

# **CRUCIAL INTRODUCTORY ARTICLES**

## **(Why Do Christians Have So Many Dogmatic Interpretations of Revelation)**

Through the years of my study of eschatology I have learned that most Christians do not have or want a developed, systematized, end-time chronology. There are some Christians who focus or major on this area of Christianity for theological, psychological, or denominational reasons. These Christians seem to be come obsessed with how it will all end, and somehow miss the urgency of the gospel! Believers cannot affect God's eschatological (end-time) agenda, but they can participate in the soteriological (the doctrine of salvation) mandate (cf. Matt. 28:19-20). Most believers affirm a Second Coming of Christ and an in-time culmination of the promises of God. The interpretive problems arising from how to understand this temporal culmination come from several sources:

1. the tension between Old Covenant prophetic models and New Covenant apostolic models
2. the tension between the Bible's monotheism (one God for all) and the election of Israel (a special people)
3. the tension between the conditional aspect of biblical covenants and promises ("if...then") and the unconditional faithfulness of God to fallen mankind's redemption
4. the tension between Near Eastern literary genres and modern western literary models
5. the tension between the Kingdom of God as present, yet future.
6. the tension between belief in the imminent return of Christ and the belief that some events must happen first.

Let us discuss these tensions one at a time.

### **FIRST TENSION**

The OT prophets predict a restoration of a Jewish kingdom in Palestine centered in Jerusalem where all the nations of the earth gather to praise and serve a Davidic ruler, but the NT Apostles never focus on this agenda. Is not the OT inspired (cf. Matt. 5:17-19)? Have the NT authors omitted crucial end-time events?

There are several sources of information about the end of the world:

1. OT prophets
2. OT apocalyptic writers (cf. Ezek. 37-39; Dan. 7-12)
3. inter-testamental, non-canonical Jewish apocalyptic writers (like I Enoch)
4. Jesus Himself (cf. Matt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21)
5. the writings of Paul (cf. I Cor. 15; II Cor. 5; I Thes. 4; II Thes. 2)
6. the writings of John (the book of Revelation).

Do these all clearly teach an end-time agenda (events, chronology, persons)? If not, why? Are they not all inspired (except the Jewish intertestamental writings)?

The Spirit revealed truths to the OT writers in terms and categories they could understand. However, through progressive revelation the Spirit has expanded these OT eschatological concepts to a universal scope. Here are some relevant examples:

1. The city of Jerusalem is used as a metaphor of the people of God (Zion) and is projected into the NT as a term expressing God's acceptance of all repentant, believing humans (the new Jerusalem of Revelation 20-22). The theological expansion of a literal, physical city into the people of God is foreshadowed in God's promise to redeem fallen mankind in Gen. 3:15 before there even were any Jews or a Jewish capital city. Even Abraham's call (cf. Gen. 12:3) involved the Gentiles.
2. In the OT the enemies are the surrounding nations of the Ancient Near East, but in the NT they have been expanded to all unbelieving, anti-God, Satanically-inspired people. The battle has moved from a geographical, regional conflict to a cosmic conflict.
3. The promise of a land which is so integral in the OT (the Patriarchal promises) has now become the whole earth. New Jerusalem comes to a recreated earth, not the Near East only or exclusively (cf. Rev. 20-22).
4. Some other examples of OT prophetic concepts being expanded are (1) the seed of Abraham is now the spiritually circumcised; (2) the temple is now the local church or the individual believer; and (3) even Israel and its characteristic descriptive phrases now refer to the whole people of God.

The prophetic model has been fulfilled, expanded, and is now more inclusive. Jesus and the Apostolic writers do not present the end-time in the same way as the OT prophets (cf. Martin W yngaarden, *The Future of The Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment*. . Modern interpreters who try to make the OT model literal or normative twist the Revelation into a very Jewish book and force meaning into atomized, ambiguous phrases of Jesus and Paul! The NT writers do not negate the OT prophets, but show their ultimate universal implication. There is no organized, logical system to Jesus' or Paul's eschatology. Their purpose is primarily redemptive!

