

“Sermon by Request #3 - Revelation Then and Now”

Sunday, January 22, 2023

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Today is the last week of our sermons by request series, so it seems fitting that we talk about the last book of the Bible. It is written as a vision, and it often reads like a nightmare. If God is peace and love, Revelation “reveals” a God who is a cosmic warrior, engaged in a life and death battle for the universe with the forces of evil.

So, let me give a basic sketch of the Book before we go into any details.

The Book starts with Christ’s angel sending messages to seven churches in what is now Turkey. Next, John is invited in a vision into heaven. Here he sees God’s throne, surrounded by martyrs and heavenly beings. Christ then appears as the Lamb and breaks open seven seals which start the end of the world with a series of natural disasters – trumpets sound, stars fall, rivers are poisoned. When the seventh seal is opened, Satan emerges as a dragon with seven heads. He is joined by a beast from the sea and from the land which also have seven heads. They mislead all the non-Christians of the world into worshipping them.

Christ appears on a cloud to wage war on Satan. Bowls of wrath are poured on the world, hurting those who follow Satan. Kings who follow Satan gather at a place called Armageddon. They lose the war against Christ and his angels. The Satanic city, the world capital, Bablyon, is defeated. Satan is thrown into an abyss for 1000 years. During this time, Christ rules the world with all surviving Christians in peace. After 1000 years, Satan escapes briefly, but is defeated again, and thrown into the abyss with all of his followers forever. Christ judges the living and the dead. A new heaven and Earth are created. The heavenly city descends to Earth where all is peaceful and joyful. It is like an urban Eden. There is no need for a temple because God walks among humans once more in peace. The fall has been fully reversed.

That’s the New testament’s vision of how the world will end. It is very trippy. In many parts, it sounds like a Godzilla movie on acid. But in fact, it is a highly meaningful text that is written in a kind of Biblical code. It was written at a time when Christians were just a tiny movement, numbering perhaps 10,000 people^[1]. They were subject to regular persecution by the Roman empire, often ending in execution. Writing down a criticism of the state could get them arrested, so they spoke in metaphors. They borrowed images from the Hebrew Scriptures, mostly from the Book of Daniel.^[2] This is where the beasts and the horsemen of the apocalypse come from. In Daniel’s vision, it is made clear that beasts are symbolic of human empires.

In John’s revelation, the same code is adopted. Babylon the Great is the city of Rome, the unholy capitol of the world. It worships and follows Satan and his beasts. They are portrayed as having seven heads. Revelation explains that these heads represent hills (Rev 17). Those hills

are the seven hills of Rome. The beasts and Satan symbolize the evil of the Roman empire, which in the end times will take over the world, and convince all non-Christians to follow its sinful ways, and worship its emperors as gods.^[3] This is very important. Revelation is not really talking about the future, it is talking about the early second century. The Roman empire is evil, it persecutes Christians, so they imagine God defeating the empire, and rescuing the Christians. The text tells us the name of the Beast is 666. In ancient Hebrew, words doubled as numbers. The number 666 spelled out the name "Nero Caesar." He was the emperor who led a terrible persecution of Christians in the first century.^[4] This text is a revenge fantasy about defeating the Roman empire. A vision of God coming to the rescue of persecuted Christians. Rome, the modern Babylon, would fall, and Christians would walk in peace with God in a heavenly city come down to Earth.

But the thing about codes is that they can be misunderstood. Long after Rome was gone, and Christianity had spread through Europe, Revelation was still sitting there at the end of the Bible. The Roman Catholic Church kept its imagery alive with the fearful last judgement to keep people in line. Yet, it discouraged people from thinking the end was coming anytime soon. But from time to time, when peasants were starving, some renegade priest would come along, arguing that their troubled times were the prelude to the end of the world. That the local king and the Pope were the antichrist from Revelation, and that Jesus was coming to save them. These peasant revolts were called millenarian movements because they wanted to be ruled by Christ for a thousand years, when life would be good. But to get there, they needed to battle the evil human rulers who held them down. Not surprisingly, these movements were crushed by armies and Popes, over and over again.

America is a nation that was founded on these millenarian hopes. The Puritans who fled England for Massachusetts in the 1600s were convinced that the world would soon end. They believed that their little Christian sect were the chosen ones who would be saved by Christ and live in that 1000-year period of peace.^[5] They were not the last to draw on revelation for inspiration and consolation. In 1862, it was not clear that the North was going to win the American Civil War. Julia Ward Howe was a poet, staying in Washington D.C. . One day, she saw the northern troops mustering, getting ready for battle against the south. She was certain that slavery was evil. She was equally convinced God was on the North's side. She went home and wrote a poem, which was soon set to a popular tune.^[6] It went like this:

(Choir sings:)

**Mine eyes have seen the glory.
Of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage.
Where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning
Of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.**

Chorus

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!

