
Revelation

THE LECTIO CONTINUA
EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

Series Editors

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Revelation

Joel R. Beeke



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Revelation

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With heartfelt appreciation for

David Van Brugge
and
Maarten Kuivenhoven

Christ-loving brothers of integrity:
formerly, two of my finest theological students;
now, my two colleagues in pastoral ministry,
with whom I am privileged to serve
in unity and love,
thankful for how they feed my soul
through their preaching and friendship.

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Series Introduction

The greatest need of the church today is the recovery of sound biblical preaching. We need preaching that faithfully explains and applies the text, courageously confronts sin, and boldly trumpets forth the sovereign majesty, law, and gospel promises of God. This type of powerful proclamation has vanished in many quarters of the evangelical church only to be replaced by that which is anemic and man-centered. Instead of doctrinally rich exposition which strengthens faith and fosters Christian maturity, the standard fare has become informal, chatty, anecdote-laden messages, devoid of instruction in the truths of the Christian faith. This approach leaves unbelievers confused, and keeps believers in a state of chronic spiritual adolescence.¹

There is indeed a dire need for the recovery of solid biblical preaching. Not only does reformation of this sort lead Christ's sheep back to the verdant pastures of His soul-nourishing Word, it also provides a good example for present and future generations

1. A stinging, yet constructive critique of modern-day preaching is found in T. David Gordon's *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009). "I have come to recognize that many, many individuals today have never been under a steady diet of competent preaching.... As starving children in Manila sift through the landfill for food, Christians in many churches today have never experienced genuine soul-nourishing preaching, and so they just pick away at what is available to them, trying to find a morsel of spiritual sustenance or helpful counsel here or there" (Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, 17). Elements of this introduction are adapted from Jon D. Payne, "The Roaring of Christ through *Lectio Continua* Preaching," *Modern Reformation* 19, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 2010): 23–24, and are used by permission of the publisher.

of ministers. For this reason, we are pleased to introduce *The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament*, a new series of expository commentaries authored by an array of seasoned pastor-scholars from various Reformed denominations on both sides of the Atlantic.

What is the *lectio continua* method of preaching?² It is simply the uninterrupted, systematic, expository proclamation of God's Word—verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book—that endeavors to deliver the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26–27). Christian discipleship is impoverished when large portions of Scripture are ignored. Carried out faithfully, the *lectio continua* method ensures that every passage is mined for its riches (even those verses which are obscure, controversial, or hard to swallow). Paul states that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Lectio continua preaching has a splendid heritage. It finds its roots in the early church and patristic eras. Its use, however, was revived and greatly expanded during the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. When Huldrych Zwingli (d. 1531) arrived at the Zurich Grossmunster in 1519, it was his desire to dispense with the standard lectionary³ and introduce *lectio continua* preaching to his congregation by moving systematically through the Gospel of Matthew. At first, some members of his church council were suspicious. They were uncomfortable replacing the lectionary with this

2. In Christianity, *lectio continua* (Latin for continuous reading) originally referred to the practice of reading Scripture sequentially in public worship, as was the practice of the ancient church. This practice is recommended by the Westminster divines in the Directory for Public Worship, which in turn, served as an impetus for *lectio continua* preaching. Sadly, Scripture reading in this manner has been neglected in Reformed and Presbyterian churches for many generations, perhaps as far back as the eighteenth century, when public worship was reduced to sermon-hearing sessions.

3. A lectionary is a plan or table of Scripture passages to be read in the services of church for each day or week of the year.

seemingly new approach. But Zwingli explained that the *lectio continua* method of preaching was not new at all. On the contrary, important figures such as Augustine (d. 430), Chrysostom (d. 407) and Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) all employed this homiletical approach. Zwingli is quoted by his successor, Heinrich Bullinger (d. 1575), as saying that “no friend of evangelical truth could have any reason to complain” about such a method.⁴

Zwingli rightly believed that the quickest way to restore biblical Christianity to the church was to preach the whole counsel of God verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book, Lord’s Day after Lord’s Day, year after year. Other Reformers agreed and followed his pattern. In the city of Strasbourg, just ninety miles north of Zurich, preachers such as Martin Bucer (d. 1551), Wolfgang Capito (d. 1570), and Kaspar Hedio (d. 1552) practiced *lectio continua* preaching. Johannes Oecolampadius (d. 1531) boldly preached the *lectio continua* in Basel. And let us not forget John Calvin (d. 1564); between 1549 and 1564, the Genevan Reformer preached sequentially through no fewer than twenty-five books of the Bible (over 2,000 sermons), which he was able to do because he also preached regularly for weekday services.⁵

The example of these Reformers has been emulated by preachers throughout the centuries, from the Post-Reformation age down to the present. In the last half of the twentieth century, Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895–1960), Martyn Lloyd-Jones (d. 1981), William Still (d. 1997), James Montgomery Boice (d. 2000), and John MacArthur all boldly preached straight through books of the Bible from their pulpits. But why? Surely we have acquired better, more

4. It is interesting to note that the year before Zwingli began preaching sequentially through books of the Bible, he had received a new edition of Chrysostom’s *lectio continua* sermons on Matthew’s Gospel. See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Black Mountain, N.C.: Worship Press, 2004), 195. Cf. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4: *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), and Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 228–53.

5. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 159.

contemporary methods of preaching? Is the *lectio continua* relevant in our twenty-first century context? In a day when biblical preaching is being increasingly undermined and marginalized by media/story/therapy/personality-driven sermons, even among the avowedly Reformed, these are important questions to consider.

Shortly before the Apostle Paul was martyred in Rome by Emperor Nero, he penned Second Timothy. In what proved to be some of his final words to his young disciple, he wrote, “I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ...*preach the word*; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:1–2). This directive was not meant only for Timothy. It is the duty of every Christian minister (and church) to heed these timeless words; according to God’s divine blueprint for ministry, it is chiefly through the faithful proclamation of the Word that Christ saves, sanctifies, and comforts the beloved church for which He died.⁶ In other words, the preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments are the divinely sanctioned and efficacious means by which Christ and all His benefits of redemption are communicated to the elect. For this reason alone the *lectio continua* method of preaching is a helpful practice in our churches, providing a steady diet of law and gospel from the entirety of God’s Word.

Some may ask, “Why another expository commentary series?” First, because in every generation it is highly valuable to provide fresh and reliable expositions of God’s Word. Every age possesses its own set of theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural challenges. Thus, it is beneficial for both current and rising ministers in every generation to have trustworthy contemporary models of biblical preaching. Second, these volumes uniquely feature the expositions of an array of pastors from a variety of Reformed and confessional traditions. Consequently, this series brings a wealth of exegetical, confessional,

6. See Matthew 28:18–20; Romans 10:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:18–21; 1 Peter 1:22–25; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 89.

experiential, and practical insight, and furnishes the reader with an instructive and stimulating selection of *lectio continua* sermons.

This series is not meant to be an academic or highly technical commentary. There are many helpful exegetical commentaries written for that purpose. Rather, the aim is to provide *lectio continua* sermons, originally delivered to Reformed congregations, which clearly and faithfully communicate the context, meaning, gravity, and application of God's inerrant Word. Each volume of expositions aspires to be redemptive-historical, covenantal, Reformed and confessional, Trinitarian, Christ-centered, and teeming with spiritual and practical application. Therefore, we pray that the series will be a profound blessing to every Christian believer who longs to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

We are pleased to announce that this series of commentaries is now being published by Reformation Heritage Books, who have graciously agreed to take over this large task from *Tolle Lege Press*. We thank *Tolle Lege* for printing the first three volumes (*First Corinthians* by Kim Riddlebarger, *Galatians* by John Fesko, and *Hebrews* by David McWilliams). We, Jon Payne and Joel Beeke, look forward to co-editing the remainder of the series for Reformation Heritage Books. The goal is to publish two volumes per year in the King James or New King James Version, according to the choice of each author.

In addition to thanking Reformation Heritage Books and its faithful team for producing their first book in this series, we wish to thank our churches, Christ Church Presbyterian, Charleston, South Carolina, and the Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan, for warmly encouraging us as ministers to work on projects such as this one that impact the wider church. Furthermore, we thank our dear wives, Marla Payne and Mary Beeke, and our precious children, for their heartwarming support which makes editing a series like this one possible. We both feel that God has greatly blessed us with God-fearing wives and children who mean more to us than words can express.

Finally, and most importantly, thanks and praise must be given to our blessed triune God, the eternal Fountain of all grace and truth. By His sovereign love and mercy, and through faith in the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ, we have been “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (1 Peter 1:23–25).

—Jon D. Payne and Joel R. Beeke, Series Editors

Preface

When Jon Payne asked me to provide a volume of sermons on the Book of Revelation for *The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament*, I tried hard to decline due to other commitments and the length of time it would take to preach through the book for my congregation, which I regarded as an obvious prerequisite. When Jon continued to press me, eventually I relented. Though I had often desired to preach through Revelation in the first thirty-five years of my ministry, I had never dared to do so. It seemed too overwhelming. I had always excused myself when church members requested me to do so by saying, “Well, if Calvin never wrote a commentary on this complex and challenging book, who am I to preach on it?”

