

A VISION OF THE TRANSCENDENT & TRIUMPHANT CHRIST

Rev 1:9-20 (27 January 2002)

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr.

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), in his preface to *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*, dismisses the Book of Revelation as “a curious record of the visions of a drug addict which was absurdly admitted to the canon under the title of Revelation.” . . . “A curious record of the visions of a drug addict” . . . I beg to differ. In a sense, the Apostle John was “high”; but it was because he was “in the Spirit” and not because of something he inhaled or injected.

How many of you have seen a “picture” of Jesus Christ? I am *not* asking a trick question. I use the word “picture” to mean a painting or drawing or sketching done by an artist which represents his or her depiction of what Jesus might have looked like. So, how many of you have seen a “picture” of Jesus? Did He have gray hair? Were His eyes like blazing fire? Did He have bronze feet? Was a sharp double-edged sword coming out of His mouth? Was His face bright like the sun?

Perhaps some of you are thinking, “Royce, you’ve read too many *Far-Side* cartoons. What kind of picture are you talking about?” The picture that I am talking about is the portrait painted by John of the transcendent and triumphant Christ in the first chapter of Revelation. John begins this book of prophecy by identifying it as a revelation from Jesus Christ. He then proceeds to identify who Jesus Christ is. His inaugural vision of the “holy terror” of the risen and reigning Jesus Christ sets the stage for all that follows. Let’s read together Rev 1:9-20.

^{Rev 1:9}I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, “Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”

¹²Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. ¹⁹Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right

hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (NRSV).

Wow! By means of these words, we witness a dramatic “light and sound show” of the majestic power and splendor of the transcendent and triumphant Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. However we understand the imagery of this passage, we must not miss the overall impression it intends to give us; and that is, *an overwhelming, awesome vision of Christ*. John was completely “blown away” by this vision of the risen and reigning Lord. “When I saw Him,” John says, “I fell at His feet as though dead” (1:17). Personally, I have seen some spectacular light and sound shows; in fact, I still remember the show my family and I saw at Disney World in the summer of 1991. But I have never seen anything that can compare with what John saw. John wants his audience, and all future audiences, to know more than *what* Jesus said; he wants them to know *who* Jesus is. Once we recognize *who* it is that is speaking, we realize the urgency of listening to *what* He is saying.

Jesus is dressed in a robe befitting a king or priest. His white hair depicts wisdom and dignity—and possibly holiness and deity. His blazing eyes express His penetrating insight. His bronze feet denote strength and stability. His voice “like the sound of rushing waters” conveys the ideas of power and authority. That Jesus holds firmly the seven stars in His right hand indicates His sovereign control over the seven churches. The “sharp double-edged sword” proceeding from Jesus’ mouth symbolizes the irresistible power of divine judgment. And finally, “His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” Here, in the opening verses of Revelation, Jesus is presented in the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. As recipient of God’s revelation in verse 1, He is a prophet. As “ruler of the kings of the earth” in verse 5, He is king. And the high-priestly garments of verse 13 present Him as priest.

The living, reigning, majestic, holy, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful Christ stands in the midst of the churches, holds their destiny in His hand, and proclaims: “*Stop fearing. I was dead. I am alive forever. More than that, I hold in My hand the keys to death and the grave. You should not fear to go to any place to which I hold the key*” (1:17-18).

Do not miss the fact that the first statement John makes about the exalted Christ is that he saw Him “among the lampstands” (1:13). Jesus is no absentee Lord, who withdrew from the earth at His ascension and now waits in heaven to return, and who—in the meantime—runs His church by remote control. The very first characteristic of the risen Christ revealed to John in this vision is that Jesus Christ is present among His people. *Jesus is with us!* He sees all, He knows all, He understands all, He is in sovereign control of all, and He is with us all.

We come now to verse 19. Earlier, in verse 11, the exalted Christ commissioned John to “write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches.” In verse 19 this commission is repeated and an explanation is added. The NIV translation reads, ““Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”” Many students of Revelation believe this verse to be the interpretive key to understanding the entire book. A popular perspective today is to view verse 19 as presenting a straightforward chronological division of Revelation into three consecutive and non-overlapping historical periods. I know that I just said a mouthful, so here is a summary of this point of view. “What you [John] have seen” refers to the vision of chapter 1,

which concerns the events of the first century. “What is now” relates to chapters 2 and 3, and describes the condition of the churches in Asia Minor—and the world—during what is called the “church age,” the time extending from the first century until the beginning of the “great tribulation.” “What will take place later” applies exclusively to 4:1 – 22:5, which narrates the final tribulation that will begin just before the very end of history and will continue for a short time until Christ’s final coming to conclude history. When read this way, chapters 4 through 22 come alive with tantalizing insights into future world events.

