

## Newsletter – March 2017

In our July 2016 Newsletter, in which we introduced the subject of Eschatology (the doctrines of the last days), we gave a very brief introduction to the book of the Revelation. In this newsletter we shall present a more detailed introduction in preparation for a study of the entire book in future newsletters. There are seventeen prophetic books in the Old Testament, and we find short prophetic texts scattered throughout the New Testament, but the text of the Revelation is the only totally prophetic book in the New Testament. That fact as well as its placement at the end of holy Scripture makes it unique enough to demand our attention. This last book of the Bible has always fascinated mankind because it tells about the last days of mankind on earth at the end of time. This interest has been greatly enhanced today in view of the obvious moral and political decline of human society leading toward a world-wide state of chaos, which we discussed in our August through November 2016 newsletters.

Unfortunately, many delve into the book of Revelation in an attempt to discover how God will deal with this plunge into moral chaos without exercising due diligence in studying all the prophetic references that come before it in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Without this background, the Revelation is nearly indecipherable – leading many to conclude that the Book of Revelation is but a jumble of unrelated visions randomly dispersed throughout the book that have no basis in reality. Still others find its many passages of judgment so frightening that they act to suppress the Christian's joy of salvation. For that reason, the book is often ignored as being an indecipherable appendage to the Bible. Admittedly there are many things contained in the Revelation that we would rather not accept because of their terrifying implications, but that is no reason why a mature believer cannot accept what is being revealed about God's future judgment if they seek the Holy Spirit to comfort and aid them in their understanding. Moreover, there is a unique blessing and promise given to those who read and faithfully keep the words of the Revelation: "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" (Re.1:3).

The English word "revelation," from which this book gets its name, is derived from the Greek word *apokalypsis*. Our English word "apocalypse" is transliterated from this Greek word and is commonly very narrowly defined as a time of great destruction that will come about at the end of days. However, the primary meaning of *apokalypsis* is "discovery" or "unveiling." The Revelation document clearly unveils all of the devastating events that must occur in the last days in considerable detail; however, the primary purpose of the book of Revelation is not to direct our thoughts to wild beasts and the massive destruction that will take place in the last days, but to reveal the glory, authority, and power of the Lord Jesus Christ to rule over all his creation and to ultimately judge an unrepentant mankind that has fully rejected his gracious offer of salvation.

The book of Revelation was written by John the Apostle. According to non-biblical accounts, John lived to be of old age extending the Apostolic Period to very nearly the end of the first century (cf. Jn.21:20–24). Therefore, he would have lived through the time of the final siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of the Roman Empire in A.D. 70. If John or others of the Jerusalem church resided in Jerusalem at that time, it is certain that they would have fled to other regions before the city fell, inasmuch as the destruction of Jerusalem had been clearly foretold by the Lord Jesus along with his instruction for them to flee when the armies gathered (cf. Lu.21:20–22). It is believed that John left Jerusalem for Ephesus following the execution of the Apostle Paul around A.D. 68, whereupon John assumed the pastoral office of the Ephesus church. He continued to disciple believers at Ephesus until around the year A.D. 95 when Roman authorities arrested him and exiled him to the small island of Patmos, which is located about sixty miles southwest of Ephesus. His exile took place during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian who instituted a brief but very severe reign of terror against all Christians during that period. It was while exiled on the island of Patmos, that John received the series of visions that he recorded in the book of Revelation.

The Revelation was fully accepted as authoritative Scriptural text by the early Church until that acceptance was refuted by Dionysius, a bishop of Alexandria (AD 248-264). He repudiated it primarily because it contained text found in Chapter 20 supporting Chiliaism, the early doctrine regarding a future millennial age on earth, which he strongly opposed. His objections were challenged and eventually overcome by Athanasius, a later

bishop of Alexandria, in AD 373. The book of Revelation was officially included along with John's Gospel and his three epistles in the completed canon of Scripture by a church Council of Carthage in the year A.D. 398.

