

REVELATION

A MANUAL

of

SPIRITUAL WARFARE

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“These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.”

Revelation 17:14

EXPOSITORY SERMONS
ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

~ VOL. 1 ~

Max Doner

REVELATION: A Manual of Spiritual Warfare
Expository Sermons on the Book of Revelation, Vol. 1

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About the Author

Max Doner graduated from Sacramento State University with a B.S. in Business Administration, and from Sacramento Bible Institute with a Diploma in Bible. He founded and pastored two Reformed Baptist Churches, one in Sacramento, California, and the other in Lebanon, Oregon. After thirty-four years of pastoral ministry, he retired and now devotes his time to writing, to the church he is a member of, and to his family. He has been married to his wife, Katherine, for forty-seven years, and has four children.

Dedication

To my wife Katherine Doner, without whose loving and loyal companionship I could have never persevered in the work of the ministry, and to my sister in Christ Barbara Wardlaw, without whose tremendous labors this book would have never come into existence.

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To the Reader

By its very nature, the book of Revelation has a degree of complexity that is irreducible and which cannot be simplified. The famous scientist Albert Einstein once said, “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.” To simplify something further than the subject matter itself permits is to lose essential elements of it, and thereby to misrepresent it.

In writing this commentary on Revelation, I have sought to make it as simple as possible, but no simpler. Therefore, I have provided an explanation of every phrase in this book, because no part of it is dispensable or unimportant to our understanding. Every phrase contributes valuable information to the reader. This necessarily means that there is a lot of explanation and interpretation that requires much attention and thought. It also explains the size of the book.

This book is not light reading, but neither is it tedious, because I have striven to make it as clear and simple as possible. It is critical that the reader give attention to the first six chapters that comprise the introduction to the book. These chapters establish the foundation for the interpretation of the entire book and provide the justification for it. Without the principles set forth in these chapters, the interpretation of the book will be much more difficult to understand. Some assertions made in these introductory chapters will be proven later in the book.

In each chapter, I have provided an introduction containing a summary of the teaching of the previous chapter. If one were to read only the introduction to each chapter and nothing else, one would have a succinct summary of the teaching of the book but would lack the proof and support for it that is contained in the body of each chapter.

As the title indicates, these chapters are expository sermons I originally preached to my own congregation. This explains the structured nature of each chapter, which contains the sermon outline for that chapter. It also explains the applications and exhortations contained in this book that flow out of its teaching. Teaching that is not applied to the life is of little value, so I have sought to assist the reader in thinking through how the truth contained in Revelation should be worked out in his or her life.

I would encourage fathers to read this book out loud to their fam-

ilies for family worship in the evenings, and to use it as a springboard for discussion, instruction, and evangelism of their children. It is written to be easily read out loud to others, because it is sermonic in form.

If the reader is interested, I have over 3,000 sermons from thirty-four years of pastoral ministry on SermonAudio.com that can be accessed for free. Search by speaker, type in Max Doner, and hit enter. Click on my name. This will take you to my page. Click on the filter tab to search by series. This puts up a list of all the books and topics I have preached through.

I welcome feedback from the reader regarding any matter contained in this book. I may be reached at ramosw1714@gmail.com and I will do my best to respond in a timely fashion.

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous debt of gratitude I owe to Barbara Wardlaw for typing the transcripts of these sermons from the audio version. It was from them I composed this book. I would also like to acknowledge the debt of gratitude I owe to those who assisted in the proofreading of this book. To Katherine Doner, Barbara Wardlaw, Aric Wardian, Tim Barras, Linda Schmidt, and Jeff Black, thank you for your many hours of work in finding my numerous errors. Any remaining errors are my own. If the reader finds any further errors, please bring them to my attention.

Preface

The volume in your hands is based on an exposition of the book of Revelation I conducted at the conclusion of thirty-four years of ministry as a Reformed Baptist pastor. I wish I had understood the meaning and message of Revelation at the beginning of my pastoral ministry as well as I did at the end of it. It would have greatly helped me understand and process the spiritual warfare I was experiencing during all those years of ministry.

But regrettably, like so many others, I had been schooled in dispensational premillennial futurist eschatology, and coming to an understanding of covenantal amillennial idealist eschatology was a decades-long process of arduous labor in the text of the Scriptures that was only fully completed in the last several years of my ministry.

I wish I had been able to read a book like this to help me break through the confusion of the commonly taught dispensational eschatology that ensnares and misleads so many, and which directs them into a tremendous misunderstanding of the vast bulk of Revelation.

It is with the hope of assisting others in their understanding of the meaning and message of this book that I offer it to the Christian world, and especially to those who find themselves confused and mystified by a book whose primary purpose is to help them understand and fight the spiritual warfare that surrounds them every day.

It is critical for the church to understand that the book of Revelation is a manual of spiritual warfare. It is designed by God to equip us to understand the nature of the spiritual battle we face against Satan and his helpers, and to enable us to be overcomers in that conflict.

The failure of the church to understand and follow this manual of spiritual warfare has resulted in her inability to fight that warfare with the skill, understanding, and strength she ought to have possessed. Much confusion and defeat could have been avoided had she understood it.