By 2011, however, the internal desire and sense of calling to preach through Revelation was burning within me. That desire was increased by reading some of the great commentaries that had been published on Revelation since I first entered the ministry in the 1970s. Then too I had listened with great joy to the sermons of Eric Alexander, Sinclair Ferguson, and others who had preached through Revelation in a gripping way. With much prayer, fear, and trepidation, I took the plunge at the beginning of 2012 and preached through this beautiful book of comfort for God’s persecuted children, completing it in June 2014. I must confess that preaching through Revelation was one of the greatest joys and comforts of my ministry, with the possible exception of preaching through Genesis.

If you are looking for something novel in these sermons, I fear you will look in vain. My goal was to preach through Revelation

in a thoroughly biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical way intended to comfort and mature God's people, warn the unsaved to flee to Christ for salvation, and exalt Christ as the King of kings and only Head of His church. I wish to make clear that though I am deeply indebted to the commentaries I have read and the sermons I have heard, any erroneous exegesis or application still remaining in these sermons is my own fault. I should also make clear that since I regard myself as an "optimistic amillennialist" in eschatology, my approach in preaching has not been to try to find some literal or historical meaning in every detail of every verse. For more insight, please read the first chapter, which explains the various approaches to the Book of Revelation.

You will also notice throughout these sermons there are scores of references to the Old Testament. This is because the secret to a sound interpretation of many portions in Revelation lies in researching the roots of this book in the Old Testament. Once that rootage is properly understood, the basic meaning of a chapter will often become readily apparent.

My heartfelt thanks first of all to the Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids, Michigan, who eagerly listened to these thirty-six sermons and gave me more encouragement than I deserve. I love this flock so much, and am humbled and grateful to be in my thirtieth year of serving them. What a joy they have been for nearly half of my life! Special thanks as well to Greg Bailey, Gary den Hollander, Ray Lanning, Paul Smalley, and Phyllis TenElshof for their valuable editorial assistance on this volume. I also thank Linda den Hollander for her expert typesetting work. As usual, I owe my greatest debt, under God, to my dear wife, Mary, who means far more to me than language can ever express. Except for saving union with Christ, her love for me, her commitment to be as involved in my ministry as I am, and her unceasing kindness mean more to me than anything else in this world.

I also thank Jon Payne not only for persuading me to write this volume and approving it, but also for proposing that our publishing house, Reformation Heritage Books, take over the publishing

of this series, *The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament*, in light of the fact that the previous publisher, Tolle Lege, was not able to see it through to completion. Jon also asked me to serve as co-editor of the remaining volumes with him, which I gratefully agreed to do: who wouldn't want the privilege of reading and editing volumes of sermons that expound the entire New Testament?

Finally, I wish to acknowledge God's grace in that today, as I write these words, it has been forty years since I first preached as a theological student with the sanction of the church. I preached in the morning from Matthew 5:3, and in the evening from Psalm 40:2, in Waupun, Wisconsin. It was an unforgettable day for me, as I felt greatly helped. In the forty years that have followed, I have been privileged by God's amazing grace to bring His Word in sermons, conference addresses, and lectures 15,000 times, in about forty countries, and on every continent of the globe—all despite my unworthiness. I can't speak well enough of my Sender, Commissioner, and Employer for the mercy He has shown to me in those four decades that now seem more like one or two at most. Countless times I have experienced God's strength in the midst of weakness. "Great is Thy faithfulness!" "Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us." Oh for grace to persevere to the end, "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:1–2)!

May God richly bless this series of sermons to many thousands of preachers and other readers to His own glory and the well-being of His precious bride, the church, against which the gates of hell will never prevail.

—Joel R. Beeke

June 2016
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Introducing the Book of Revelation

REVELATION 1:1-3

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.

The Revelation of Saint John the Divine, the last book of the Bible, is sometimes referred to by its Greek name, The Apocalypse. The word *apocalypse* repeatedly appears in various forms of social media today. Many people describe the times in which we live as *apocalyptic*, saying these days are the end times. People inside and outside the church are talking about eschatology, the doctrine of the last things. Scientists, politicians, and world leaders are quite at home talking about Armageddon and the end times. Politicians frequently discuss the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust from a world war or an attack by rogue nations, which could cause the final breakdown of society—indeed, of the world. Even unbelievers are using language and imagery from the Bible, specifically from the book of Revelation, and talking—albeit flippantly—about the end of the world.

What will happen to the United States and, by extension, to the world? Will our children and grandchildren continue to enjoy the freedoms and pleasures of peace that we know today? Some young people wonder whether they will live long enough to marry and

have children before Christ returns. To address such concerns, we can turn to no better source than the Bible, specifically to Revelation.

However, I must confess that I approached this series of studies on Revelation with considerable trepidation. I had wanted to take on this task for more than three decades, but did not dare to do so because of the difficulty of correctly interpreting several chapters in the book. Yet the importance of this book and a growing internal urge to attempt this study with God's help brought me to a point where I could no longer hold back.