However, even within the NT there is tension. There is no clear systemization of eschatological events. In many ways the Revelation surprisingly uses OT allusions in describing the end instead of the teachings of Jesus (cf. Matt. 24; Mk. 13)! It follows the literary genre developed during the inter-testamental period (Jewish apocalyptic literature). This may have been John's way

of linking the Old and New Covenants. It shows the age-old pattern of human rebellion and God's commitment to redemption! But it must be noted that although Revelation uses OT language, persons, and events, it reinterprets them in light of first century Rome.

## **SECOND TENSION**

The biblical emphasis is on one personal, spiritual, creator-redeemer, God. The OT's uniqueness in its own day was its monotheism. All of the surrounding nations were polytheists. The oneness of God is the heart of OT revelation (cf. Deut. 6:4). Creation is a stage for the purpose of fellowship between God and mankind, made in His image and likeness (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). However, mankind rebelled, sinning against God's love, leadership, and purpose (cf. Gen. 3). God's love and purpose was so strong and sure that He promised to redeem fallen humanity (cf. Gen. 3:15)!

The tension arises when God chooses to use one man, one family, one nation to reach the rest of mankind. God's election of Abraham and the Jews as a kingdom of priests (cf. Ex. 19:4-6) caused pride instead of service, exclusion instead of inclusion. God's call of Abraham involved the blessing of all mankind (cf. Gen. 12:3). It must be remembered and emphasized that OT election was for service, not salvation. All Israel was never right with God, never eternally saved based solely on her birthright (cf. Jn. 8:31-47), but by personal faith and obedience. Israel lost her mission, turned mandate into privilege, service into a special standing! God chose one to choose all!

## **THIRD TENSION**

There is a theological tension or paradox between conditional and unconditional covenants. It is surely true that God's redemptive purpose/plan is unconditional (cf. Gen. 15:12-21). However, the human response is always conditional!

The "if...then" pattern appears in both OT and NT. God is faithful; mankind is unfaithful. This tension has caused much confusion. Interpreters have tended to focus on only one "horn of the dilemma," God's faithfulness or human effort, God's sovereignty or mankind's free will. Both are biblical and necessary.

This relates to eschatology, to God's OT promises to Israel. If God promises it, that settles it, yes? God is bound to His promises; His reputation is involved (cf. Ezek. 36:22-38). However, mankind is God's instrument of blessing! The unconditional and conditional covenants meet in Christ (cf. Isa. 53), not Israel! God's ultimate faithfulness lies in the redemption of all who will repent and believe, not in who was your father/mother! Christ, not Israel, is the key to all of God's covenants and promises. If there is a theological parenthesis in the Bible, it is not the Church, but Israel (cf. Gal. 3).

The world mission of redemption has passed to the Church (cf. Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). This is not to imply that God has totally rejected the Jews (cf. Rom. 9-11). There is surely, but not exclusively, a place and purpose for end-time, believing Israel (cf. Zech. 12:10).

## **FOURTH TENSION**

Genre is a critical element in correctly interpreting the Bible. The Church developed in a western (Greek) cultural setting. Eastern literature is much more figurative, metaphorical, and symbolic than modern, western culture's literary models. Christians have been guilty of using their history and literary models to interpret biblical prophecy (both OT and NT). Each generation and geographical entity has used its culture, history, and literalness to interpret Revelation. Every one of them has been wrong! It is arrogant to think that modern western culture is the focus of biblical prophecy!

The genre in which the original, inspired author chooses to write is a literary contract with the reader. The book of Revelation is not historical narrative. It is a combination of letter (chapters 1-3), prophecy, and mostly apocalyptic literature. It is as wrong to make the Bible say more than was intended by the original author as to make it say less than what he intended! Interpreters' arrogance and dogmatism are even more inappropriate in a book like Revelation.

The Church has never agreed on a proper interpretation. I am a dialectical (paradoxical) interpreter. My concern is for the whole Bible, not some selected part(s). The Bible's eastern mind-set presents truth in tension-filled pairs. Our western trend toward propositional truth is not invalid, but unbalanced! I think it is possible to remove at least some of the impasse in interpreting Revelation by noting its changing purpose to successive generations of believers. It is obvious to most interpreters that Revelation must be interpreted in light of its own day and its genre. An historical approach to Revelation must deal with what the first readers would have, and could have, understood. In many ways modern interpreters have lost the meaning of many of the symbols of the book. Revelation's initial main thrust was to encourage persecuted believers. It showed God's control of history (as did the OT prophets); it affirmed that history is moving toward an appointed terminus, judgment or blessing (as did the OT prophets). It affirmed in first century Jewish apocalyptic terms God's love, presence, power, and sovereignty!