The sad truth is that most Christians neglect the message of this book because they cannot make much sense out of the meaning of it. This is something I hope to remedy by offering these expositions, which explain the meaning of every verse in the book.

It is spiritually liberating and empowering to believers to have the mystery and confusion removed and to gain a clear and satisfying

understanding of every passage. It is deeply satisfying to finally make sense out of what has been at best, a confusing book, or at worst, a closed book to the vast majority of Christians.

I would urge a careful perusal of the bibliography at the end of this book. These are the primary and most important resources I have used in gaining an understanding of Revelation, and they will richly repay anyone who spends the time to carefully read them. My gratitude to those who have been my teachers cannot be adequately expressed. I am indebted to each of them for helping me understand the meaning and message of this book.

I have carefully weighed their interpretation of Revelation, sometimes agreeing and sometimes disagreeing with them. I have added my own reflection and meditation, so that these resulting expositions provide a clarity and completeness that significantly advances the church's understanding of this book.

My hope is that Revelation will be understood as clearly and fully as every other book in the New Testament, and that it will be frequently used and applied to the everyday experience and walk of the believer just as much as any other book in the Bible.

It is past time we stop ignoring this book because we think we cannot understand it. Here the understanding of it is made both clear and compelling. My prayer is that this understanding will become universally held throughout the church until Christ returns, with the result that the church will overcome in the spiritual warfare she faces until the end of this age.

Max S. Doner

October 26, 2017

Foreword

The Importance and Simplicity of Biblical Eschatology

To study the book of Revelation is to study the subject of eschatology. God has revealed much of His plan for the future, and eschatology is the study of that plan. This plan enables us to know what the future will be and what we might expect to experience as we move into that future.

Jesus considered it important for His disciples to understand eschatology. He demonstrated this by spending entire chapters talking about it in the Gospels. He spoke of what would happen in the whole period of time between His first and second coming because it was important for His disciples to know that information. He did not want them to be surprised or dismayed or confused by what they were going to experience in the succeeding centuries.

Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostles repeated and expanded the teachings of Jesus about the future plan of God, with the result that the entire New Testament is saturated with eschatological teaching.

It follows, then, that since the matter of eschatology was so important to Christ and the apostles that they devoted this kind of time to it and provided this volume of information about it, it should be important to us as well.

There are two foundational concepts we need to grasp in order to be able to successfully launch into a study of eschatology.

The Importance of Eschatology

There are many Christians who question the value and importance of eschatology. They are dismayed by all the controversy surrounding it. They are mystified by the seeming complexity and obscurity of many of the passages that address it. They are confused by the conflicts and contradictions among the people who teach and write about it. As a result, they adopt a reductionist mentality toward the whole subject which can be summarized by these statements: “I know Jesus is com-

ing back to earth again. I know He is going to fix everything that is wrong. This is all I really need to know. Do not bother me with the details.”

Their attitude is this: We need to focus on the present issues and the practical matters. We need to focus on evangelism; we need to learn about child-rearing; we need teaching about husband-wife relationships; and we need instruction on the struggle with remaining sin. We need practical teaching. Do not bother us with confusing and complex prophetic schemes. Just preach the gospel.

The rebuttal to this mindset is that the Christian gospel, which is at the very core of every single practical issue, is saturated with eschatology. This is because eschatology sets forth what the gospel promises and where the gospel will bring us in the end. God has a goal to achieve with the gospel, and that goal is described by eschatology.

The central purpose of the gospel is to destroy the work of the devil which was begun in the garden of Eden, to redeem us from the effects of sin that were introduced there, and to restore us to the paradise that was lost. This is the goal of Christ’s saving work. Eschatology is the description of the achievement of that work, and where it will leave us in the end.

Eschatology has to do with God’s central purpose in salvation. That purpose is to bring mankind back to his original, God-intended state of perfect righteousness before God and perfect fellowship with God in a perfect world designed by God, all for the purpose of bringing glory to God. This is the end and goal of the gospel. This is what eschatology addresses.

Eschatology is about the defeat of Satan’s destructive purposes and the victory of God’s redemptive purposes. Eschatology is about the final triumph of the cross over sin and Satan, and their utter defeat through the saving work of Christ. In short, eschatology is simply the conclusion and the outcome of the gospel in its final vindication and triumph.

There is nothing more practical and more important than the gospel and its final vindication and triumph. Therefore, when someone says: “Just give me the practical and the important teaching,” the response must be: “There is nothing more practical than eschatology. There is nothing more important and basic to the gospel and its message.”

We cannot separate the gospel from eschatology because eschatol-

ogy is the end and the outcome of the gospel. If the gospel matters, eschatology matters as well. The second coming, the resurrection, the final judgment, and the eternal state of the saved and the lost matter to the gospel because they are the outcome of the gospel. They are essential elements of the Christian faith.

Several passages make this connection between the gospel and eschatology clear. One cannot talk about salvation without also talking about where it leads and what its outcomes are.

