

A Vision for the Church

In the name of him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, dear friends in Christ: to begin, I feel I may have to apologize to you. It seems that I've been failing you as a minister and not doing my job correctly. At least that's what the current crop of self-appointed experts in church growth and management are saying. According to them – and they ought to know because they *are* the experts (and if you forget it for a moment, they'll remind you) – what I'm supposed to be doing instead of preaching the Gospel and administering Christ's Sacraments is prayerfully looking ahead into the future, fervently asking the Lord to give me a vision of what this church could be in say, five, ten, or fifteen years. And then, when he does that – fills my mind with the vision – I'm supposed to inspire you with it. I'm to cast the vision that God has given me before you so that it becomes contagious, so that *you* will see and internalize it. And then together under my divinely inspired leadership, we're to invest every ounce of effort toward making the vision a reality, so that we reach our goals (I mean God's goals for us) in order that within the next five years or so we do whatever it takes (no matter how theologically suspect it may be) to quadruple our membership, hold three services each Sunday and one on Saturday night, hire a youth minister, get a really rockin' praise band in here, and spawn at least two daughter congregations. Oh, and if anyone opposes the vision, doesn't think we're heading in the right direction, I'm to get the rest of you to shame that person into silence for resisting the vision. And if that doesn't get them on board, I'm mercilessly to throw them under the bus. "You're outta here!"

So, if anyone is upset or disappointed because according to the experts I've been doing it wrong, I'm sorry—sorry not because I haven't been seeking such a vision and casting it before you, but sorry if that's what you think I should be doing. It's not. Nowhere in Scripture is anyone directed to seek some such vision of the Lord for the Church. Nowhere has the Lord promised to grant such a vision. Besides, he's already given his vision for the Church. That's what we have in today's reading from what is the beginning of the Book of Revelation. The Lord gave the vision to Apostle John, and he directed him to write it down so that we would know how the Lord sees his Church and how he wants us to see it too.

But before we get into it, it will be helpful to say a few words about the Book of Revelation in general because there's a lot of confusion about it. Many people find its message and images to be quite frightening. If so, it's because they're reading it wrong. Revelation is the Bible's most extended example of what's known as apocalyptic literature. It's a style of writing that communicates its message through signs and symbols rather than straightforward narrative. And what it's meant to do is to provide hope and comfort for the faithful especially in times of persecution while at the same time keeping its meaning hidden from those on the outside who don't have the key to deciphering its symbols, and who are very likely the ones persecuting the church. The overall message of Revelation is not gloom, doom, and destruction as so many believe; but that God is in control, and that despite the attacks of the devil and the assaults of the world, he is defending his people and he will bring them safely through all the trials and tribulations of this age to the place he has prepared for them. It is sometimes mistakenly referred to as the Revelation of St. John. And while it's true that John received the revelation and wrote it down as he was told, what John himself says about this book is that it is the revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the focus of and the main actor in the book. And if you keep that foremost in mind when reading it, you won't stray too far from its intended meaning.

Okay, just a bit of history. When John writes Revelation in the last decade or two of the first century, he is likely the last of the apostles of Jesus still living, the others having been martyred for preaching the truth about Jesus. For some time John had been overseeing the Christian Church at Ephesus in the province of Asia, which was most of what is western Turkey today. Back then it was Greek territory. The Turks came in later, around the 9th century AD. Anyway, John's oversight extended to the six churches in the smaller cities nearby whose names we heard: Smyrna, Pergamum, and so on. These churches were daughter congregations of the main church at Ephesus – so they all looked to John as their spiritual father and leader. That's why, when another round of Roman persecution came at the church, he was a logical target for the enemy. Rather than kill him and make another martyred hero for the Christians, they sent him into exile on Patmos, a tiny island off Asia's coast. It's while John was there in exile that the Lord gave him the visions that he describes in the Book of Revelation.

Turning to the text itself, we see that it's written in the form of a letter from John to the seven churches on the mainland. And already we're into one of the symbols: namely the number seven which is theologically loaded and reoccurs many times in this text: seven spirits, seven lampstands, seven stars, and so on. When you see the number seven show up think God dealing with his people in grace and mercy. It has to do with him giving us rest; specifically rest in Christ through the forgiveness of sins. It has to do with God's promises of the Gospel. And for that reason it stands for the whole church on earth – not just the seven congregations who were the original recipients of the letter. In other words, John is writing also to us.

He begins by giving us a Trinitarian blessing: "Grace and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come" – that's a reference to the Father, emphasizing his eternal nature; "and from the seven spirits who are before his throne" – that's a reference to the one Holy Spirit, don't let the number seven throw you; remember, it's symbolic. It harks back to the 11th chapter of Isaiah where the one Spirit is called the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of counsel, the Spirit of power, the Spirit of knowledge, and the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. Seven names, one Spirit. And then the third person who makes up the Trinity: "and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." Notice who gets the most press: it's Jesus, the one Revelation is mostly about. He is called the faithful witness because he was sent to testify to us of the Father, his love, and his plan of salvation. He is called the firstborn of the dead, which highlights his resurrection; and not only his, but ours. If he is the firstborn, there are more to follow. And finally he is called the ruler of the kings on earth. That stresses his authority. He is ruler over all creation, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Having greeted and blessed us in the name of the Triune God, John immediately launches into an ascription of praise to Jesus. "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom of priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever." This is all about the work of Jesus who in love redeemed us from everlasting shame and death by his blood on the cross. The result is that we are now citizens of his eternal kingdom. And priests; he's made us all priests. What does that mean? Recall that in Old Testament times, the priests were those who could come into the presence of the Lord in his temple. There they offered sacrifices on behalf of others. That's what we are now. In Christ we stand closer to the Lord than the rest of humanity. And our lives are to be living sacrifices in the work and service that we perform for others. And as priests we represent the Lord to the world. What they know of him they will learn from what they see and hear in us. It's an awesome responsibility; one that we would do well to take seriously.

