

Preaching the Apocalypse

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The book of Revelation can be fascinating, intriguing and perplexing but chiefly, it is designed to be helpful. It is a book for the church. Churches need to hear it and preachers ought to preach it. Not only that, ordinary pastors *can* preach it and churches *can* cope with it. It ought not be put in the “too hard” basket. It may be wise for preachers not to tackle the book too early in their ministry. The fact is, it is a difficult book, full of biblical allusions that will be handled better after a preacher has wider familiarity with God’s Word. But, despite its challenges, Revelation has themes that need to be heard by the church today.

A. Motivations to preach on Revelation

There are a number of reasons why preachers should consider preaching from Revelation. The first is that churches need the realism of Revelation. Revelation is a book about struggle, war, suffering and martyrdom. It is not in any way naively triumphalistic. It does not promote a sugary, sentimental Christianity. Rather, it will help steel believers for battle, prepare them for suffering, strengthen them to persevere and help them to remember that they are not in heaven yet. It will therefore teach the church to persevere. This is one of the great themes of Revelation and also one of the great failings of the church in the West in the 21st century. Our consumer age has taught people not to persevere but, if things are hard, to shop elsewhere. So we readily change church, or marriage partner, or job if things don’t work out well. We also want things fast – including sanctification. Revelation is a superb antidote to this kind of superficiality.

Secondly, Revelation will help the church to think corporately. It is a book more suited to corporate than individual spirituality. It is not about ‘you, me and Jesus’ but about Christ and his bride, the Church. It is not about how to have better quiet times, or how to build your marriage. It is not a “how to” book at all. It is about the church of Christ on earth, viewed from a heavenly perspective. It will therefore help people think more corporately and less individualistically.

A third benefit in preaching from Revelation is that it will help instil hope. The corporate realism and perseverance promoted in Revelation is not pessimistic. It is full of the expectation of glory. If it tells us the world is

getting worse and worse, it also tells us the work of the gospel is getting better and better. If it warns us of Satan's power, it also proclaims to us the greater power of Christ. If it sobers us with pictures of the dragon, the land beast and the sea beast, it also shows us that they are a pale reflection of God, the Son and the Spirit. Revelation is a book to inspire and enthuse. It gives a reason to go on and a cause for which to fight. When times are easy people are motivated by trivialities but in times of war they are motivated by great and worthy causes. Revelation motivates in this latter way and gives us reason to fight on.

One final reason for preaching Revelation is that it teaches the church to be God-ward in its orientation. This book lifts our eyes above what we can see, above what we are currently experiencing, above what things look like, so that we see things as God sees them. It teaches us to see that he is enthroned on high, sovereign over all. Creatures, earthly and heavenly, surround his throne, singing his praises. Revelation is the New Testament praise book but it is not the sentimental praise of 'Jesus is my boyfriend' songs. It is the robust worship that is generated by knowledge of God's great attributes.

Given these motivations for preaching from one of the hardest books of the Bible, it will be useful to consider next the kind of text choice that is conducive to effective preaching.

B. Choosing texts and planning a series

Revelation is lengthy and contains a great amount of difficult detail. While it is possible to have a magisterial series of perhaps thirty or forty sermons exploring every facet of the book, this will not usually be best for the preacher or his congregation. Most preachers will do best to work with smaller series. Many preachers readily tackle the first three chapters that are somewhat self-contained, fairly straight-forward and readily applied to the contemporary church. Another bite-sized series would be a sermon or sermons from Revelation 4-5 or from chapters 21-22. These are the most accessible parts of the book.

Other manageable selections, beyond these common ones, are also possible. A series on the beatitudes of Revelation¹, or the doxologies²

¹ Seven beatitudes can be found in 1:3, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7 and 22:14

² The seven key doxological scenes are 1:4-8, 4:1-5:14, 7:9-17, 11:15-19, 14:1-5, 15:1-8 and 19:1-10.

would provide insights into the book without having to cover some of the more obscure parts. More significant would be a brief series that devoted one message to each major section of the Apocalypse.³

Whatever approach is taken, any portion must be preached in light of the whole and ordinarily, preaching texts ought not to be too small. While the temptation, for the sake of ease, will be to adopt short texts, the safest and surest approach is to preach whole scenes. When John is caught up in the Spirit he doesn't just *hear* things, he *sees* things. Entire pageants and dramas unfold before his eyes. We therefore do greater justice to the book when we preach whole scenes. If we focus only on parts we may well pay too much attention to the details and lose a sense of the whole.

