

*The Deep Things of God*  
By Jon Paulien

**Chapter One**

**The World of the Book of Revelation**

I was born on the Upper East Side of Manhattan . . . when it was relatively poor (today the Upper East Side is the nation's most expensive real estate). My parents soon found affordable and attractive housing across the Hudson River in New Jersey. But while I grew up in another state, my family and I still thought of ourselves as New Yorkers. We went to church in Manhattan, and when we could afford it, my brother and I went to Adventist schools in the city as well.

It was tough growing up Adventist in New York City. Not only were most of the people on the street secular, we didn't even feel at home with Christians of other denominations. We were a tiny community of our own in the midst of an enormous world of skyscrapers and forbidden attractions. Like most New Yorkers, we hurried from one familiar place to another through a vast jungle of strangers with unfamiliar faces. We rode subways and buses that were crowded with people who labored diligently not to make eye contact or otherwise acknowledge each other's existence. To grow up Adventist in New York was to be a stranger in a strange land.

I can't say I was ever really persecuted for my faith. I knew I was different, I was strange. I wanted to be liked but the neighbor kids knew I was not like them. I didn't go to the movie theaters with them. I never showed up at the school dances on Friday night (I went to public school for five years). When my friends asked if they could come over on Saturdays, I made some excuse or other. When offered a beer or a smoke I declined as politely as I knew how (although I suffered many guilty struggles at the neighborhood candy shop). When the pork chops came out at my friend's house, I made it clear that I was not hungry (even though I had been there for five hours). Persecuted? No. Abused? No. Scorned and rejected? Not really. My non-Adventist friends and neighbors were really nice people. A fish out of water? Yes. A stranger in a strange land? Definitely.

Growing up I felt more at home in the book of Revelation than I did in my neighborhood. John seemed to understand my struggles with the world. He understood the forbidden attractions, the sense of being different, even weird. He set the table for the kind of world I was living in. When I read about the seven churches, I felt that I was reading about me. As a scholar of Revelation, the more I learn about John's world the more it sounds like the one I grew up in. Christians in Asia Minor, even if they weren't persecuted, struggled with how to live as Christians in a pagan world.

In the ancient Roman world most human needs were met by one of two institutions, the family or the state. There was also a third category of society, what we might call "associations" or "clubs." These associations in the ancient world existed to meet needs that were not met by either the home or the government. In a way they were like an extended family. The church

found its place in this ambiguous third category of society. It was seen by Roman society as a strange sort of "club." These Roman "associations" were often harmless, but at times the state felt threatened by them. According to Adela Yarbro Collins, five major events made the situation of the church in the Roman world seem increasingly precarious at the time Revelation was written.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Precarious Situation of the Church**

#### *Conflicts with the Jews*

First of all, the church was suffering from a number of conflicts with the Jews. These conflicts had serious potential consequences. You see, Judaism was known in Latin as a "religio licita," a legal religion. As a legal religion Jews had privileges not granted to others, such as the right to Sabbath observance and to exemption from worship of the emperor. Rome had learned that cutting the Jews some slack avoided many problems in society. As long as Christians were thought of as Jews, and many of them were, they were sheltered under Roman law.

Toward the end of the first century, however, conflicts between Christians and Jews threatened to separate them in the minds of others. Since Jews were a recognized association and the church was not, the more Christians were distinguished from Judaism, the more difficulties they would have in society. So Jewish attempts to repudiate Christianity had legal consequences for Christians in the first century. Note the evidence of the following texts:

"I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! ***I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.*** Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of

death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Revelation 2:9-10

"To the angel of the church of Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens, no one can shut; and what he shuts, no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ***I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not***, but are liars--I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you."

Revelation 3:7-9

There is evidence Jews made note of the fact that Christians were the only Jewish sect that did not stay in Jerusalem and fight during the war of independence against Rome in AD 70. It is likely that from that time on, Christians were increasingly seen as a foreign element, even when they attended the synagogues. Some scholars believe that an extra prayer or benediction was added to some synagogue services around 80-90 AD. This "eighteenth benediction" was basically a curse against Christ and Christians. Christians attending such a service would identify themselves by falling silent during that benediction. When this occurred, they could be singled out and excluded from the communion.

So around the time that the book of Revelation was written, the legal standing of Christians was coming under threat. Christians would naturally be concerned about this situation and wonder what the future would hold for them in Roman society.

