heart.

John adds the words, “for the time is near.” This is the language of Jewish Messianic expectation. Jesus had warned that many would come in his name claiming, “The time is at hand.” Yet only when He came with His miracles, His perfect life, His atoning death, and redeeming resurrection was the Messianic age really here. Now we have another moment of impact as John writes about the events unfolding in God’s plan of providence.

We are told at the end of verse 3 that we are living in a “defining moment.” We have been hearing that in the political world. After a half century of spending beyond our means as a nation, this is a defining moment to rescue the economy. In church life we are being told that the decisions of the synods of the 90’s have brought us to a defining moment in the future of the Christian Reformed Church. In our church here at Sully we have celebrated our hundredth anniversary over a decade ago, another “defining moment” for us. In many of our lives, we have just past or now are passing through “defining moments.” For all of us who have stood at such moments, Revelation 1:3 has special meaning, “Revelation 1:3.”

The number seven in Scripture has symbolic significance. Whether John was alluding to that significance when he writes to seven churches or if it just happened that there were seven churches in what we now know as Asia Minor, the sentence strikes us, “Revelation 1:4a.”

The greeting is a common one. Many churches use this as the only or major greeting for each worship service. By now the words are so familiar you may feel you know them by heart, and perhaps you do. Do you hear the Trinity in the greeting? “Revelation 1:4b,5a.” God the Father is referred to poetically as the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come.” The “seven spirits” refer to the fullness of the Holy Spirit Who has been poured out in this era. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was not as evident. We know that He was given to the church in a special way on Pentecost. Now the fullness of the Holy Spirit, pictured by the symbolic number of seven, is how we know the Holy Spirit in our age. Jesus Christ is spelled out in the greeting. It is striking to see what characteristics the Holy Spirit through John would impress upon the church. The first thing we see is that Jesus is a faithful witness. Remember that John is the gospel writer who refers to Jesus as “the Word.” That word is reliable. We in the Reformed tradition are persuaded that God’s word revealed in Jesus and in the Bible is without error. The words we use to describe God’s word are “inerrant,” “infallible,” “authoritative,” and “perspicacious.” The last word is a long word to say that when we read the Bible carefully we can understand it. The next thing the Holy Spirit has John stress is that Jesus is risen. Every New Testament

sermon includes an account of the resurrection, not all an account of the crucifixion. In our century we stress the cross. We name churches Calvary, not Empty Tomb. Since the days of Constantine who saw the sign of the cross in the sky, the cross has superseded the tomb as the symbol of Christianity, but back in 70 AD about when Revelation

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was written the empty tomb meant more to Christians than the cross. That is why John writes, “The firstborn from the dead.” The third characteristic of Jesus is the He is Lord. That theme is crucial to understanding the book. It is because Jesus Christ is Lord that all these events described can and shall happen. They are all based on the one crucial fact: Jesus Christ is Lord.

“Revelation 1:5b.” Again notice the Biblical emphasis, what we sometimes refer to as a Reformed emphasis. In the Reformed churches we stress the Lordship of Jesus and the priority of the love of God. We assert from Scripture that we cannot love God unless He loves us first; there is no Christian love until God loves us.

We Reformed Christians have always stressed that our salvation is not rooted in what we do, but in what God has done for us. That is how verse 5 ends, He ‘has freed us from our sins by his blood.’ Verse six continues the same thought, “Revelation 1:6.” It is God who has done the salvation thing, not us. Salvation is out of our hands and in the hands of our loving and unchanging God. That is why the Reformed faith, of all the branches of Christian thought and theology, offers the most comfort. The heart of being Reformed is to embrace the doctrines of grace in which we are passive recipients of salvation.

However, once we are saved, we are to be fireballs for God. He “made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father.” That is what we seek to do when we speak of a world and life view. No branch of Christianity is more work oriented than the Reformed branch. We never work to earn salvation; we work to serve our God and Father. After all, “to him be glory and power for ever and ever!” There is that Reformed emphasis on giving all the glory to God. That is another great Reformation theme that leaps at us out of the pages of Revelation. We are confronted with “To God alone the glory.”

There are three great Reformed themes at the end of verse 5 and through verse 6. First, God is the initiator of all love; second, God does all the saving and our works are just a response from our thanks; and, third, God always receives all the glory because He first loves and saves motivating our love and deeds of thankfulness. To those great Reformation themes we say, “Amen.” So did John.

John again ties the book of Revelation to the whole Bible. In verse 7 he has a collage of quotes from Daniel, Zechariah, and his own gospel. “Revelation 1:7.” He concludes the verse with “So shall it be! Amen.” Amen means “It is sure to be.” In the last answer of the Heidelberg Catechism we read, “A129.” This repetition is to certify the affirmation. What John writes is Biblically intertwined and Biblically validated. This is just one of many verses that separate the writings of Revelation from the general genre of apocalyptic literature. Revelation is closely tied to other books of the Bible like Deuteronomy after which Revelation is patterned.

Revelation 1:8 really needs no explanation to us. We know “Alpha and Omega” are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. God being first and last is reinforced by quoting from the greeting of the letter, “who is and who was and who is to come.” Then is added the words, “the Almighty.” That is a repeated theme. God is almighty. Since God is almighty, He controls the events of the world and crushes His enemies. The wise are always on the side of the Almighty.

We have not done many verses today. Going through Revelation is something like a rocket launch. We begin slowly, then pick up speed, and then settle in an assigned orbit. We will start slowly until we all get the feel of Revelation, then we will speed up, and then settle back for a nice flight. Be here!