It is preferable, for example, to preach one sermon on the seven seals rather than a sermon on each seal. It is preferable to preach one message on the two beasts of chapter 13 than a message just on the meaning of 666. The only exception is if a verse or a few verses sum up a section, but even then, the preacher will need to know and draw on the section as a whole. After preaching a section as a whole, the preacher may choose to return to some of the details of the passage in subsequent messages or pick up on them in other contexts, such as in a bible study group.

Dealing with large texts, of course, requires many hours of study and demands sermons that are longer than 15 or 20 minutes. Here there can be no short cuts. We must prioritize sermon preparation time amidst the demands of pastoral ministry if we want to handle material as substantial as Revelation. And we must, over time, teach our congregations to cope with sermons of at least 30 minutes if we are to serve meat not just tasty treats.

³ A possible division of Revelation for a series of ten sermons would be:

1. 1:1-20 - the vision of Christ
2. 2:1-3:22 - the seven churches
3. 4:1-5:14 - the throne room
4. 6:1-8:1 – the seven seals (or 8:2-9:21, 11:15-19 - the seven trumpets)
5. 12:1-17 – a look behind the scenes
6. 13:1- 14:20 - Satan's agents and God's people
7. 17:1-18:24 - the fall of Babylon
8. 19:1-21 - the Wedding of the Lamb and the Fall of the Beast
9. 20:1-15 - the binding of Satan
10. 21:1-22:21 - the New Jerusalem

3. Preaching for the eye

We have observed that John *sees* things and that large dramas unfold before his eyes. Revelation is a visual book. In preaching, therefore, we need to help our people see what John saw, which is one of the chief reasons for preaching whole scenes. Wilcock suggests that the first readers would have keenly anticipated John revealing what he saw next:

We may be among those who find the recounting of other people's dreams a breakfast-time bore; needless to say the vision revealed by Christ to his apostle could never come under that condemnation! Should we not rather imagine the little congregation at Philadelphia, for example, gathered in someone's house on the Lord's day, hanging on every word of the one who was reading? And as he came to the end of each paragraph, would they not be saying eagerly, 'And what happens next? What does John see next?'⁴

The scenes in Revelation are often bizarre, grotesque, dramatic and extreme. John is ushered into places where he sees amazing things, sometimes weird, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes beautiful. It is important that the preacher does not regard these pictures as disposable husks, to be dispensed with as quickly as possible in order to get down to the real propositional teaching. The preacher must paint the picture, allowing the scene to unfold and the characters to emerge. He must not rush to explain everything. He will do well to let people see the ugliness of the beast, or the grossness of the prostitute, or the majesty of the heavenly throne room. Vern Poythress says, "Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don't try to puzzle it out. Don't become preoccupied with isolated details. Rather, become engrossed in the overall story."⁵

As such, we must ask the right questions of the text. A. Pieters suggests that we should not ask, "Who is this meant to be?" but ask, "What is the picture?" and "What does this picture mean?"⁶

As with parables, sometimes the details may just be part of the scenery. Not every aspect of the picture must carry meaning; not every detail needs to be explained. Pieters puts this well:

⁴ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*. Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: IVP, 1975), p. 111.

⁵ Vern Poythress, *The Returning King*. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2000), p. 13.

⁶ A. Pieters, *Studies in the Revelation of St John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), p. 69.

The great thing in reading the Revelation is to get the impression. I will not discourage any one from careful study, and do not deny that he does well who seeks to know the meaning of every detail, so far as it can be ascertained; but this I do say, that he who uses the book to get an overwhelming *impression* of majesty, and reverence, and awe, and assurance of victory, and certainty that, come what may, Christ is supreme, that man makes the right use of the book, even though he be wrong in almost every point of interpretation.⁷

Preaching Revelation so that people see it and feel it can be a particular challenge for us. We are often inclined to treat Revelation as we would a Pauline epistle or a narrative by Luke. Many of us instinctively think analytically and propositionally. However Revelation demands that we think in terms of pictures, images, impressions and symbols. It may well be a book best suited to right brained preachers. Perhaps sermon preparation should include watching *Lord of the Rings* as well as reading commentaries, so that we learn to visualise mighty vistas, graphic battles, vile creatures, massive tension, and begin to sense fear, joy, disgust and delight. Pieters suggests that Romans is for the mind, Psalms for the emotions, commandments for the will, but Revelation for the imagination!⁸ The advice of Vern Poythress is right on target:

Let the images ‘soak into you’. Get involved in the Book. Don’t try to puzzle it out. Enjoy it. Sing about it. Cheer for the saints. Detest the beast. Rejoice in God’s power and glory. Praise the Lamb.⁹

As we observe scenes and enter into the drama of the text we will secure one of the best remedies against predictable and boring preaching. We have to reckon with the fact that once a congregation has grasped how we interpret Revelation they may begin to predict where we are going. They start to know how the book works and understand its main themes and emphases. They know that we will be talking again about persecution, trials throughout this age, Satan’s deceptive activity, his tendency to use counterfeits, the triumph of the Lamb, future glory, the call to overcome, and so on. A series from Revelation, however, should never become predictable. It certainly was not boring for John as these visions unfolded.