I hope that you will approach this book with a sense of awe and wonder, as I attempted to do. I pray that God will use this book to help you explore Revelation biblically, doctrinally, experientially, and practically in an accurate and edifying way, so that you may be blessed by the Holy Spirit and bring God the glory due to His name.

We will begin by considering the first three verses of Revelation 1. These verses are the title page and foreword for Revelation. They contain all you would expect to find at the beginning of a book. The *title* is The Revelation of Jesus Christ. The *contents* of the book are everything that John saw and attested of this revelation, including things that would shortly come to pass. The *author* of the book is the apostle John. John does not identify himself as an apostle, but he assumes that everyone will know who he is. There must have been hundreds of people named John in the churches of that time, but referring to himself as a servant of Christ was sufficient to identify him as the beloved disciple and apostle who wrote the Gospel of John and the three epistles of John found in the New Testament today.

These verses also give us a foreword to the book, offering details about the agencies and forces that helped John write it. As revelation, this book is a prophecy that came from God through Christ. It was given to John by an angel and then delivered to the churches. Furthermore, the apostle commends the reading of this book, promising a blessing to those who read it, and he exhorts those who hear it read to observe and safeguard what they hear.

To summarize, these verses offer us (1) the title and contents of Revelation; (2) the manner in which the contents of this book were communicated; and (3) words of commendation from John to those who read and hear it. Let us use these divisions to help us look at the opening verses of the Bible's last book.

The Title and Contents of Revelation

Christians are often divided about the book of Revelation. Many ignore the book altogether, except for some well-known texts found in the letters to the seven churches of Asia (chaps. 2–3) and some texts here and there that are often preached at funerals. Some Christians ignore Revelation because of its unfamiliar context and its extraordinary imagery: a sea of glass; a lake of fire; six-winged beasts full of eyes before and behind; dragons, scorpions, and serpents; vials of wrath; stars falling to earth; and a bottomless pit—such things are the stuff of myths and legends. The symbolism is foreign to most of us and difficult to interpret. Many people think Revelation is so dreamlike and confusing that it cannot really be understood.

At the other extreme are Christians who are obsessed with the book and read it more than any other part of Scripture. They say the book holds the answers to all our questions and concerns regarding the distant past, the upheavals of our times, and the shape of future events.

Happily, there is a way to understand Revelation that falls between these two extremes, and it is hinted at in the title of the book. The contents of the book are summarized as The Revelation of Jesus Christ. The word for *revelation* in Greek is *apokalupsis*, from which we derive our word *apocalypse*, and it literally means an uncovering or unveiling of something that was previously hidden or kept secret. Thus, this book is an unveiling or uncovering of Jesus Christ.

Revelation was never meant to be an obscure or closed book. It was not meant to be enigmatic. It was written to be read and understood. You may have read this book in times past without attempting to understand it. You were confused by the book's imagery and

symbolism, and put off by the many conflicting interpretations people have given to that imagery. You became so frustrated that you gave up trying to understand the book. That is a pity, because this book was meant to be understood. The very title suggests that we can and should try to understand what is written in this book.

We admit there are many strange things in the book of Revelation. So perhaps we should begin our study by imagining ourselves as missionaries who are about to go out to a strange land.

One of the first things we do to prepare for that mission is to go to orientation school. There we learn *how the language works* in this new country. People who have never learned a second language are often astonished to be told that not every language works the same way or in the same order as the English language. We need to approach the language of the book of Revelation as a new language that must be mastered.

Second, we must learn *the culture* of this new country. We need to understand that what we do may convey a different meaning to people in a foreign culture. Only when we know a culture can we begin to grasp what dress, habits, gestures, and other forms of body language mean in that setting. In some cultures, you may present a gift with one hand, but in other cultures, you must use both hands or you will insult the receiver. You might say, "I am not insulting you," but your actions will speak louder than your words. Some of us give up and say: "I'm not going to change my ways to suit those people. I want to do things my way." If we do that, we will never understand a new culture or be comfortable living with the people who belong to it.

In that light, how can we begin to understand the language and culture of Revelation? Above all, we must view the content of this book as *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, not merely as *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, as the title in our English Bible (KJV) puts it. This title simply implies that John was the human instrument who recorded the prophecy and that he was also instrumental in delivering it to the churches. John himself recognizes that his book is the revelation of Jesus Christ given to him as Christ's servant.

This vision is about Jesus Christ, not the pope, Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Saddam Hussein, or any other person in world history. It has much to say about world history and tells us much about the motives and methods of world leaders, but it is primarily focused on Jesus Christ and His further revelation of Himself to His church. Because Revelation is not primarily about world events or world personalities, we must take care not to read them into the book; rather, we are to look at them in the light of the book. We may then understand what goes on in our world according to principles we find in the book of Revelation, as it discloses who Jesus Christ is and what He is doing in the world, and what He will do to bring all things to an end. So the book of Revelation is first of all a book about Christ.