### *Gentile Accusations*

A second problem that Christians began to face at this time were accusations from their Gentile neighbors. As Gentiles came to see a distinction between Christian faith and Judaism,

they often examined Christianity with hostile contempt. From the second century on, there is plenty of evidence for Gentile accusations against Christians. It is reasonable to assume that such accusations were already beginning to occur toward the close of the first century, although we have no direct, written evidence. Let's look at the kinds of accusations that were thrown at Christians shortly after the time when Revelation was written.

One second-century accusation was that Christians were “haters of the human race.” They were seen as exclusive because they did not participate in civil society the way most people did. Public events in Asia Minor were saturated with pagan rituals and rhetoric. Christians, therefore, usually avoided them so as not to compromise their faith. The general population, on the other hand, took the smorgasbord approach to religion. They felt free to pick and choose among a variety of ideas. But much like today, they did not appreciate people who thought they had the truth and that everybody else was wrong. So they accused Christians of being anti-society.

Since religion was so tightly connected with civil affairs in ancient Rome Christians were also accused of “atheism” because they would not worship any god but their own. The peoples of the Empire each had their own religious preferences but added worship of the state gods as a token of their allegiance to the state. Christians were charged with atheism because they would not accept the state gods as objects of worship.

Christians, oddly enough, were also accused of “cannibalism.” How on earth did this one come up? It had to do with Gentile perceptions of the Lord's Supper, where Christians were “eating the body and drinking the blood” of their Lord. Christians understood these statements

in a spiritual way, but apparently their pagan neighbors did not. So stories went around that Christians were sacrificing children and others, in order to eat at their Lord's table. The combined effect of all these accusations was an insecure world for Christians to live in.

### *Traumatic News*

A number of traumatic events would have been further indicators that Christian standing in Roman society was increasingly uncertain. One such event was the destruction of Jerusalem. While this event did not affect Christians directly, it raised an important question, “If a **legal** religion could be handled in such a brutal manner by the Romans, what would happen if Rome focused its attention on Christians?”

A second piece of traumatic news would have been reports of Nero's persecutions. These persecutions were brief but gruesome. Though probably the work of a madman, the helplessness of Rome's Christians showed just how fragile the relationship of all Christians to the Empire was. There were not a lot of safeguards in Roman society for minorities. We are used to the idea that when people's views are in the minority the legal system should prevent the majority from totally abusing the minority. But in New Testament times it was not so. A Roman emperor could mistreat a minority with little danger of retribution.

A third piece of traumatic news was the gradual development of the imperial cult of emperor worship. The call to worship the emperor was both a religious and a political act. Refusal to participate in emperor worship was more than unpatriotic, it was a treasonous act. This made it difficult for people to be good citizens and good Christians at the same time.

Christians were singled out because even small tokens of loyalty to the emperor compromised their loyalty to Jesus Christ. Asking Christians to worship the emperor would be like forcing Jews to become Nazis or African Americans to give public lip service to the tenets of the Ku Klux Klan. There was no good news for Christians in these developments.

### *The Death of Antipas*

The book of Revelation also reports the execution of a Christian named Antipas. While details are not given, it is clear that Antipas died as a martyr to his faith. “You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city--where Satan lives.” (Rev 2:13) Pergamum was one of the places where the Roman governor held court and made judicial decisions. It is possible that early Christians would see in the “sharp, two-edged sword” of Christ (2:12,16) a contrast to the governor’s power over the “sword,” the death sentence.<sup>2</sup> If so, Antipas was probably executed by the Roman governor for being a Christian.

The procedure in Antipas’ case may have been similar to that described by the governor Pliny some fifteen years later, in a letter to the Emperor Trajan:

“I have asked the accused whether they were Christians. If they confessed, I asked a second and a third time, threatening penalty. Those who persisted I ordered to be executed, for I did not doubt that, whatever it was they professed, they deserved to be punished for their inflexible obstinacy. . . . I dismissed those who said they were not or never had been Christians, and who in my presence supplicated the gods and placed wine and incense before your (Trajan’s) image, and especially cursed Christ, which I hear no true Christian will do.”

Trajan responded that Christians were not to be sought out or tried on the basis of anonymous

accusations, but if they were openly brought to the governor's attention, they were to be handled as Pliny had described.<sup>3</sup> Antipas was probably not sought out by the governor, but was accused by a hostile neighbor, either Jew or Gentile. Imagine living in a place where you never knew which neighbor might suddenly report your faith to the authorities! If it could happen to Antipas, it could happen to any Christian in the Empire at any time.