In Acts 3:19–21, we have the record of Peter healing a lame man at the gate of the temple. A crowd gathered and Peter preached the gospel. He said: “*Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;*”²⁰ *And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you:*”²¹ *Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.”*

From the beginning of the world, God has been speaking about the end of the world. From the beginning in Genesis 3:15 when God first proclaimed the gospel message that the seed of the woman was going to crush the head of the serpent, God has been working out that plan. The prophets constantly spoke about how it was going to unfold and be accomplished.

The Old Testament prophets spoke about both the first and the second coming of Christ. The first coming of Christ was realized in the incarnation of Jesus. From the time of Jesus, the New Testament prophets have been speaking about the second coming of Christ.

Peter’s preaching of the gospel leads into and concludes with eschatology. He sets forth the gospel: repent, believe, have your sins blotted out. Then he sets forth eschatology: Christ is coming back and is going to restore all things, including a refreshing, deliverance, and renewal of all that has been corrupted by sin. The gospel leads to and concludes with eschatology. They are inseparably connected. Peter did not preach one without preaching the other.

Furthermore, notice Matthew 19:16–29 in which Jesus preaches the gospel: “*And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?*”¹⁷ *And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.*”¹⁸ *He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou*

*shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness,*¹⁹ *Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*²⁰ *The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?*²¹ *Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.*²² *But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.”*

Jesus is preaching the gospel and saying to this man: If you believe the gospel, you will have treasure in heaven. What is heaven, and what is this treasure, and when are we going to arrive there and possess it? The answer to those questions involves eschatology.

Jesus continues in verses 23–29: *“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.”*²⁴ *And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.*²⁵ *When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?”* Notice, the subject is still salvation.

*“²⁶ But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.”*²⁷ *Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?*²⁸ *And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*²⁹ *And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”*

In this passage in which the gospel is preached, the sacrifice required of those who embrace the gospel is set forth. Eschatology is offered and declared to be the motive for embracing the gospel and the sacrifice it entails. Jesus said: If you are going to inherit eternal life, you have to follow me. That involves sacrifice. Peter asks: If we make that sacrifice, what are we going to have as a result? Jesus answers with eschatology: There is going to be a regeneration where everything will be made new. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and you are going to sit on thrones as judges. The point is, without eschatology, there is no motivation to embrace the gospel and

the sacrifices it calls us to.

The doctrine of hell and the doctrine of heaven is part of eschatology. If we are not teaching eschatology, we have removed the motivation for embracing the gospel. The gospel is not just about the here and now, it is also about the then and there. If there is no “then” or “there,” or if our understanding of it is defective or minimal, then the gospel will not mean much and we will not be greatly motivated by it, whether to believe it, preach it, or live it.

However, when we tie the gospel to its outcomes, then the gospel becomes very precious precisely because of those outcomes. This is what Jesus is doing here. In His preaching, Jesus ties the gospel to eschatology, and eschatology is the whole foundation for saying to Peter: This is why you believe and why you make the sacrifices you do as a Christian.

Finally, notice 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10: *“For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”* This is the “here” and “now.” You turned away from idol worship and you started serving God. What was your motivation? Why did you do that? You did it because of what is said in verse 10: *“And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.”* This is the “then” and “there.”

It was things to come in the future that motivated the Thessalonians in the present to turn to God from idols and to serve the true and living God. If we do not understand the things to come, then we cannot preach the gospel and provide people with proper motivation to give up their false gods and embrace the true God and start serving Him. The fruit of repentance and faith and service to God is the result of belief in the second coming and deliverance from the wrath to come. We must understand the second coming and its nature, the events that surround it, and the impact it has if we are to preach the gospel.

Examples could be multiplied, but the point is that the New Testament is saturated with extensive teaching on the subject of eschatology. The preaching of the gospel is always attended with teaching on eschatology, sometimes more, sometimes less, but it is always there. You cannot read the New Testament without constantly running into end-times teaching.

Indeed, there is one whole book of twenty-two chapters that is

dedicated exclusively to the issue of eschatology. If eschatology were not important and we could simply dismiss it, why did God put the book of Revelation in the Bible? People say they cannot understand it so they do not bother with it. You need to do the work of trying to understand it because it can be understood, and this book is designed to enable you to do so.

If eschatology was important enough to Jesus Christ for Him to teach us about it constantly and extensively in the Gospels, then it ought to be important enough to us to do the work of learning about it. We may not treat eschatology with a dismissive attitude when Christ does not and the entire New Testament does not.

As Christians, we have the obligation to do the hard work of focusing on and figuring out what prophetic passages mean. When we do, the richness of the gospel will be seen in a clearer light than we have ever seen it before, and it will move us to worship and live better than we ever have in the past.

The Simplicity of Eschatology

One of the reasons why people shy away from the study of eschatology is that it seems so complicated and confusing. But, in reality, the eschatological system of the Bible is very simple. There is the age we are in now, and there is the age to come that will occur after the second coming of Christ.

It is really just that simple. The Bible teaches us about this age and it teaches us about the age to come, and that is all there is. There are not seven ages as dispensationalists teach. There are not three ages as post-millennialists teach. There are just two ages. There is this world, and there is the world to come.