Let me put it this way: *The Bible was not written to satisfy the hunger of the human mind for knowledge of future events.* Many Christians use the book of Revelation as a kind of horoscope to predict the future. They might as well read the stars. The Bible is not a horoscope; it is a revelation of Jesus Christ. It is to be understood rationally, spiritually, and practically—not superstitiously or speculatively. Indeed, reading Revelation as a horoscope is not only useless but downright sinful because all such efforts are forbidden in Scripture (Deut. 18:9–14). The technical term for this abuse of Scripture is *bibliomancy*, or using the Bible as a literary divining rod or Ouija board.

Jesus said, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power” (Acts 1:7). Instead, walking by faith, we live one day at a time, knowing that Jesus is Lord, committing the keeping of our souls to a faithful Creator, and casting all our cares upon Him. We must not attempt to pry into the future, for God alone holds the key to it. If He were to hand over that key to us, we would be sorry. So we are not to interpret Revelation speculatively or superstitiously. We must understand the book in terms of our Lord Jesus Christ, because it is a revelation of Him.

Revelation tells us that Jesus Christ, as the Lamb of God, is seated on the throne of heaven. He is the theme of this book, as the

One revealed. But He is also the Revealer, the author of the book. Verse 1 says this book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass.” “Things which must shortly come to pass” can also be translated as “things which must soon begin to happen.” This phrase is the key to understanding the book of Revelation: Jesus Christ wants to show us things that must shortly come to pass.

Some interpreters say these words refer to the immediate historical context of the apostle John, who lived in the first century after Christ. They say Revelation refers to events of that time, such as the persecution of Christians under Domitian, who ruled as emperor of Rome from AD 81 to 96. At that time, it was a capital offense for a person to be a Christian. Following this view, “things which must shortly come to pass” should thus be understood in that specific historical context. Others view these words differently. They say that “things which must shortly come to pass” refers to events and people that extend long into the future. They think that many of these events will occur during the Millennium, or the thousand-year period prior to the second coming of the Lord. Still others believe “things which must shortly come to pass” refers to what will happen in all of church history—from the first advent of Christ to His second coming.

We will be studying this book extensively, so from the beginning we must lay a solid foundation that will help us know exactly what we are doing, where we are going, and how we should best interpret this book. I am taking the risk of being technical, but with a book like Revelation, we must be technical.

In church history, five predominant ways of interpreting Revelation emerged. While these approaches have substantial overlap at points, they represent five distinct views of the message and themes of Revelation. Let us summarize those approaches.¹

First is the *preterist* approach. This view sees Revelation wholly in terms of the circumstances that transpired in John’s day prior to the

1. For a succinct summary of these five views, see Cornelis P. Venema, “Interpreting Revelation,” *Tabletalk* 36, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 10–13.

destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, without any reference to future events. The word *preterism* is derived from the Latin word *praeteritum*, meaning “that which is past.” Preterists believe that any interpretation of Revelation must be confined to the historic past rather than projected into the future. This view interprets Revelation’s opening words, “things which must shortly come to pass,” as events that happened in John’s own time. Preterists argue that, just as the seven churches of Asia were real first-century churches to which letters were addressed, so the entire book of Revelation contains only things that came to pass in John’s day or shortly thereafter, with the exception of chapters 21–22, which clearly refer to the time of the new heaven and new earth. The strength of this approach is that it strongly affirms the operative framework of the book as “things which must shortly come to pass.” Its weakness is that Revelation then has little to say to the church today in the midst of her struggles.

Second is the *historicist* approach. This view, which was held by most of the sixteenth-century Reformers, sees the book of Revelation as a symbolic representation of the panorama of church history, from the first coming of Christ to His second advent at the end of the world. A historicist might say that the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2–3 do not refer to seven particular churches in Asia Minor, but to seven ages of church history. They would then conclude that today we live in the age of Laodicea, or the era of the lukewarm church. They thus view Revelation as a chart of church history, offering a series of historical pictures moving from Christ’s first coming to the end of the present age. In Revelation 13, the beast rising from the sea could be the rise of Islam in the seventh century, while Revelation 17, several centuries further along, may refer to the Roman Catholic Church and the rise of the papacy. The strength of this approach is that it embraces all of church history; its weakness is that it too easily assumes that Revelation prophesies a linear movement through church history, with no recapitulation of events seen from different points of view.