However, in my humble opinion, there are serious problems with reading Revelation this way. First, such an approach interprets Revelation without sufficient sensitivity to its literary form. The book is read in a literal way rather than in a figurative way, which would be more appropriate given the book’s symbolic nature. Perhaps I can better illustrate my point than explain my point. When I am asked the question, “Do you interpret the Bible literally?” I answer with, “I interpret the literal parts literally.” *All of Scripture cannot be interpreted literally because all of Scripture is not literal.* I do not read the poetry of the Psalms the same way I read the historical narratives of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. I do not read the prophecies of Ezekiel the same way I read the legal codes of the Mosaic Law. I do not read the parables of Jesus, the in-depth logic of Romans, and the visions of Revelation exactly the same way. No. I interpret the literal parts literally, the poetic parts poetically, and the figurative parts figuratively.

Second, Revelation does not neatly confine all past events to the first chapter, all present events to chapters 2 and 3, and then all future events to chapters 4 through 22. To treat the book in such an unnatural fashion is to put it into a straightjacket that ignores the movement of past, present, and future throughout all of the book.

Third, the proper division of verse 19 is not threefold; it is twofold. In verse 11 John is told to “write what you see” and this refers to the contents of the entire Book of Revelation. Furthermore, what John sees is a marvelous mixture of both the present and the future. So, we should translate verse 19 this way: “Write, therefore, the things you are about to see, that is, both what is now happening and what will happen soon after this.” (Cf. the NLT: “Write down what you have seen—both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen later.”)

Fourth (and last), verse 19 reaches back to Dan 2:28-29. What John is asked to write down is the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy about the ultimate triumph of God’s rule.

Ok, that is enough of the heavy stuff for now. At this point, I want to tease you with a preview of coming attractions. *The Book of Revelation is a book of worship that summons us to recognize the awesome majesty of our Lord.* There is a lot of talk about worship today, and Revelation has a lot to say about the subject. So, stay tuned . . . this discussion is “to be continued . . .”

The last phrase of verse 20 reads, “the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” Notice, the churches are *only* the lampstands—the light is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the light; the church is the lampstand. And this means that it is the purpose of the church to shine forth Jesus Christ. As a church, our reason for existence is to allow the light of Jesus Christ to shine through us into a dark world. We do this by “loving others as Jesus loves us.”

There is a lot more to being a “Church of Christ” than having a sign on the front of our building that says “Church of Christ.” It is not whether we have the right *sign* that

counts, but whether we have the right *shine*. Does the light of the risen and reigning Christ shine through us? When we assemble, does the light of the exalted Christ inspire and illuminate our worship? Have we come here today in order to “fall at the feet of the Son of Man?”

The story is told of some churchgoers who were standing outside of their church building after services. They were talking about, what is a “saint”? After much discussion, a young girl blurted out, “I know what a saint is.” And then, looking up at the stained-glass windows, she said, “A saint is someone who lets the light shine through them.”

To the church at Ephesus, Christ threatens to remove their lampstand from its place. Why? They are working hard and they are sound in the faith. They do not tolerate false teachers or evildoers. What is the problem? As we will see, in our next lesson, they have lost their love. *Where there is no love, there will be no light.*

“A saint is someone who lets the light shine through them.” Is the light of Christ shining through us? When His light shines through us, then—and only then—are we truly “the Church of Christ.”

Aune, David E. *Revelation 1-5*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52A. Dallas: Word, 1997.

Aune, David E. *Revelation 6-16*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52B. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998.

Aune, David E. *Revelation 17-22*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52C. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998.

Barclay, William. *Letters to the Seven Churches*. London: SCM Press, 1957.

Barr, David L. “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment.” *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 243-256.

Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Beasley-Murray, G. R. *The Book of Revelation*. New Century Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

Boring, M. Eugene. *Revelation*. Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989.

Collins, Adela Yarbro. *Crisis & Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984.

Dudrey, Russell P. “Worship in Revelation 4-5.” Unpublished paper.

Hemer, Colin J. *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*. Biblical Resource Series. Eerdmans/Dove, 2001.

Keener, Craig S. *Revelation*. NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.

Michaels, J. Ramsey. *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*. Guides to New Testament Exegesis. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.

- Michaels, J. Ramsey. *Revelation*. IVP New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation*. Rev. ed. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Reese, Jack. "The Crux of the Battle for Worship Renewal (Part 1)." *The Christian Chronicle* 57 (August 2000).
- "Revelation Now: What Is Jesus Saying to Today's Churches (Annual Bible Issue)." *Christianity Today* 43 (October 1999).
- Rudwick, M. J. S.; Green, E. M. B. "The Laodicean Lukewarmness." *The Expository Times* 69 (1957-58): 176-178.
- Stevenson, Gregory. "Preaching Apocalyptically." *Restoration Quarterly* 42 (2000): 233-244.
- Summers, Ray. *Worthy Is the Lamb*. Nashville: Broadman, 1951.
- Thompson, Leonard L. *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*. Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Wall, Robert W. *Revelation*. New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 18. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991.
- West, W. B., Jr., "The Battle of Armageddon." *Gospel Advocate* 120 (February 23, 1978): 113, 122.