⁷ Pieters, p. 71

⁸ Pieters, p. 71

⁹ Vern Poythress, quoted in S. Voorwinde, “Worship: The key to the Book of Revelation?” in *Vox Reformata* (No 63, 1998), p. 35

He was repeatedly left shaken, stunned and astonished. At one point he was so discombobulated that he began worshipping an angel instead of the Lord, receiving a mild rebuke for his error.

A useful principle for preachers approaching any passage of Scripture is to look for what you would not expect. Look for the surprise, the twist, the difficulty. This is often the key to a passage and it is particularly so in Revelation. In each scene, look for the drama. In chapter 5, for example, there is the dramatic tension of no one being able to open the scroll. John weeps in agony. The scroll contains the plans and purposes of God for all history. Everyone wants to know what it says, but no one is worthy to open it. But then one is found. A lion. The spotlight turns to him, yet as he appears he looks not like a lion but like a slain lamb. It is this dead looking sheep that is worthy to unfold the purposes of God history, and who then, believe it or not, takes his place on the throne with God.

The final battle in chapter 17 is similarly unpredictable. The chapter has revealed to us the hideous beast, ridden by a gaudy, drunken prostitute. It is again a lamb that lines up to fight the beast in what appears to be a ridiculously unequal contest. But the lamb actually wins, and wins easily. It is one of many times in Revelation where a great battle is a fizzer. The win is all too easy when at first it looks virtually impossible.

Another dramatic moment is the half hour of silence when the seventh seal is opened. Perhaps no text calls for dramatic pause more than that one!

Working with the innate drama of the text will help prevent sermons from becoming boring and predictable even after the key themes are already well known. Look for the dramatic, the unexpected, the surprising, and work with that.

4. Handling the details

As a preacher works through the book or a portion of it, he will particularly face the question of how much detail he should go into. The scenes need explanation, but how much? The scenes rest on OT passages, but to what extent do you have to open them up as well? The scenes are rooted in the 1st century, but how much classical history must the congregation learn to understand the book correctly? The scenes contain curious numbers, signs and symbols, but do we try to unravel all that is there?

Here we must steer a fine line between too much and too little detail. Too little will rob our hearers of much of the richness of the text. They need to know, for example, that the beast, the dragon and the lamp stands didn't come from nowhere. Each has a rich Old Testament background. They also need to be introduced to the great biblical themes of life and death, the Garden, the temple and the desert. They will also need some awareness of the first century setting. These things were written to real churches in real places about real issues, and many interpretative errors are avoided by first applying each passage to the original recipients.

Messages from Revelation, therefore, must be anchored in biblical interpretation and the historical setting. But ordinarily we will need to limit the amount of detail given. A sermon is not a verbalized commentary on the passage, so what the commentators cover is not necessarily what the preacher must cover. Neither is a sermon a lecture. It does need to systematically justify every interpretation made, not recount the various alternative possibilities.

So what is a sermon? It is a message from God to his people today. The preacher's task is to discover and bring that message as clearly and plainly as possible. He will have to do copious amounts of work himself to be sure he has the message right, but he will bring that background information to his people selectively, presenting sufficient detail for the text to come alive and make sense, but not so much that only the most academic and pedantic hearers can cope.

Ordinarily, good preaching focuses on one main thing in each message. Unity and persuasiveness are generally dependent on having a central proposition (or big idea, or main theme) that is the chief focus of the entire sermon. That one thing is opened up, explained, applied and driven home to the hearers. Preaching Revelation is no different. The chief task is to find the passage's centre of gravity. Find the main message of the scene and preach that. That will then allow us to omit some of the details so long as we have preached clearly and fully the main point.

The main thrust of a given passage may not necessarily be stated up front in our sermon. Revelation will often lend itself to a more inductive sermon form, allowing the picture to unfold. The sermon saves some of the mystery. It puts the puzzle together piece by piece. But throughout, the preacher is driving toward the central thrust of the text. By the end he has arrived at the one central message God has given him from that text. If the

scene has been explained well, that central message should be graphic and memorable.