Third is the *futurist* approach. This was the most popular view of evangelicals at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially

premillennial dispensationalists, but it has lost ground in recent decades. The futurist believes that the visions of Revelation 4–22 refer to events that are still future, but that they will transpire immediately prior to and along with Christ’s second coming at the end of history, ushering in the millennial age. Most futurists are premillennial; that is, they believe that Christ’s return will precede the millennial age. The problem with this view is that it reads the book as almost entirely without reference to the needs and struggles of the churches to which John first sent this book. It also affords little consolation for the suffering church at any other point in church history, including today, because it is exclusively focused on events surrounding Christ’s second coming. The strength of this view is that it emphasizes the ultimate victory of Christ and His elect over the world at His second coming.

Fourth is the *idealist* approach, sometimes called the *poetic* or *inspirational* approach. This position is sometimes called *iterism*, from the Latin verb *itero*, meaning “to repeat,” because idealist interpreters hold that the events described in Revelation are repeated from time to time in the experience of the church from age to age. This approach teaches that Revelation is relevant for everyone, since it deals with principles and symbols that are always valid in our personal history and experience. The idealist scarcely wrestles with the problem of chronology in Revelation, preferring to see this book and its symbolism as a tract written for persecuted Christians of any period. The symbolism is interpreted loosely, in a very general way, to give comfort and encouragement to persecuted Christians. The strength of this approach is its applicability to the church of all ages; its weakness is that it is difficult to affirm this view exegetically, based on the description “things which must shortly come to pass” (1:1).

Fifth is the *eclectic* approach. It embraces the apparent strengths and rejects the apparent weaknesses of the other four approaches. This approach acknowledges that there are elements of truth in all of these approaches. Personally, I believe this is the best and safest approach to take. Though there are serious problems with each of

these approaches, we can also glean something from each. Cornel Venema explains this approach well:

Preterism rightly insists that the visions of Revelation reflect events and circumstances contemporaneous with its writing or the period immediately thereafter. But preterism fails to adequately account for the way Revelation also reveals events and circumstances that characterize the struggles of the church throughout the entire inter-advental age. Futurism partially solves the problem of preterism by emphasizing the way the visions of Revelation portray events that will take place shortly before the end of history. But in doing so, futurism exaggerates the future orientation of the book. As for historicism, although the events portrayed in the vision of Revelation have occurred in the past or may reoccur at various points in history, these events are not limited to a particular time in the past, present, or even future.

The obvious strength of eclecticism is its ability to incorporate the primary emphasis of the other approaches without the one-sidedness that often characterizes alternative views. The weakness of the approach may be its tendency to ascribe different meanings to the same vision.²

In accord with many Reformed theologians, I propose an eclectic approach that accents the idealist or iterist approach. This approach has also been called the *parallel* or *cyclical* view of Revelation. Imagine a man with a video camera who is recording a church congregation. He pans over the people, starting on one side of the church and going all around. Then he goes up into the gallery and does the same thing. Then he goes to the back, comes from behind, and pans over everyone again. That is what we see in Revelation. The book offers us views of the entire history of the church, but seen from different vantage points.

I believe there are seven parallel sections in Revelation. Each section offers a different view of the church in history, as we will

2. Venema, "Interpreting Revelation," 13.

see as we make our way through the book. With this parallel or cyclical view of the book, we will see how each section spans the entire dispensation of the gospel, from the first coming of Christ two thousand years ago down to His coming again at the last day.

The great theme of Revelation is the victory of Christ and His church over the old serpent, his helpers, and all the kingdoms of this world. We will track that theme through each of the seven sections and see how this book accomplishes its purpose: to inspire, comfort, and encourage God's people in the church in every era to press on in the face of persecution and amidst all our struggles, knowing we are on the winning side in this anti-Christian world. I believe this is the right way to interpret Revelation. It puts Christian warfare into proper perspective. God pulls back the curtains to offer us a glimpse behind the events we read and hear about in the news media or learn about in history, so we can see what unseen but powerful forces are shaping reality in the world around us. Such insights from Revelation help us fight the good fight of faith and endure to the end. I hope this revelation of Jesus Christ will strengthen our faith and afford us greater hope and comfort.

Here are the seven sections of the book of Revelation, each dealing with the entire present age or dispensation, from the first to the second coming of Christ:

1. The Son of Man and the Seven Churches (1:1–3:22)
2. The Lamb and the Seven Seals of God's Scroll (4:1–8:1)
3. The Seven Trumpets (8:2–11:19)
4. The War with the Dragon (12:1–14:20)
5. The Seven Bowls of Wrath (15:1–16:21)
6. The Fall of Babylon the Whore (17:1–19:21)
7. The Victory of Jerusalem the Bride (20:1–22:21)³

3. This outline is derived from *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, Michael P. V. Barrett, Gerald M. Bilkes, Paul M. Smalley (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1866.