Why? John tells us: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”. Yes, Jesus is returning to judge every person on the earth – all who have ever lived, both friend and foe alike. All will stand before him either to be received into the new heaven and earth or to be sent away to endless misery. Our work as priests is to prepare ourselves and others to be ready to receive Jesus well when he comes.

What follows is an introduction from the One True Author of the Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega”, says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. So, on one level, it’s a way to say he’s the first and last; like we’d say A to Z. Again, this points to his attribute of eternity. But of course letters are used to form words. They’re for communication. And that’s what the Lord does. He reveals himself by speaking. More than that, his words are powerful, almightily powerful. When he speaks, things happen, things change – for the better. And so referring to himself as the Alpha and Omega conveys also the idea that the Lord is the sum and substance of all true meaning, wisdom, and knowledge – and also that through his powerful Word he is working to change us.

John proceeds from there to describe his situation on Patmos and what he was doing when the Lord began to give him the Revelation. He says he was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day. The Lord’s Day, we know, is Sunday; called that because it was on a Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead. And to say that he was in the Spirit does not mean that he was in some kind of weird trance or something. No. It means that he was reading from the Scripture. The Spirit comes to us through the Word of God.

It’s as John is reading from the Holy Bible that he hears a loud voice like a trumpet instructing him to write as a letter to the churches the visions that he is about to receive. And when he turns toward the speaker to see who it is, the vision begins. He sees first seven golden lampstands. These represent the churches, and in a broader sense the whole Church on earth. They are points of light in the otherwise dark world. That they are made of gold speaks of holiness, purity, and great worth.

John goes on to describe “one like a son of man” standing in the midst of the lampstands. We’ll get to that soon. But what strikes me is that John mentions the lampstands first. Anyone else would have first noticed the person standing there, then added something about the lampstands. It seems out of order. But that’s the point. It’s the churches we see. Though he stands in our midst the speaker – whom I’m guessing you already know is Jesus – is not seen by us. He wants us to know that he’s here among his faithful even though he is unseen; as he said, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of you.”

Okay then, on to the description of Jesus: his appearance is “like of son of man”. The emphasis here is on his humanity. Though he is eternal God, his coming to us is as one of us. For his work of atonement, to live, suffer, die, and rise again he had to become “a son of man”. And he remains both God and man forever. He is dressed in a long robe, which speaks of dignity. The golden sash across his chest points to his holiness. And his hair is white like wool or snow. This would point to both his purity and the reverence and honor due him as an elder.

John describes his eyes “like flames of fire”. We need light to see. The idea here is that he generates his own light. He sees everything. He sees what we can’t. His feet are like burnished bronze glowing as from the furnace. That strikes us as a strange image; but recall that in the ancient world, feet were considered to be pretty gross. It was the one part of your

body you could never keep clean. They were your continual point of contact with the dirty ground. As soon as you washed them, they got dirty again. And because of that they were a constant reminder of our sinful condition. Confess all your sins to cleanse your soul, and as soon as you step away, you're sinning again. The point in the vision is Jesus' feet don't get dirty. He stands among us with no sin.

John describes his voice like the roar of many waters. That is to say, like water, it's the source of life and cleansing. I'm guessing there's something Baptismal here too. Christ's first words to us are when water and Word come together and he claims us as his own in Holy Baptism.

In his right hand he holds seven stars. These represent the pastors, his spokesmen in the churches. They are little points of light that represent him, who speak his words – or rather, through whom he speaks. He, by contrast, shines like the sun in full strength. He's the biggest and brightest light. And coming from his mouth John sees a sharp two-edged sword. This is the powerful Word of God which kills the sinner in us and gives life through the proclamation of the Gospel.

John, for his part, is overwhelmed by the vision he sees. He falls before Jesus as though dead. It's all any sinner can do. In the presence of Christ appearing in his divine glory all must fall down before him as dead. But to John (and to us – all who trust in him) he extends and lays on his right hand expressing his grace and favor. And he grants us life and encourages us with the truth saying: "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the Living One. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hell." That is, he proclaims to us who he is and what he has done by his death and resurrection to forgive our sins and to set us free from death and hell.

This, my friends, is the vision God wants us to have of his Church: Jesus, the Living One, who died for our sins and rose again standing here in our midst, freeing us from death and hell, and granting us life and salvation through his powerful Word faithfully proclaimed by his appointed representatives. It's the only vision of the Church we need. May our gracious God and Father help us to internalize this vision so that with the eyes of faith we see it whenever and as often as we gather here in Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!