### *The Exile of John*

Finally, of course, Christians would have been aware of John's own exile. Although recent scholarship has raised some questions about this, early church tradition widely held that the beloved patriarch of the church in Asia Minor was exiled to the island of Patmos, in order to prevent him from spreading his faith.<sup>4</sup> If the leader of the churches was now in exile, it would increase a sense of insecurity within the church. The original readers of Revelation, therefore, seem to have been Christians whose position in society was becoming more and more insecure on account of their faith. They were concerned about where things were going in the future, and they looked to John to provide direction and comfort in their situation.

## **Divisions in the Church**

### *The Basic Situation*

The situation of the churches in Asia Minor was even more precarious, however, for another reason. The church was more than just threatened from the outside. Divisions in the church were threatening it from inside as well. The members of the churches in Asia Minor



were in vigorous disagreement as to how to handle their marginalized position in society. We can see this very clearly as we work our way through the seven letters (Revelation 2-3).

“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.” (Rev 2:14) Apparently there were some Christians in Pergamos who were following what Jesus calls the “teachings of Balaam.” Balaam did not succeed in destroying the Israelites through prophetic curses. So, instead, he counseled the Moabites to use sexual enticement and idolatrous feasts (Num 25:1-3; 31:16) to lead them away from God. The letters to the churches draw a strong tie between the temptations of Israel and the situation of the churches in Asia Minor.

The majority of Christians in Pergamos, Ephesus and Smyrna were faithful to God and to the course John had taught them. But a minority in these churches were tempted to accommodate to the prevailing winds of their communities, and in the process, John feared that they would lose their connection to Christ. But while these three churches were divided, the majority seem to have remained faithful. When you get to Thyatira, the fourth church, it begins to look more like a 50-50 split. Even some of the leaders of the church at Thyatira were on the wrong side.

The impression of degeneration continues in the last three churches. In Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea the majority are not on John's side. “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.” (Rev 3:4) In Sardis, the faithful ones are few. While Philadelphia seems to have less

problems with heresy, the church has little strength (Rev 3:8). With Laodicea things are even worse, the letter gives the impression that the church is locking Jesus out (Rev 3:20). There isn't even a faithful minority. Jesus can find nothing good in Laodicea at all (Rev 3:14-20).

So among the seven churches of Asia Minor three seem largely on John's side of the conflict, one it seems to be about 50-50, and the last three have only a minority who are faithful. The churches of Asia Minor are seriously divided about how to relate to society and the problems around them. It is a time of both external and internal stress. So the book of Revelation was written not only to encourage the faithful in a time of impending persecution, but also to confront the churches about their divided condition.

### *Beliefs of the Opposition*

The seven letters of Revelation 2-3 offer a sharp rebuke to many in the churches. When we compare what we find in Revelation with other New Testament books, we gain insight into the following questions: "Why were the Christians of Asia Minor divided? What was the basis for that division? Who were John's opponents and what did they believe?"

The opponents of John are described by means of three different names in Revelation 2-3 - they are Nicolaitans, Balaam, and Jezebel:

**"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: *You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam*, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise *you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*"**

Rev 2:14-15 NIV

**"Nevertheless, *I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel*, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual**

immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.”

Rev 2:20 NIV

So the Christian opponents of John are called followers of Balaam, Jezebel, and those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Apparently all three names represent the same group because all three names involve the same problems: the two basic issues of food offered to idols and sexual immorality. A further evidence of the unity between these groups is based on the meaning of two of the names. “Nikolaos” is a Greek term that means “conqueror of the people,” while the Hebrew term “Balaam” means “one who swallows up the people”—the two names mean essentially the same thing (one in Greek and one in Hebrew).

So all three of these “groups” taught essentially the same thing—something to do with food offered to idols and sexual immorality. Interestingly enough, when you go to the writings of the following century, the same two issues are front row center. Why were Christians divided over these issues? Because these two issues, in particular, had to do with how Christians related to the state and the society around them.

All non-Jews in the Empire were required to participate in Roman civil religion. The Romans tolerated all kinds of religious practices, but no matter what your religion was or where you came from, you were also expected to participate in the ceremonies and public events of Roman society. These events were somewhat like the Fourth of July parade in the United States. It did not matter what religion you were, it was part of your duty as a citizen to participate.

There were serious consequences for citizens who did not participate in the civil religion (the Jews, of course, were exempted), even when the death penalty was not generally in view.