These two ages are distinguished and divided from each other by the second coming and the Day of Judgment. There is the age from the creation to the second coming which is called this age or this world. The second coming and the final judgment occur, and then there is the age and the world to come, which is the eternal state of the new heavens and new earth. That is all there is. This world and the world to come are distinguished and divided from each other by the second coming of Christ and the Day of Judgment.

This simple two-step eschatology, which does not include any ages other than these two, is set forth numerous times in the Scriptures.

First, notice Matthew 12:31–32. Jesus is talking about the unpardonable sin, which is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. *“Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.”*³² *And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.”*

This age and the age to come, this world and the world to come exhaust all of time. If you are not forgiven in this age or in the age to come, you will never have forgiveness, because there is no other time period in which to be forgiven. In the parallel passage in Mark 3:29, Jesus says, *“But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation.”* Therefore, if you are not forgiven in this world, and if you are not forgiven in the world to come, then you will never be forgiven because this world and the world to come encompass all of time.

Second, notice Mark 10:29–30 which says, *“And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel’s,”*³⁰ *But he shall receive an hundred-fold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.”* There is just *“this time”* and *“the world to come.”* There is no other time period.

The parallel passage in Luke 18:29–30 says virtually the same thing. *“And [Jesus] said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God’s sake,”*³⁰ *Who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.”* There is this present time, and there is the world to come. There is nothing beside that.

Third, notice Luke 20:34–36: *“And Jesus answering said unto them, The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage:”*³⁵ *But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage:”*³⁶ *Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.”*

Jesus is saying there are just two worlds. There is *“this world,”* and

this world encompasses all the time that people marry and are given in marriage. Then there is “*that world*,” and that world contains people who are resurrected, who are all the children of God, and who never engage in marriage ever again.

This clearly encompasses all of time. Marriage and death began in Genesis 1–3. From creation until the second coming, people marry and are given in marriage, and people die. During that period there are saved and unsaved living together on the face of the earth. But from the second coming and into eternity on the new earth there is no marriage, there is no death, all the people there are resurrected to eternal life, and only the children of God are there. Jesus teaches that this world and the world to come encompass all of time.

Fourth, Romans 8:16–18 says: “*The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:* ¹⁷ *And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.* ¹⁸ *For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*” We have the present time of suffering, and the future time of glorification in which there is no suffering, and that is all there is.

Fifth, Ephesians 1:20–21 says, speaking of the work of the Father in raising the Son from the dead: “. . . *he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places,* ²¹ *Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.*” This world and the world which is to come is all there is, and together they encompass all of time.

Sixth, Titus 2:11–13 says, “*For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men,* ¹² *Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;* ¹³ *Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ,*” which is the end of this world, and the beginning of the world to come. The event of the second coming separates those two worlds and two ages.

Seventh, 1 Timothy 6:17–19 says, “*Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God,*” that they lay up in store for themselves “¹⁹ *a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.*” There is “*this world*,” and there is “*the time to come*,” in

which they obtain eternal life.

Repeatedly we see that there are just two ages. No others are mentioned or indicated.

The point is that this two-age terminology permeates the New Testament, and is foundational to it. People do not think of these passages as being prophetic, but, in fact, they set forth the framework into which all prophecy must fit. All prophecy must fit either into this age or into the age to come, into this world, or into the world to come.

Therefore, the conclusion follows: the Millennium spoken of in Revelation 20 has to fit into one of these two ages. The Millennium is not a third age. The language of the Bible does not allow for a third age. The Millennium either fits into this age or into the age to come because these two ages encompass all of time.

The major framework of eschatology is clear. While we may wonder as to whether some details fit into this age or the age to come, the big picture is plain. In this world, we are going to have tribulation. In that world, we are not going to have any. This world is a present evil world. That world is going to be a perfect, sinless, and holy world. In this world, people marry and die. In that world, no one marries or dies. In this world, there are both the children of God and the children of the devil. In the world to come, there are only the children of God.

Complicated eschatology is unnecessary. It is unbiblical to say there are seven ages or there are three ages. There are just two, and everything fits into one or the other. When you understand this and start reading prophetic passages, asking the question where this fits, you will realize there is only one of two boxes to put it in. Understanding this dramatically improves your ability to understand the Bible's teaching on eschatology.

(There are a few passages in which the word "age" is used in the plural. They are Ephesians 2:7, 3:5, 3:21, and Colossians 1:26. When the word "ages" is used, it is simply referring to the passage of long, extended, indefinite periods of time. It has the same meaning as the expression "throughout the centuries," "across the millennia of time," or "down through the generations." When used in the plural, the word "ages" has no relationship to the two-age framework explained above.)

Having seen the importance of eschatology and the simplicity of eschatology, it should motivate you to say, "Eschatology is important.

I must strive to learn it.” It should also motivate you to say, “Eschatology is simple. I can understand it.”

You can put aside the false notions that have been taught in the Dispensational school of teaching, which is the most popular view in our day. There is just one coming and one Day of Judgment, which is the dividing line between this age and the age to come. The sequence of a secret rapture, and then a seven-year tribulation, and then a second coming, and then a millennium, and then a rebellion, and then a new heaven and a new earth is unbiblical.