His truth is marching on.

Her poem invokes imagery from Revelation to imagine Christ coming in glory to join and help the northern army in its battle against the evil of slavery. For many centuries, Revelation has been an inspiration to Christians who felt under threat.

This kind of borrowing from Revelation continues into our day. Evangelical Christians are known for believing that everything in the Bible is meant to be useful, and it always about our lives right now. Being careful readers of the Bible, for a long time they believed that the end of the world could only be initiated by Christ. A Christian's duty was to live righteously, so we could be ready when the tribulations began.^[7] This lead many evangelicals to interpret every new earthquake or famine as possible a sign that the end had begun. It also meant that they should stay out of politics, since that would be where Satan would want to exert the most influence. They assumed, based on Revelation, that since only God could initiate the end of the world, all Christians could do was wait and keep their heads down.

Since the 1970s, a new reading of Revelation has appeared in the United States. It is called dominionism. These Christians believe that the best way to get Christ to return is for Christians take over society.^[8] Specifically, they believe that Christians must take over seven areas of society, which they call the seven mountains. Christians must be in control of family, education, medicine, media, government, entertainment and business. Basically, everything. They believe the existing government has already been taken over by Satan, as predicted in Revelation. As a result, they believe the current government is corrupt, and should be shut down or taken over by Christians.

There are two things progressive Christians should understand about this movement. First, that is based on a significant misreading of the Book of Revelation. The Bible says only God can initiate the end of the world. God is not waiting for Christians to take over first. So, the dominionists have created their own faith here, it is not Biblically based. This is a power grab dressed in pseudo-Biblical clothing.

Second, the dominionists have become tremendously powerful. The leading organization of this movement is called the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR).



One of its leaders is this man on the left, Rafael Cruz, the father of Senator Ted Cruz from Texas. Senator Cruz has consistently argued, that the Internal Revenue Agency, which collects taxes, should be abolished, so Christians can hang onto their money without paying for government services.^[10] When Donald Trump became President, he appointed Rev. Paula White, a dominionist as his Presidential spiritual advisor.^[11]



On January 6th, 2021, she led the prayer at the rally which preceded the attack on Congress. At the close of her prayer, she stated “we worship God, not government.”^[12]

Trump’s close allies, Roger Stone and General Michael Flynn, are both dominionists.^[13] This sect of Christianity has played a prominent role in the overturning of Roe vs Wade, and in contesting the legitimacy of the 2020 election.^[14] Their assumption that the current government is secretly controlled by evil forces has become very popular among conspiracy theorists and small “c” conservatives. Their influence on the right explains why so many Christian Republican politicians seem uninterested in governing, and more dedicated to simply dismantling

government. It also explains why the tone of American politics has shifted from disagreements about the size of government, to a battle of good and evil.^[15] Dominionists and their sympathizers have taken to denouncing leading Democrats like Nancy Pelosi as demons. ^[16]

We are witnessing a political revolution inspired by the Book of Revelation. The core interest is power, mostly for white Christians. It is being justified by a self-serving misreading of Revelation. While progressive churches may find Revelation irrelevant or embarrassing, others have weaponized and distorted it. It is critical that we see through these deliberate distortions. Revelation was written by people who saw the state as a source of hatred and persecution. To take that same book and use it to justify hatred is perverse and wrong. When God sends troubles to the Earth, each time, we are told, “and still the people did not repent.” In revelation, God gives the people multiple chances to see through the lies of evil rulers. Even as the world comes apart, God holds out an olive branch, asking people to renounce evil and hatred. When the heavenly city descends, it is a poetic vision of hope. It imagines a world without strife, where the judgement and disparagement of others has ended. Not because everyone in this heavenly city is the same. We are told explicitly that the saved will be gathered from all nations. People of every colour and ethnicity will live in peace.

This Book was written as a vision of a world that could work once evil, hating influences were swept away by God, not by human beings. At no time does it suggest that the way to love is through hatred. And how could it? The only way to love and God is walking on the pathway of love, a beautiful path which can be reached through humility, prayer and openness. If love is to reign in the future, all we can do is ask for some of that love now, and practice it as best we can. To flow with that love, bending like water as circumstances require. If we want to be saints who gather around the throne of God, love is the way there. That is the great Revelation. One still worth listening to, and living by.

Amen.