Those who did not take part in the civil ceremonies would lose significant economic opportunities. They would be ostracized from the trade guilds, where people networked to build their businesses. When jobs opened up, the best would be reserved for the “good citizens” of the area. Non-participation also had political consequences. To be in civic positions required people to encourage and lead out in the civil religion. Without political position, Christians lost the ability to influence the development of society or to improve their position within it. Lack of participation in the civil religion also resulted in the loss of social opportunities. Just like today, the party crowd was also the “in crowd” and Christians had a hard time becoming “in.” As a result those who refused to participate in Roman civil religion became poor, powerless, social outcasts. These were very real issues to anyone who considered becoming a Christian in first-century Asia Minor.

Why did Christians have so many problems with the Roman civil religion? Because there were two major elements in it that would involve a compromise with Christian faith; the issue of food offered to idols and the matter of “fornication.” Why was food offered to idols a problem for John’s churches? After all, in the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that an idol is nothing and offering food to an idol does not really matter because idols cannot speak, hear, or feel (1 Cor 8:4, 7-9). If something is offered to an idol, nothing has really happened so in principle there is no big problem here. But by the time of Revelation, the situation seems to have changed. When the idol feast was seen as a way of putting the state before God, it would create a serious conflict for many Christians.

There was also the problem of cultic prostitution. A part of the ancient religious scene

was ritualized prostitution. The idea seems to have been that if sexual intercourse took place in the temple between the men of the city and cultic priestesses, that rain would fall in abundance, the crops would grow, and the community would be prosperous. It was felt that a good citizen would on occasion visit a temple prostitute simply to encourage a little rain at the proper time. As strange as this sounds to us it made sense to the ancients. People who held aloof from these “civic traditions” might be thought hostile to the community welfare.

In the Western world today wealth and security seem to represent the highest goals of secular society. But in the Greco-Roman world there was an even higher goal, status. It was a world that reveled in the honor and esteem of others, and poured shame on those who did not conform. In such a world, the restrictions of Christian life and practice virtually guaranteed exclusion from honor and status in one’s own neighborhood.

Many Christians, however, were loath to give up the quest for a high place in the esteem of others. They wanted to have a function in society, they wanted to have economic, political, and social opportunities. They wanted to accumulate some wealth and have some influence. But that was not going to happen unless they participated in the cultic feasts and in the temple prostitution. The letters to the churches in the book of Revelation indicate that there were some Christians who weighed the options and asked, “Why not? Isn’t John being just a little exclusive here? Doesn’t God want us to be involved in reaching the world? How can we reach the upper classes for Christ if we are not involved in their lives?”

So early Christians seem to have faced a tension between outreach and involvement in society, on the one hand, and faithfulness to the full counsel of God. No doubt many Christians

pointed out the Seventh Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery?” On what basis, then, could a serious Christian even think about participating in cultic prostitution? I would like to suggest that some Christians found a theological justification for this kind of activity in the writings of Paul, who argued that the state had authority to require certain things:

“Everyone must **submit himself to the governing authorities**, for there is no authority except that which God has established. **The authorities that exist have been established by God**. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgments on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to **submit to the authorities**, not only because of possible punishment but also **because of conscience**. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”

Romans 13:1-7 NIV

Might the Nicolaitans think that they were following Paul's counsel in submitting to the requirements of civil religion? “(Pray) for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior.” (1 Tim 2:2-3 NIV) We are to pray for, obey, respect, and honor the authorities. I'm sure Paul would not have approved of cultic prostitution. In 1 Corinthians 8-10, however, Paul is fairly clear that eating food offered to idols is not a major issue in itself. For Paul, forty years before Revelation, eating food offered to idols was a personal choice based on the situation. One suspects that sincere Christians who differed with the perspective of Revelation might have found encouragement in Paul's letters, whether or not they were reading correctly.

### *John's Response to the Compromisers*

The reality is that Paul's situation was quite different than John's. ***Circumstances alter cases.*** By the time of Revelation, the appropriate response was: "No compromise. Those idols may be deaf and dumb, but behind every idol is Satan himself. If you honor the idol, you invite him into your life and you will lose your place in heaven. So, you basically have a choice: honor God and lose your place now, or honor Satan and lose it later."

The book of Revelation recommends social, political, and economic withdrawal from society, if necessary, in order to be faithful to the instructions of Jesus. John takes a hard line with the believers that Paul did not feel was necessary in his day. Evidently circumstances had changed in the forty years between Paul's letters and Revelation. Actions that would have been acceptable in the past were no longer so, due to changing circumstances.