In summary, the book of Revelation is about Jesus Christ and His victory over the powers of evil. It was written to offer hope to Christians in times of difficulty and darkness, and to warn others of judgment to come because of their persistent unbelief and impenitence. You might say the personal themes of Revelation are (1) Christ's revelations of His glorious victory over evil, (2) hope for believers in the midst of persecution, and (3) warnings to unbelievers who are fast approaching judgment day. Remember that each of these themes applies to you personally, but do not approach Revelation as if you were solving a difficult puzzle. Do what John did: fall at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:17). If studying Revelation doesn't make you bow before the Lord Jesus Christ in wonder, adoration, and joy, then you have missed the point of the whole book.

The Communication of Revelation

Revelation has been communicated to us in four ways that we must keep in mind to properly understand this book:

First, it comes to us *from God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. It was delivered by an angel to the apostle John so that we all might benefit from it. It comes to us as an apostolic epistle (1:4), handed from one person to another, from church to church and from age to age. When you want to send a valuable item through the mail, you don't just stuff it in a mail slot and hope for the best. You send it by registered mail to ensure that the item is received and signed for by the person to whom it is addressed. Revelation has come to us as a letter registered by God for believers in the church throughout history.

The last verse of the book is much like the ending of many other epistles in the New Testament: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen" (Rev. 22:21). This benediction implies that, although this epistle was sent to the churches in Asia Minor in the first century, it has profound implications for all Christians and for the church everywhere and in all times—even in our present century.

Second, this book comes to us *as an apocalypse*. It therefore must not be read literally throughout. As a specimen of apocalyptic literature, it is filled with imagery, symbolism, and other kinds of

figurative language. To read it all literally is a basic error in interpretation, a failure to do justice to the literary character of the book. These verses at the opening of Revelation root this book in the prophecy of Daniel, itself full of divine revelations of things to come (Dan. 2:28–30, 45–47).⁴ Daniel contains symbolic dreams and visions, and we must interpret Revelation in a similar way.

Most of us understand this when we read a book. Fiction has different rules than non-fiction: one allows for imaginary people, places, and things, while the other is based on reality. Allegorical literature must be read allegorically; you cannot read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as you would read John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Thus, it is crucial to understand that the book of Revelation cannot be interpreted as mere factual data. Most books in Scripture can be accepted at face value, but Revelation was not meant to be read that way. If you read it that way, you end up with things that are simply impossible. You must view it as a book that uses imaginative symbolism to help you see more clearly the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, for example, numbers in this book are symbolic rather than mathematical. Colors are symbolic. So are animals, many of which we have never seen. So are patterns that keep repeating.

Revelation draws us into a world which is full of symbols that leave us with profound impressions. As we examine these symbols and see what they mean, we will begin to understand the message of this book. Revelation is a kind of picture book of the glory of Jesus Christ. It is, as John says, the revelation of Jesus Christ. What you and I are meant to see in this book is not a book of puzzles but a catalog of paintings depicting the glory of our Lord and Savior.

Third, this book is communicated *as a divine vision*. Ordinarily Scripture speaks of words and hearing. But Revelation uses the language of seeing and perceiving. In this revelation, Christ is not just *speaking* to His servants but *showing* them things that must soon

4. G. K. Beale with David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 35–36.

take place. Indeed, as you read through Revelation, you will find the recurring expression, “I saw.” In most of the Bible, the recurring expression is, “Hear the Word of God.” But Revelation invites us to *see* the Word of God. John is offering us these views of the Lord Jesus Christ, saying, “I saw this” and “I saw that.” As he presents one image after another, the scenario builds in scope and depth until, at the very end of the book, what we see finally becomes patently clear.

Fourth, this book is communicated *as prophecy*. John says in verse 3, “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy.” We usually understand a prophecy as something that foretells the future. But in the Bible, most prophecy does not speak about the future as much as it applies the Word of God to the present situation. There may be indications about the future, but by and large prophecy is given so that we may know how to live for God’s glory in the present.

Revelation 1:1 says God gave this revelation to Christ “to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass.” At the end of verse 3, God says these servants should “keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.” So the book reveals things that must “shortly come to pass...for the time is at hand.” We have things that will happen *soon* and events that are *near*, but that is not so much for us as it is for John and his companions. The language here echoes Daniel 2, in which Daniel interprets an astonishing vision of God’s kingdom that is to be fulfilled “in the latter days” (v. 28), or at the beginning of the *last days*. Now John has been shown that those promises have come to fruition because of the work of Jesus Christ, and the time is short. As the Lord Jesus often declared, “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). So this revelation of Jesus Christ is a revelation for Christians living in the last days.

When people ask me if I think we’re living in the last days, I answer, “Of course we are living in the last days, but we have been living in the last days from the Bible’s point of view for the last two thousand years.” The New Testament says the onset of the last days was marked by Christ’s pouring out His Spirit on the church on

the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17). That is when Christ inaugurated His kingdom, which is now spreading to the ends of the earth. The last days include the days in which we are living. Thus, John is being told, “You stand at the beginning of the days when the kingdom of Jesus Christ will extend to the ends of the earth.” That is what Revelation is all about. It is communicated to us as a letter from God, an apostolic epistle; as an apocalypse; as a divine vision; and as a prophecy.