Centuries later, objections to the book's canonization arose during the Reformation Movement by Martin Luther and other reformers on the grounds of questionable authorship as well as its extensive Jewish content, which could not be reconciled to reformed belief and practice within the church of that day. As has been noted earlier, John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the New Testament with the sole exception of the Revelation, which he fully neglected in all of his voluminous writings. Technical questions continue today about its authorship. These center upon its somewhat unwieldy prophetic style and an apparent inferior quality of its Greek, which deviates from that found in John's Gospel. It is also pointed out that John did not include his name in his Gospel, but he prominently identified himself as John in the Revelation document.

The Revelation document was initially written to be circulated within a group of seven churches in Asia, which were under John's personal headship, during a time of intense persecution. Therefore, it was important that John authenticate this writing by stating his name – much as did the Apostle Paul in most if not all of his epistles (many consider the book of Hebrews a noted exception). Within the document, John refers to himself by name (cf. Re.1:4,9; 22:8) stating that he was in exile because of his firm witness of the Gospel. Note that he specifically identified himself as having been incarcerated on the island of Patmos (cf. Re.1:9); this eliminated any possibility that the document was written by some other man with a similar name. Therefore, it is nonsensical to deny the Apostle John's authorship on the grounds that he fully identified himself within it. As to variation in linguistic style, skilled authors often alter their styles and parlance to suit the subject matter at hand. In addition, the text must conform to the dialect and linguistic abilities of its intended recipients, such that they may better understand its words and phrases. This could account for an intentional variation in the Greek. Moreover, the Revelation prophecy is unique such that John needed to stretch his human literary skills to record a series of heavenly visions that were most strange even to his own mind.

Before delving into the prophecy of this book, one must acquire a basic understanding of Old-Testament Scripture, especially the books of Daniel and Ezekiel. Although there are no direct references to Old-Testament text, John often refers to the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, as well as alluding to information found in the Bible books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and the Psalms. Many of the heavenly visions have a highly Jewish flavor about them, although uniquely new in their overriding exposition of Jesus Christ. For that reason we must have a sound knowledge of the entire New Testament that precedes the Revelation. We should also equip ourselves with an understanding of the vast history of the Church that transpired since this book was written. Although this preparation should be considered a valuable prerequisite to its study, we must understand that the book of Revelation is not a sealed prophecy (cf. Re.22:10) as was the prophecy of Daniel (cf. Da.12:4,9). Nothing has been hidden away out of view or encrypted for the understanding of a supposed spiritual elite. Rather, it is an open text that unveils prophetic knowledge through a series of visions to all mature believers that will take the time to prepare themselves and diligently study it.

Moreover, the Revelation is not a difficult book to follow because of its very orderly chronological construction from beginning to end. Three major divisions of the Revelation are recorded in Revelation verse 1:19 wherein John is told to write down the things that he "has seen" regarding the glorified Christ (cf. Chapter 1), things "which are" in the Church age (cf. Chapters 2,3) as well as the state of things in heaven during that same era (cf. Chapters 4 and 5). After that, he was directed to write of future things "which shall be hereafter" (cf. Chapters 6-22). Those future events are set forth in an organized chronological order as well. There is, however, one notable break in this strict chronology in Chapters 12 and 13 as John pauses in his ongoing dialogue to relate information about persons and events most likely contained in a little book that he had been directed to read and digest in Revelation 10:8-11. In Chapter 14, the prophetic chronology continues on uninterrupted to the end of the document.