Introduction to the Book of Revelation

1

The Name, Purpose, and Recipients of the Book

The book of Revelation is probably the most misunderstood book in the Bible. Leon Morris says in his commentary on the book of Revelation:

The Revelation. . . is by common consent one of the most difficult of all the books of the Bible. It is full of strange symbolism. There are curious beasts with unusual numbers of heads and horns. There are extraordinary phenomena, like the turning of one-third of the sea into blood (8:8), which are impossible to envisage. Modern readers find it strange. They are, moreover, not usually attracted by the fantastic schemes of prophecy which some exegetes find in it, and whose ingenuity is matched only by their improbability. The result is that for many Revelation remains a closed book. Except for one or two passages, like the vision of the redeemed in chapter 7, or that of the heavenly Jerusalem in the final two chapters, it remains largely unread. We recognize that it is part of the canon of Scripture and therefore we accord it formal recognition. But we remain uneasy and do not make use of it.¹

What he says is true, but what he says is also a great tragedy, because this book is intended to be a source of great comfort and encouragement to the church. Much of that comfort and encouragement is lost through misunderstanding its structure, its language, its symbolism, and its message.

This misunderstanding is largely due to an attempt to read first-century apocalyptic writing with a twenty-first-century mindset

¹ Leon Morris. *Revelation* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries). Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987, 17

and understanding. We cannot view the book of Revelation from a modern-day perspective. If we do, we will be utterly confused by it. We must understand the book of Revelation from two perspectives: from a first-century perspective, and from an Old Testament perspective.

What would John's first-century readers have understood as they read the book of Revelation? How would they have understood its structure, language, symbolism, and message? That is how we must seek to understand it. Modern-day dispensational schemes, current political events, and last-days speculations are not a basis for understanding the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is firmly rooted in the first century, and in the Old Testament.

It is from those two perspectives—a first-century perspective and an Old Testament perspective—that we must approach this book and seek to gain an understanding of it. The book of Revelation was written to be understood. It can be understood if it is approached and interpreted with a proper methodology, a methodology that first-century Christians would have understood and used.

It says in Revelation 1:3, "*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 clear implication behind that verse is the expectation that the ordinary Christian would read this book, understand it, and obey the instructions that it provides.

The modern-day Christian is often baffled and confused by what it says and cannot comprehend what it means. This is entirely unnecessary. This book can be understood and will be understood as it is properly approached and interpreted. It does not need to be a mystery and a source of confusion and frustration as it is read.

It is fitting that the book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible because it tells us the end of the Bible's story and it concludes the message the Bible conveys. The Bible opens with the book of Genesis, otherwise known as the Book of Beginnings, where we see the original creation of the world and humanity. The book of Genesis describes the work of the devil in engineering the fall of humanity in the garden of Eden and the depravity and curse that fell upon creation and all mankind as a result. As we read the early chapters of Genesis, it seems that Satan has triumphed over God and has destroyed the work of God.

However, God will not be defeated. God promises in Genesis 3:15 that He will send the Seed of the woman who is Jesus Christ to crush

the devil and his works. He will restore the paradise that has been lost, He will redeem the souls of fallen men, and the devil and his works will be destroyed.

Genesis 3:15 is God's declaration of war against Satan, and the rest of the Bible is a record of how that war develops and ends. As the Bible unfolds, we see the progressive defeat of Satan as the plan of God is slowly but surely developed over time. The book of Revelation records the conclusion of that plan, the ultimate triumph of Jesus Christ, and the final defeat of Satan.

Genesis tells us about the beginning of sin and paradise lost. Revelation tells us about the defeat of sin and paradise restored. Genesis tells us about the work of Satan established. Revelation tells us about the work of Satan destroyed. It is for this reason that the book of Revelation is such a great comfort and encouragement to the believer. It is a declaration of how everything is going to turn out in the end. It tells us that Jesus Christ wins and His people win, and that Satan and his followers, both demonic and human, suffer everlasting defeat and destruction in the lake of fire.

These then are the two goals we hope to accomplish as we study the book of Revelation together. Our first goal is to understand this book by understanding the structure, language, symbolism, and message of the book. We will do this by understanding it from a first-century perspective and from an Old Testament perspective. Our second goal is to see and rejoice in the triumph of Jesus Christ over Satan. It says in 1 John 3:8, "*For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.*" The book of Revelation is a declaration from start to finish that Jesus Christ has accomplished that purpose. Our goal is to see and rejoice in the triumph of Christ: to see His triumph in destroying the works of the devil, in restoring paradise lost, and in redeeming His people from sin and all its effects.

As we begin our introduction, there are several issues we need to consider, each of which has an important impact on our understanding and interpretation of the book. Some of these introductory issues might not seem too exciting at first, but each of these points is an important building block in understanding the book as a whole and in understanding its various parts. Without them, we cannot hope to achieve our two goals. Chapters 1–6, which form the introduction, are critical to understanding the exposition of the text in chapter 7 and following.

The Name of the Book

The title of this book in our English Bible is “The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” and it is commonly called the “Book of Revelation.” The word “revelation” is derived from Latin and simply means “unveiling.” The basic idea here is of something being concealed behind a curtain and, when the curtain is removed, what is behind the curtain is revealed. There has been a revealing, or a revelation of what was formerly hidden.