The Commendation of Revelation

In verse 3, the apostle John commends the book of Revelation to all who read it or hear it read. He says, “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.” We must remember that this book was sent out in times of controversy. Not everyone acknowledged the authority of John; thus, he could by no means be sure that everyone would receive this epistle with the due measure of faith, reverence, and submission.

We must also remember that in those days, many in the church could not read. One of the duties of the minister of the Word was to “give attendance to reading” (1 Tim. 4:13), that is, the reading and exposition of Holy Scripture, so that those who could not read could at least hear it read and expounded for their edification. John promises a blessing to both faithful ministers who read and expound this book, and also to those who hear it with faith and do what it teaches and commands. We may therefore conclude that we shall be blessed by doing the following things:

- *Reading and studying this book with faith, reverence, and godly fear, as the Word of God and the Word of Christ. Repent of any past neglect of this part of Scripture. Embrace Revelation as a book God wants you to read and understand. Read it “with an high and reverent esteem...with a firm persuasion that [it is] the very word of God...with desire to know, believe, and obey the will of God revealed in [it];*

with diligence, and attention to the matter and scope of [it]; with meditation, application, self-denial, and prayer” (Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 157).⁵

- *Being obedient to Christ.* John says in verse 3 that people are blessed who hear what Revelation says and “keep those things which are written therein.” Notice that God’s blessing is not pronounced upon those who own a copy of this precious book, nor upon those who only read it or have it read to them, nor upon those who specialize in debating the meaning of this prophecy. The blessing is pronounced upon those who “keep those things” written in it. We *keep* the words of this prophecy by cherishing them as the Word of God and by applying them to ourselves and to our lives in such a way that, as followers of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, we look forward to his coming. We want to live as He would have us live until He comes. Knowing that this world will pass away, we look forward to a city with a foundation whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10; 2 Peter 3:10–15), and we live as strangers and pilgrims in the earth.

So Revelation calls us to be faithful, willing, obedient subjects of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The book of Revelation is primarily about Christ the King. Like Psalm 2, it calls on us and all mankind to “kiss the Son” in sweet submission, “lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little” (v. 12). But Christ also speaks in Revelation as Prophet and intercedes as High Priest while He reigns as King. The book of Revelation calls us to bow before Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King, and then to go out and be

5. James T. Dennison Jr., comp., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in English Translation: 1523–1693* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014), 4:340.

prophets, priests, and kings standing under His banner and ministering to a perishing world.

- *Being prepared for Christ's coming.* Verse 3 concludes: "for the time is at hand." The lesson embedded in these words for every person in every age of the Christian church is *be prepared to meet your King in righteousness and peace at all times*. We ignore or resist Christ's lordship to our peril. You may bend the knee to culture, gurus, Pharisees, libertines, false prophets and prophetesses, or idols of the times, but know that the sure judgment of King Jesus will soon fall upon you and all others who live carelessly or walk disorderly, and on every church that does not submit to Christ as Lord.
- *Overcoming through Christ.* The implication of verse 3 is that Christ has power to bless His people even in the midst of severe persecution, and they will be blessed in overcoming the world by faith in Him. Christ promises in Revelation 2:7, "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." God's overcoming grace and your overcoming faith will be a blessing to you, enabling you by faith to overcome the powers of evil at work in a wicked world. This blessing is sure because, as Peter declared at Pentecost, "God hath made that same Jesus...both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

The counterpart to this promise of blessing is a curse upon those who do not keep the things written in Revelation (cf. Rev. 22:18–19). Believers who read these words are promised blessings, but unbelievers are warned against the danger of despising and disregarding God's warnings, for the end is near. "Behold, the judge standeth before the door" (James 5:9). Here, John specifically invokes the wrath of God, in the form of a deadly curse, upon those who deal lightly or deceitfully with these words, imposing on it ideas and words of their own choosing, or else discarding anything they disagree with or don't understand.

Dear friend, examine yourself. Are you saved by grace through faith in Christ, the blessed Lamb of God who as our representative perfectly satisfied the holy requirements of God's law, bore God's wrath on the tree, and rose victoriously from the grave? Are you abiding by faith in the One who accomplished our redemption? Are you being obedient to Christ, preparing to meet Christ, and overcoming sin through Christ?

If you have not found blessing in Christ, you are ignoring Christ at your peril. You will be cursed forever if you do not repent of your sins and take refuge in the mercy of the Lord of glory. But if you seek for blessing in the reading, hearing, and keeping of the words of this revelation of Jesus Christ, then you will be blessed indeed.