How does one persuade believers to take such a radical stance? First of all, the book of Revelation creates what some scholars call a "symbolic universe." The empire of Rome dominates the "universe" of everyday experience. But Revelation describes an empire that transcends the empire of Rome. The reality of this world is not all there, nor is the money, power, and social opportunity of this world all there is. The book of Revelation offers the Christians of Asia Minor a larger perspective: they are kings and priests in their own right. They have genuine dignity in the eyes of God. In giving up their status in this world, they gain political and religious status that transcends even that conferred by Rome.

But it is more than a matter of being on the right side now. Jesus is coming soon and the believer needs to be on the right side when He comes. So Revelation teaches that the

difficulties Christians face are part of God's plan and their current lack of power and wealth is not to last forever. They will not always lack access to gold because one day they will walk on gold. There is no need to compromise with society because the people of God are on the winning side. True, Rome could threaten your life, your status and your earthly possessions, but God is even more powerful than Rome. Ultimately, who would you rather face, the wrath of Rome or the wrath of God? The message of Revelation is a no compromise, hard line message.

### **Applying Revelation to Our Day**

The book of Revelation clearly had a powerful message for its original time and place. It would have created discussion all over the churches of Asia Minor. But the question remains: “What do we do with it today? Is the book of Revelation merely an ancient book that has nothing to say to us today? Or is it a book that can speak as powerfully in our day as it did in John's time? How can we access that power today?”

#### *Four Major Approaches*

Traditionally, there have been four schools of interpretation regarding how to make the book of Revelation speak to every succeeding generation: preterist, futurist, historicist, and idealist.

**Preterist.** The preterist school of interpretation suggests that the book of Revelation was primarily written for John's day. Preterists believe that it offers no prophetic predictions of the future. It is simply a message from John to the churches of Asia Minor. If this is so, the book



of Revelation should be studied along the same lines as the rest of the New Testament. From Matthew to Jude, we understand the New Testament writings as messages to particular times and places, from which we can draw out truths that have ongoing relevance. There is no question that parts of Revelation, at least, fit such a description (Rev 1:9-11; 22:16). But much of the book seems to call for a different approach.

***Futurist.*** The futurist interpretation suggests that the book of Revelation was written almost solely for the final crisis of earth's history. Rather than a message to the original audience, its relevance is primarily for the final generation. The major branch of futurism is associated with the popular theory about the rapture. But other forms of futurism are becoming increasingly popular even among Adventists. Does such a view of the book really fit sequences like the Seals and the Trumpets? Is virtually the whole book intentionally limited to the final generation? Such a thesis needs to be proved rather than assumed.

***Historicist.*** The historicist mode of interpreting Revelation is the one Adventists are most familiar with. Historicism, in one form or another, portrays a sequence of history from the time of John until the second coming. This approach for Revelation is grounded on the book of Daniel, where you clearly find such historical sequences. But the historicist approach is not without its problems. If the book as a whole contains sequences of Christian history, then much of it doesn't apply directly to the point in history where we now live. Historicists sometimes read the book as if the only point of spiritual value in it is determining our location in history. As a result, the historicist interpretation has often been very dry and left people hungry for real meaning in the book.

***Idealist.*** The idealist approach suggests that the book of Revelation is not primarily historical, futurist, or even a message to the churches in John's day. Rather it contains timeless truths in symbolic form, principles that apply to any time and any place. This method is often used in conjunction with the preterist approach. The interpreter explores how the book of Revelation was originally understood, then seeks the broad and timeless principles that can apply to any age.

Which of these schools of interpretation should we adopt? Do we have to choose? Well for starters, I should point out that the futurist and historicist approaches to Revelation only make sense if the book is truly inspired by God. Unless John is getting messages directly from God, he could not describe the future in detail as the historicist position suggests, nor the final days in detail as futurism suggests. Unless we believe the Bible is an inspired book, we could not take either of these two positions.

But if you believe in inspiration, all four of these approaches have validity to some degree. First, as we have seen, the book of Revelation certainly spoke powerfully to its original audience. So the preterists have a point, at least part of the time. Second, the book claims to describe important events that are still future in our day--the second coming and even beyond. So a futurist approach to the book of Revelation will be correct at times. Third, the book of Revelation unquestionably describes the future from John's perspective (Rev 1:1), and parts of it (like Revelation 12 and the seven trumpets), at least, portray a sequence of events from John's day to the End. So the historicist approach is very helpful at various points in the book. Finally, the book of Revelation contains many themes that would be valid in any age.