It functions in these same theological ways to every generation of believers. It depicts the cosmic struggle of good and evil. The first century details may have been lost to us, but not the powerful, comforting truths. When modern, western interpreters try to force the details of Revelation into their contemporary history, the pattern of false interpretations continues!

It is quite possible that the details of the book may become strikingly literal again (as did the OT in relation to the life of Christ) for the last generation of believers as they face the onslaught of an anti-God leader (cf. II Thes. 2) and culture. No one can know these literal fulfillments of the Revelation until the words of Jesus (cf. Matt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21) and Paul (cf. II Thes. 2) also become historically evident. Guessing, speculation, and dogmatism are all inappropriate. Apocalyptic literature allows this flexibility. Thank God for images and symbols that surpass historical narrative! God is in control; He reigns; He comes!

Most modern commentaries miss the point of the genre! Modern western interpreters often seek a clear, logical system of theology rather than being fair with an ambiguous, symbolic, dramatic genre of Jewish apocalyptic literature. This truth is expressed well by Ralph P. Martin in his article, "Approaches to New Testament Exegesis," in the book *New Testament Interpretation*, edited by J. Howard Marshall:

"Unless we recognize the dramatic quality of this writing and recall the way in which language is being used as a vehicle to express religious truth, we shall grievously err in our understanding of the Apocalypse, and mistakenly try to interpret its visions as though it were a book of literal prose and concerned to describe events of empirical and datable history. To attempt the latter course is to run into all manner of problems of interpretation. More seriously it leads to a distortion of the essential meaning of apocalyptic and so misses the great value of this part of the New Testament as a dramatic assertion in mythopoetic language of the sovereignty of God in Christ and the paradox of his rule which blends might and love (cf. 5:5,6; the Lion is the Lamb)" (p. 235).

W. Randolph Tate in his book *Biblical Interpretations* said:

"No other genre of the Bible has been so fervently read with such depressing results as apocalypse, especially the books of Daniel and Revelation. This genre had suffered from a disastrous history of misinterpretation due to a fundamental misunderstanding of its literary forms, structure, and purpose. Because of its very claim to reveal what is shortly to happen, apocalypse has been viewed as a road map into and a blueprint of the future. The tragic flaw in this view is the assumption that the books' frame of reference is the reader's contemporary age rather than the author's. This misguided approach to apocalypse (particularly Revelation) treats the work as if it were a cryptogram by which contemporary events can be used to interpret the symbol of the text. . . First, the interpreter must recognize that apocalyptic communicates its messages through symbolism. To interpret a symbol literally when it is metaphoric is simply to misinterpret. The issue is not whether the events in apocalyptic are historical. The events may be historical; they may have really happened, or might happen, but the author presents events and communicates meaning through images and archetypes" (p. 137).

From *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, edited by Ryken, Wilhost and Longman III:

"Today's readers are often puzzled and frustrated by this genre. The unexpected imagery and out-of-this-world experiences seem bizarre and out of sync with most of Scripture. Taking this literature at face value leaves many readers scrambling to determine 'what will happen when,' thus missing the intent of the apocalyptic message" (p. 35).

## **FIFTH TENSION**

The kingdom of God is both present, yet future. This theological paradox becomes focused at the point of eschatology. If one expects a literal fulfillment of all OT prophecies to Israel then the Kingdom becomes mostly a restoration of Israel to a geographical locality and a theological pre-eminence! This would necessitate that the Church is secretly raptured out at chapter 5 and the remaining chapters relate to Israel.

However, if the focus is on the kingdom being present at Christ's first coming, then the focus becomes the incarnation, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ. The theological emphasis is on a current salvation. The kingdom has come, the OT is fulfilled in Christ's offer of salvation to all, not His millennial reign over some!