In our December 2016 newsletter, we discussed the prophecy of Daniel's seventy weeks followed by a discussion of the Olivet discourse in our January and February newsletters of 2017. Both of these prophecies find their ultimate fulfillment in the book of Revelation. Moreover, as we shall discover, the Revelation is a destination document into which all unfulfilled Old-Testament prophecy flows to find its ultimate fulfillment. The number seven as it is used in Scripture implies perfection in the sense of completeness. As the book of Genesis

was a book of beginnings, we find that the Revelation is a book of completions. The number seven is prominent in Daniel's prophecy of seventy weeks, which ends in a final week of seven years. The underlying structure of Revelation is also based upon a repeated series of sevens; the number seven appears in thirty-one of its verses. Seven candlesticks are seen in Revelation Chapter 1, which represent seven churches found in Chapters 2-3. An interconnected triad of "sevens" underlies a major portion of the book: seven seals of a heavenly scroll are presented in Chapters 6-7, the seventh of which leads directly into seven trumpet judgments in Chapters 8-11, the seventh of which leads directly into seven bowls of God's wrath in Chapters 16-18. Seven historic figures are presented in Chapters 12-13, and seven final issues can be observed in Chapters 14-22.

The text of Revelation contains a series of heavenly visions. What John saw in these visions was presented to him while he was in a spiritual state; it was so ethereal that it was beyond any ordinary human means of description. Therefore, John was sorely pressed to record the humanly inexpressible. This necessitated his use of descriptive metaphors and allegory. When John wrote about what he saw in this way, he was very careful to say so specifically or very suggestively in order to aid us in our interpretation of his words. For instance, John used the phrase "as it were" 12 times, the phrase "like unto" 14 times, as well as using the words "like" or "as" alone in many other places to indicate that he was using metaphors to describe what he saw in a vision when he was not able to give us an exact description. For example: "And the shapes of the locusts were *like unto* horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were *as it were* crowns *like* gold, and their faces were *as* the faces of men" (Re.9:7; emphasis added).

All of the things, places, or beings contained in the Revelation, which we could imagine to be only subjective allegory, nevertheless have a literal objective basis, such that the events that surround them must be fulfilled exactly as they are presented – as past prophecies were so often fulfilled. Therefore, it is imperative that we accept a literal sense of the text while maintaining a careful awareness of its objective prophetic style such that we do not deviate from its intended meaning (cf. Newsletter, May 2013). Although the language used in the Revelation is highly figurative, we must understand that all of those figures represent real persons or real events that we could not understand if they could have been expressed more openly. The metaphors and allegories that John utilized in describing these many visions are intended to be a means to aid our understanding; they are not intended to obscure it. Therefore, it is very important that we carefully follow John's allegories exactly as he gave them, not fabricate additional allegories of our own on top of them. This leaves us a very narrow line to follow between factual neglect and extra-biblical exaggeration.

In the remainder of this newsletter we shall consider basic methods of interpretation, which today's Bible scholars apply to the book of Revelation. The most common of these methods are the futurist view, the historical view, the preterist view, and the spiritualist view. The futurist considers all of the major events found in the Revelation yet to be fulfilled in a future age immediately preceding and following the second advent of Jesus Christ, with the exception of the vision of the glorified Christ in Chapter 1 and the primary intent of the messages given to the seven first-century churches found within the first three chapters. This interpretation requires accepting a very exacting literal prophetic sense of the text and is the view that was held by early Christians such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and still many others.

All but the futurist view requires a certain amount of distortion of the text in order to make it conform to a non-futurist view. There is a strong warning for those who would tamper with the contents of the Revelation in this way: "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book" (Re. 22:18). While adding to its text by falsely interjecting present-day events or additional allegories and metaphors into the prophecy is most certainly prohibited, so is the taking away from the prophecy by ignoring various parts of it that one does not like, or by refusing to read, study, and preach about its judgmental passages in order to avoid controversy regarding its harsh message: "And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book" (Re.22:19).