After all, Jesus tells each of the seven churches: “Whoever has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches” (Rev 2:7, etc.). So all four approaches have a certain amount of validity for study of the Apocalypse.

I believe, given the above data, that historicism is the best approach for studying the book of Revelation. Historicism takes seriously the first-century standpoint of preterism, the future standpoint of futurism, and the general interests of idealism, without limiting our understanding to any one of those approaches. Instead, rightly applied, it takes all the evidence of Revelation seriously. Some aspects of the book speak directly to the beginning of the Christian era (Rev 1:4, Rev 2-3). Other aspects focus on the end of time (Rev chapters 19-22). Others are of general value in every time and place (Rev 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6, 13, 22). Historicism, rightly understood, is the best method for a book like Revelation because it allow each text to locate itself in time; it doesn't pre-determine the meaning of a text in an arbitrary way as the other approaches do. It tells us, accurately, that the book applies to the beginning of the Christian era, to the end of the Christian era, and to all the time between those two points.

I do not believe that preterism, futurism, or idealism should be imposed on Revelation as an arbitrary template. A healthier approach is to go text by text and ask: “What is the approach called for in this passage?” As we go through the book of Revelation, we will want to be sensitive to the evidence of the text. We want to let the Biblical text govern what we see in the text. In other words, we don't want to impose our ideas on Revelation, but let the text itself teach us how to understand it. Historicism, rightly applied, allows for such a biblical approach to the meaning of a given text.

### *Balanced Christian Living*

Does John's conflict with the Nicolaitans of Asia Minor offer us any lessons for today? In some ways our society is very similar to the time in which John lived. Exclusivism is not appreciated and comments like "I have the truth" or "I belong to the true church" are considered out of line. It is natural these days to be inclusive. At the same time standards and certainties seem to be breaking down. Everybody is thought to have some handle on truth and nobody has all the truth. But even though it may seem threatening to the standards and certainties of most churches, this philosophy is not all bad. Isn't it true that we all have a lot to learn? That we all have a grasp on some aspect of ultimate truth? I believe that God is using the "post-modern" shift in today's world to bring us into a more balanced view of the Bible than may have been possible in a previous generation.

The "post-modern" outlook helps us notice that Jesus and Paul support a more inclusive approach. They reached out to segments of society that no "respectable" religious person would reach out. They fellowshipped with gentiles, prostitutes, and others who were outcasts in society. So the Nicolaitans of Asia Minor may have had a point. In order to reach Roman society it helped to be involved in at least some aspects of Roman society.

But the book of Revelation warns us that there are limits to inclusion. Though outreach calls us to be everything to everyone (1 Cor 9:19-23), we must not think, say, or do things that compromise our loyalty to God. Although we want to reach out to other people, although we want to be open to truth wherever we might find it, there are times in Christian life when the

only faithful answer is “No, absolutely not.” At times like that John insists that compromise is to be shunned even if one's very life is at stake. To paraphrase Ecclesiastes: “There is a time to be inclusive and a time to be exclusive.” Revelation was written at a time when the churches needed to say "no."

So, in the book of Revelation, we discover messages of God to that time and that place, but we also discover messages to our time and place. The New Testament, Revelation included, offers a message of balance. On the one hand, there is the need for inclusiveness, to reach out to those we don't normally reach. On the other hand, there is the need for strong boundaries, wherever inclusiveness would bring us in conflict with God's will. Such balance is best attained through a broad-based approach to Scripture. So in the next chapter we will take a quick survey of Bible prophecy from Genesis to Revelation. Out of this broad perspective we will gain principles that guide us to a healthy understanding of Revelation in all of its complexities.

### Notes

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1. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 84-104.

2. *Ibid.*, 101.

3. The quotation is from Pliny, *Epistulae*, 96. Translated by Roland H. Bainton and quoted in Bainton, *Christendom: A Short History of Christianity and Its Impact on Western Civilization*, vol. 1 (NY: Harper and Row, 1966), 57. Trajan's response is summarized on page 58 of the same book.

4. Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 95-115. The more traditional position is supported by G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, edited by I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 5-16; and Kenneth A. Strand, Review of Leonard L. Thompson's AUSS *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 29 (1991): 188-190.