When reading through the table of contents of some Bibles, the last book of the New Testament is listed as “Apocalypse.” The word “apocalypse” is derived from the very first word of the Greek text of this book which is “*apokalupsis*.” The Greek word *apokalupsis* is transliterated to apocalypse, which also means to uncover or to unveil things that were previously hidden.

Revelation unveils the plan of God for the future and what will unfold over the process of time. We are told what the church will do in the future and what will happen to it. We are told what the world will do in the future and what will happen to it. There is an unveiling of the things that will occur and characterize the age between the first and second coming of Christ. In the first century, believers did not know how God’s plan was going to unfold over time. The book of Revelation pulls back the curtain and gives them an unveiling or revelation of how history is going to unfold and what spiritual warfare is going to look like from the first century until the second coming of Jesus.

Revelation 1:1 says this book is “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him. . .*” God the Father gave Jesus this revelation when He gave Him the book in Revelation 5 which was sealed with seven seals.

Contained in this book is the revelation describing the things that will occur and characterize the entire period from John’s day on into eternity. What first-century Christians could see and what we can see today is the declaration by God of what history is going to look like and how it is going to unfold over the process of time.

This does not mean that this book foretells specific future events that have occurred over the last 2,000 years, like the rise of King Constantine, the French Revolution, the establishment of America, World War I, or World War II. When we say that Christ reveals future histo-

ry, we are not saying that He reveals the specific events in the unfolding of that history so that this seal refers to the French Revolution, and that trumpet refers to World War I, or something similar. That is the historicist's view of the book of Revelation. We will be addressing that view in the next chapter. That is not the proper method for interpreting the book of Revelation.

When we say that Revelation gives us a view of what history is going to look like and how it is going to unfold over the process of time between the first and second coming of Christ, we mean that it foretells the general characteristics of the spiritual warfare that will take place in this age, it sets out the types of blessings that will be granted to the believers, and it describes the kinds of judgments that will fall on the wicked.

It tells us about the struggle between the church and the world, and what that will look like. It tells us about the conflict between God and Satan, and what that will consist of. It tells us about the second coming of Christ and the eternal state of the saved and the lost. And while it does deal with some very specific events that take place right at the end of this age, its primary thrust is to set out the characteristics of the spiritual warfare that is going to take place throughout this age between the first and second coming of Christ, and how that warfare will turn out.

In short, it reveals to us what we might expect to see and experience in the spiritual warfare that is going to go on until Christ returns, and the outcome His second coming will produce when He appears.

This is the reason for the name of the book. It unveils what the future will consist of between the first and second coming of Christ; and therefore, it is relevant to every generation until Christ returns.

Every section of this book has relevance to every generation of Christians. Every section describes each generation's spiritual conflict in fighting to establish the kingdom of God, in fighting against Satan and his forces, and in experiencing the protection and blessing of God as they fight.

The book of Revelation is a guidebook. It tells us what we are experiencing, why we are experiencing it, and how we should respond to it. During your lifetime, you have been undergoing spiritual warfare. What you have been undergoing is described in this book. It is described in the seven seals, in the seven trumpets, and in the seven vials. It is described in the conflict between the dragon and the beast and the

false prophet on one side, and the people of God on the other side. It equips you to fight that spiritual warfare, as you rightly understand and apply its message and teaching.

Revelation is a field manual for our present spiritual warfare, for the spiritual warfare of all previous generations, and for the spiritual warfare of all subsequent generations until Christ returns. Since it is a field manual that explains what the spiritual warfare of the age in which we live looks like and how we might successfully fight and triumph in it, it is sad that this book is so badly misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misapplied.

It is especially sad that so many get frustrated with Revelation and throw up their hands in confusion over what it is saying and therefore ignore it and leave it unused. That is like a general giving his troops intelligence about the enemy, supplying them with a battle plan for defeating the enemy, telling them the proper tactics to employ, and promising them victory if they use them, and then for the soldiers to say, “We cannot understand all of this. We will just set it aside and figure out what to do on our own as we go along.”

The failure of the church to properly understand and rightly use the book of Revelation is the reason for so much of the confusion and ineptitude Christians display in their methods of spiritual warfare. The modern-day church is largely characterized by ignorance as to how to conduct spiritual warfare and obtain victory in it.

My hope as we study this book is that we will say to ourselves as we go through it: “Of course! Now I see why things happen the way they do. Now I see why I experience the conflict I have. Jesus told us this is how it was going to be during this period. I can also see that if I patiently persevere, the triumph is mine and Christ will obtain the victory for Himself and for me. Therefore, I can fight these battles with confidence and with the knowledge that I am using proper tactics, and that I am assured of a triumphant outcome when I understand the battle as He describes it, and when I prosecute the battle as He instructs me.”

To summarize: what the book unveils to us is how history is going to unfold, the spiritual conflict that is going to characterize it, who the parties are, what the issues are, and how we are to fight that battle in our generation. How are we supposed to fight the battle in our generation? We must fight it the same way the first-century church fought it, and the same way the thirty-third-century church will fight it, if this world goes on that long.