Those holding to what is referred to as the historical view of Revelation state that most all of the events contained in the Revelation have already been fulfilled within all or various periods of past history. A typical view is to ascribe the text to various events that took place during the Maccabean era prior to the incarnation of

Christ. The Maccabees, a traditionalist sect of Judaism, had organized a successful revolt against Hellenist Jews who ruled Jerusalem at that time. In this view, the antichrist is assumed to have been Antiochus Epiphanies, the ruler of the Seleucid Empire that occupied Palestine between the years 175 to 164 BC. In AD 1202, a monk arbitrarily assigned a day-year principle to the 1260 days of Revelation 11:3, such that the last 3 ½ years of Daniel's seventieth week was applied to a period beginning with the apostles and ending in his own time. It must be noted that it becomes necessary to stretch both historical fact and Scripture text to make all the puzzle pieces fit convincingly in any of these historicist schemes. That fact accounts for the rather large number of interpretations based upon this view. It is hard for one to believe that John's highly detailed account was merely intended to be a recapitulation of the past especially in the light of Revelation 1:19, wherein John was told to write about things that were obviously yet in his future.

Preterism is derived from the Latin word *praeter*, which denotes something that is past or beyond. The preterist is a more specific historicist who believes that the events of judgment recorded in the Revelation have already been fulfilled during the Roman and Apostolic era. They see the second coming of Christ as having taken place in A.D. 70 at the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Roman armies. The great tribulation period, which Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24:21, is viewed as the severe persecution of Christians, which took place under the emperor Nero, whom they envision as having been the antichrist. In Matthew 24:36 Jesus said that no one knew the "day and hour" of his return. Preterists say that He did not mention the year inasmuch as his return would be within the lifetimes of the immediate generation of his disciples. This view is further supported by misinterpreting Matthew 16:28 and Matthew 24:34 in a similar manner. A more convincing verse commonly used to support this view is found in Matthew 10:23 wherein Jesus said to his disciples as He sent them out, "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, ***Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come***" (emphasis added). Revelation 1:3 is also referred to as supporting this view inasmuch as it reads, "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***" (emphasis added). These interpretations are refuted at length in *CRC Book III*, beginning on page 552. Briefly, Nero's reign and persecution was limited to the Roman Empire, not the entire earth, and he issued no mark restricting the trading of goods. Moreover, Nero took his own life in AD 68 prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. Regarding verse 10:23 in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus was merely saying that He would be rejoining them before they had gone over all the cities of Israel. As to the day and hour, Jesus was telling them that the precise date was not to be known. As to the generation He spoke of, in Matthew 16:28, He was referring to the revelation that Peter, James and John observed when He was transfigured on the mountain top, revealing Him as the Eternal King (cf. Mt.17:1,2). In Matthew 24:34, Jesus was not referring to the life span of his immediate disciples, but to that of those who would begin to see the predictive signs of which He had just spoken being fulfilled in rapid succession.

Because preterism denies the "blessed hope" of Jesus' future return to the earth for his elect (cf. Tit.2:13), some only partially accept that position. In this modified preterist view, Jesus' return in AD 70 is considered to have been but a spiritual return – a precursor to his second advent that is yet future. Partial-preterists commonly believe in a second advent of Christ and a general resurrection of all men at the end of days. They do not believe that Jesus will call down to earth to transport his Church out of harm's way (i.e. the rapture; cf. 1Th.4:13-18) prior to his return to execute divine judgment upon the earth's reprobate population that will remain behind. Nor do they believe in the coming of an antichrist in the last days, whom Jesus will destroy (cf. 2Th.2:2-9; 1Jn.2:18).

The spiritualist view, also referred to as the idealist view, states that the events recorded in Revelation have no literal context at all, but merely point out the significance of various Christian principles and attitudes. The severe judgments related in the Revelation are viewed to serve as warnings to point out serious consequences for Christians who deviate from the faith. This interpretation necessitates radically allegorizing the text. This is generally the view of various hyper-covenantalists as well as the view of religious scholars in many liberal denominations who render the entire book of the Revelation as poetic allegory rather than predictive prophecy. It must be noted that radically allegorizing the prophecies in the book of revelation out of their proper prophetic context could be used to justify almost any sort of religious bent no matter how extreme it may be.

The futurist view is the position put forth in this entire work as being by far the most credible in its faithfulness to the integrity and intent of this prophetic Scriptural text. © Arthur J. Smith, March 2017