It is surely true that the Bible speaks of both of Christ's comings, but where is the emphasis to be placed? It seems to me that most OT prophecies focus on the first coming, the establishment of the Messianic kingdom (cf. Dan. 2). In many ways this is analogous to the eternal reign of God (cf. Dan. 7) and the millennial reign of Christ (cf. Rev. 20). In the OT the focus is on the eternal reign of God, yet the mechanism for that reign's manifestation is the ministry of the Messiah (cf. I Cor. 15:26-27). It is not a question of which is true; both are true, but where is the emphasis? It must be said that some interpreters become so focused on the millennial reign of the Messiah that they have missed the biblical focus on the eternal reign of the Father. Christ's reign is a preliminary event. As the two comings of Christ were not obvious in the OT, so too, the temporal reign of the Messiah!

The key to Jesus' preaching and teaching is the kingdom of God. It is both present (in salvation and service), and future (in pervasiveness and power). Revelation, if it focuses on a Messianic millennial reign (cf. Rev. 20), is preliminary, not ultimate (cf. Rev. 21-22). It is not obvious from the OT that a temporal reign is necessary; as a matter of fact, the Messianic reign of Daniel 7 is eternal, not millennial.

## **SIXTH TENSION**

Most believers have been taught that Jesus is coming soon, suddenly, and unexpectedly (cf. Matt. 10:23; 24:27,34,44; Mk. 9:1; 13:30). But every generation so far has been wrong! The soonness (immediacy) of Jesus' return is a powerful promised hope of every generation, but a reality to only one (and that one a persecuted one). Believers must live as if He was coming tomorrow, but plan and implement the Great Commission (cf. Matt. 28:19-20) as if He tarries.

Some passages in the gospels (cf. Mk. 13:10; Lk. 17:2; 18:8) and I and II Thessalonians are based on a delayed Second Coming (*Parousia*). There are some historical events that must happen first:

1. world-wide evangelization (cf. Matt. 24:15; Mk. 13:10)
2. the revelation of "the man of Sin" (cf. Matt. 24:15; II Thes. 2; Rev.)
3. the great persecution (cf. Matt. 24:21,24; Rev.)

There is a purposeful ambiguity (cf. Matt. 24:42-51; Mk. 13:32-36)! Live everyday as if it were your last but plan and train for future ministry!

### **CONSISTENCY AND BALANCE**

It must be said that the different schools of modern eschatological interpretation all contain half truths. They explain and interpret well some texts. The problem lies in consistency and balance. Often there is a set of presuppositions which use the biblical text to fill in the pre-set theological skeleton. The Bible does not reveal a logical, chronological, systematic eschatology. It is like a family album. The pictures are true, but not always in order, in context, in a logical sequence. Some of the pictures have fallen out of the album and later generations of family members do not know exactly how to put them back. The key to proper interpretation of Revelation is the intent of the original author as revealed in his choice of literary genre. Most interpreters try to carry their exegetical tools and procedures from other genres of the NT into their interpretations of Revelation. They focus on the OT instead of allowing the teachings of Jesus and Paul to set the theological structure and let Revelation act as illustrative.

I must admit that I approach this commentary with some fear and trepidation, not because of Rev. 22:18-19, but because of the level of controversy the interpretation of this book has caused and continues to cause among God's people. I love God's revelation. It is true when all men are liars (cf. Rom. 3:4)! Please use this commentary as an attempt to be thought provoking and not definitive, as a sign post and not a road map, as a "what if," not a "thus says the Lord." I have come face to face with my own inadequacies, biases, and theological agenda. I have also seen those of other interpreters. It almost seems that people find in Revelation what they expect to find. The genre lends itself to abuse! However, it is in the Bible for a purpose. Its placement as the concluding "word" is not by accident. It has a message from God to His children of each and every generation. God wants us to understand! Let us join hands, not form camps; let us affirm what is clear and central, not all that may be, might be, could be true. God help us all!

Use this space to list your own presuppositions about how to interpret the Revelation. All of us bring our biases with us into the interpretation of this book. Identifying them helps us overcome their influence and limits our dogmatism.

1.

2.

3.

4.

etc.