This is not a book just about the past; this is not a book just about the future; this is a book about the spiritual warfare we are facing right now. To be sure, it covers issues regarding the past and regarding the future. But primarily, it is a revelation about how we fight spiritual warfare right now in our present lives and in our generation. It tells us how we may expect that battle to look, and how we should respond to it.

The Purpose of the Book

God never does anything without a reason and a purpose. We should expect that God has a definite reason for writing the book of Revelation and a definite purpose in placing it in our Bibles. We are not disappointed in that expectation. We are specifically told in Revelation 1:3 that the purpose of the book is to provide a blessing to all those who both hear and keep its teachings.

Revelation 1:3 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.”* God’s purpose in giving us this book to read, hear, and obey is that we would be blessed by it.

At the end of the book in Revelation 22:7, Jesus says, *“Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.”* He repeats in chapter 22 verse 7 what He said in chapter 1 verse 3. From the start of the book to the end of the book, the purpose is the same. The purpose is that the people of God would be blessed by understanding this prophetic revelation and by obeying the instructions it gives.

Many blessings accrue to those who read and obey the message of this book. Chief among those blessings is that of obtaining comfort and assurance as they struggle against the forces of evil. This whole book is about the struggle against the forces of evil. It opens with a description of this struggle.

Revelation 1:9 says, *“I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ.”* John is exiled on the island of Patmos because of persecution by the Roman Empire. Jesus comes and reveals the content of this book to John as he suffers because He wants John to be blessed. Among those blessings is the blessing of being comforted in the midst of persecution.

This book is full of help and comfort for persecuted and suffering Christians. Satan is a relentless foe of the people of God, and he stirs up his followers to persecute them mercilessly. The church is constantly struggling against the forces of evil. This has been going on for the last 2,000 years and will continue to go on for the next 2,000 years, if Christ delays His coming that long.

The purpose of this book is to comfort and strengthen and encourage believers, and to assure them of ultimate victory in their conflict against Satan and his people. This book opens with a glorious revelation of Christ in chapter 1. We see Him standing in the midst of His churches and saying to them, “Fear not. I am the First and the Last. I am He that lives and was dead and behold, I am alive forevermore. I have the keys to hell and death. Because I am all these things, you do not need to be afraid.”

Revelation 17:14 states regarding the forces of evil: “*These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.*” It speaks of the fact that though the forces of evil are going to assault us, Christ is going to triumph over them, and we who are with Him will triumph too. Christ ensures our victory.

The book of Revelation declares in its closing chapters that Satan and the beast and the false prophet are all cast into the lake of fire, death and hell are cast into the lake of fire, and all those who served Satan and persecuted the church are cast into the lake of fire. But the people of God will have a totally different destiny. God will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be their God. Revelation 21:4 says, “*And God shall wipe all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*”

The theme of Revelation from start to finish is that Christ is with His church—His people—when they battle the forces of evil, and He will ensure their victory. Even though the battle is long and difficult and painful, and some Christians are martyred, the outcome is not in doubt. Christ wins, and His people win.

Knowing this is a tremendous comfort to a militant church that is fighting hard in every generation to establish and expand the kingdom of God throughout the earth. It encourages us as we are battered

and beaten in spiritual warfare to remain faithful to Christ in spite of our sufferings, because faithfulness will be rewarded in the end. To those who overcome, the wonderful blessings of the new heavens and new earth are promised.

Revelation 21:7 says, “*He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.*” The purpose of the book is to give Christians assurance of victory, comfort in their persecutions, and encouragement to remain faithful to death. It provides motivation to overcome the pressure put on them to compromise and apostatize, knowing that if they overcome and do not surrender, the promised outcome is of infinite worth, eternal duration, and an immeasurable blessing.

This book equips the believer to face the spiritual warfare he will experience with strength, confidence, and joy. That is the purpose of the book: to give you strength, confidence, and joy as you fight the spiritual warfare of your generation.

The Recipients of the Book

This book is directed to a very specific audience. It is specifically directed to the churches of Jesus Christ. This is stated repeatedly.

Three passages make this clear. Revelation 1:4 says, “*John to the seven churches which are in Asia.*” In Revelation 1:11 Jesus says, “*I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches.*” John says, “I am writing to the seven churches.” Jesus tells him to send the information to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. At the end of the book of Revelation in 22:16, Jesus says, “*I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches.*”

From beginning to end, this book is addressed to the churches. It speaks about what they will face in the first century, the second century, and every subsequent century until the second coming of Christ. The church is the sole institution Christ left on earth to do His work, build His kingdom, and represent His message. Christ expects every single believer to be committed to and involved in a local church. His teaching presupposes this.

For example, in Matthew 18:15–18, Christ says that if you have a problem with your brother, go to him alone. If he will not hear you, take two or three more. If he does not hear them, tell it to the church.

The clear expectation is that these brothers have a church they are involved in and there are elders in that church to whom this matter of church discipline can be taken.

Jesus said in Matthew 28:19–20, “*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: ²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.*” We are to go out and witness and make disciples. We are to baptize them and teach them. The context in which baptism and teaching are done is in the context of the gathered assembly of the local church.