5. Making sound application

Of course, one of the hardest aspects of preaching Revelation is knowing how to apply it. Given the prophetic nature of Revelation we must determine whether the prophecies relate to the first century, to the present, or to the future. Ordinarily, we will do well to think in terms of all three horizons.

We ought usually to begin our explanation of the text in the first century context. We ask, “Why was it important to them? What did it mean for them?” Anchoring our interpretation then may help us avoid pointless speculation on matters that were clear to them but are now veiled to us. Suppose, for example, someone in a remote tribe in Papua New Guinea, who has never listened to a radio, seen a TV news bulletin or read a newspaper, comes to the West and overhears a conversation about 9/11. He has no idea what 9/11 is. He may turn it over in his mind: 9-1 -1, 911??? Without being told how American’s put the date and without knowing about terrorism and the World Trade Centre, 9/11 means nothing to him. To those in the know, however, those numbers are easy and loaded with meaning. In a similar way, Revelation was written in a particular context in which a number of details that are now very obscure to us may have made perfect sense to them.

While we root our interpretations in the first century, however, our chief task in preaching is to speak to the 21st century. We must ask, “How is the same issue important for us? What does it mean for how we live and operate as God’s people today?” Preachers should spend at least as much time on ‘our world’ as ‘their world’. That does not mean finding in the present socio-political sphere all kinds of fulfilments of John’s prophecies, but rather it means relating the truths of Revelation to the battles, struggles, fears and realities of church life and Kingdom living today.

Yet even much present day application will fail to do justice to Revelation because the book is incessantly eschatological. Every scene is moving toward the end. Each drama draws us nearer to the new heaven and new earth. So we must also ask, “How does this passage help us relate to our final eschatological hope?” We will do people a great favour if we can help them think eschatologically.

In applying Revelation at these three different levels we need constantly to remember that its application is much broader than issues of personal sin and salvation. Revelation deals with cosmic conflict and systemic sin. It concerns war in heaven, corrupt governments on earth, a world marked by apostasy, and the state of church and society.

Perhaps the chief application is to teach the church how to cry the ultimate cry of Revelation: “How long?” How long this struggle? How long this persecution? How long this advance of the enemy, this reign of evil, this injustice and oppression? The words of one of the verses of the great hymn, *The Churches One Foundation*, are apt:

Though with scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed,
Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, “How long?”
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.

6. Preaching Christ

At weddings it is invariably the bride who attracts most attention. Her dress, her hair, her face, her flowers - she is the centre of attention. But that is not the case at the wedding supper of the Lamb. Then the Groom will be the centre of attention. While we have seen that Revelation is more about the church than individuals, we might also say it is more about Christ than the church.

Revelation is a gospel book. In it the gospel triumphs amid persecution, judgement, trial and suffering. It triumphs because Christ has already had the victory. He has conquered death. He has defeated the powers of evil. He has overcome sin. He is therefore worthy of praise and honour.

The centrality of Christ is wonderfully highlighted by the range of titles given to him. He is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth. He is the Living One, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. He is the Lamb who was slain. He is the Word of God, the Lord of lords and King of kings. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. He is the bright and Morning Star.

Revelation begins with a vision of his majestic glory and power and then proceeds to shower him with accolades, calling forth for him the highest

praise. He is the Lord of the Church, walking among the lamp stands. He is seated on the throne with God. He alone is worthy to open the scroll. He is the witness who is faithful unto death, as we should be also. He is the one in whom there is resurrection and eternal hope. He is the one to whom all authority has been given. Victory over Babylon, over the beast, and over the dragon is achieved by him.

Clearly, then, it would be a travesty to open up the scenes of Revelation and explain its images and symbols without constantly putting the spotlight on Jesus Christ himself. John showed his readers what we also need: a clear and compelling picture of Jesus. The chief task of the preacher of Revelation is to preach Christ to people's affections, causing them to hope in him, rejoice in him, long for him, be thankful for him, depend on him and marvel at him. Anything less than this will fall short of the very purpose of the book itself.

The would-be preacher of Revelation may well feel like he is standing at the foot of an enormous mountain. Revelation is not for novices. Embarking on the journey can be daunting. But it should be clear that the views from the peak are unsurpassable in their beauty and majesty. Revelation is worth preaching on! In fact, the book pronounces a special blessing on those who read it, and we might add preach it, as well as on those who hear it. Equipped with strong motivations for opening up its grand themes, suitable text choice, a refusal to get bogged in the details, a commitment to past, future and present application, and a supreme desire to see Christ magnified, the preacher may commence the ascent with a large measure of exhilaration and anticipation. Revelation is a great book to preach.