The New Testament knows nothing of lone-ranger Christianity or do-it-yourself spirituality. The New Testament everywhere expects and assumes that every Christian will be in a church, be committed to that church, and be participating in all the means of grace the church is entrusted with. It is as individual believers are involved in the life of the church that the church collectively and churches individually will be able to overcome the onslaught of Satan and his people.

Christ’s work is always done through local churches. Revelation makes this clear. Local churches are the focus of His concern and the object of His care, because Christ is in the midst of His church. In Revelation 1:12–13 John says, “*And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; ¹³ And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the [chest] with a golden girdle.*” What are these seven candlesticks? Revelation 1:20 says, “. . . *and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.*”

When Christ reveals Himself to John, He is standing in the middle of the seven candlesticks which represent the seven churches. Christ is focused on His churches and Christ lives in the midst of His churches. In Matthew 18:20 it says, “*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*” Christ is in the midst of His church because the local church is the New Covenant temple. It is made up of living stones with a universal priesthood that offers up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Christ is in the midst of His church because the church is the habitation of His special personal presence on earth. If Christ is focused on His church and dwells in the midst of His church, where do you think we

ought to place our focus and spend our time on the Lord's Day? Is it not in the midst of His church?

The local church is God's institution for getting His work done on earth in this age. It is through the local church that He builds His kingdom, proclaims His glory, and preaches His gospel. Therefore, we see that Christ's great concern in the book of Revelation is for the purity of His church, the doctrine of His church, the suffering of His church, the protection of His church, and the victory of His church. Christ is a church-centered Savior, and therefore we need to be church-centered Christians. To be church-centered is to be Christ-centered, because Christ dwells in the midst of His church.

In this book, we see the great concern Christ has for the purity, doctrine, persecution, protection, suffering, and victory of the church. We see His concern for these things in the letters He writes to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. There we see that Christ's heart is focused on His churches. There are seven of them, a number that is used forty-four times in the book of Revelation. The number seven symbolizes completeness. Therefore, these seven churches represent the church as a whole and the church throughout the centuries. These seven churches represent all the churches that exist, have existed, or shall exist between the first and second coming of Christ. They represent the complete church.

These seven churches represent the problems they struggle with, the virtues they possess, and the opposition they experience. In these seven churches we see the types of challenges, blessings, failings, and successes that churches have in this age. The afflictions the church was subjected to in the days of the apostle John are typical of the persecution churches must endure throughout the New Covenant period, and especially in the period after Satan is loosed shortly before the second coming of Christ.

Therefore, any church that hopes to please Christ, overcome the world, and triumph over persecution needs to understand and apply the lessons in Revelation. If there ever was a church epistle, the book of Revelation is it. Christ as the Head of His church gives instructions to His church, and the church needs to hear and heed the instructions and promises He provides.

Have you ever wondered: What should our church look like? The book of Revelation tells us what it should look like, as well as what it must not look like. It tells us how it can triumph. It tells us about the

care and protection Christ provides for it. But it also tells us the work, labor, and faithfulness we must exercise if we are to be overcomers in the spiritual warfare we face. Christ made wonderful promises to every one of the churches, if they overcame in the spiritual warfare they were facing.

Overcoming implies that there is an obstacle in the way. The obstacle we face in our day is the same one John faced in his day, the obstacle of satanic opposition. Satan is fighting hard against the church and God's people, and we have to fight back and defeat him. If we follow Christ's instruction to His churches, we will overcome in this warfare. In the end, we will have been found to be faithful to Jesus, and Satan will be found to have failed in subverting us into apostasy. Those are the overcomers. They are not people who are perfect; they are people who persevere in spiritual warfare, and by the grace, strength, and blood of Christ overcome Satan. They send him away defeated in his purpose to pull them away from Christ and draw them to himself.

This is the name of the book, the purpose of the book, and the recipients of the book. In this book like nowhere else, we see the triumph of Christ over Satan, and we see God's sovereign control over the course of history as the seals are opened, the trumpets are sounded, and the vials are poured out.

Therefore, we should not be surprised at all by the way things are unfolding, by the things we experience, by the struggles we have, or by the fact that we actually do overcome! The Christ who chose us and called us is the same Christ who ensures by His grace that we remain faithful. Here we see the challenges that faced the church and the victory of the church over every opponent.

We have to understand that the church is not a place of ease and comfort. It is like a military base. It is an outpost in the war, and therefore people are going to come in bloodied and wounded. They need to have their wounds bound up and healed. They need to be equipped with spiritual weapons, and they need to go back out and fight some more. The church looks more like a field hospital than a retirement home, and we need to understand that.

People see conflict in their church and ask, "Why are people in the church fighting with each other? The church is to be a place of peace and harmony!" Sadly, there will always be conflict in churches because we are involved in a war. Satan is going to send his people

into the church to try to subvert the church. Does the enemy ever try to infiltrate his opponent's military base? Satan does so as well. Paul himself said in Acts 20:29 that grievous wolves shall come into the church from without. He said that even from within the church, men would arise and speak perverse things and try to draw away disciples after them. It is no wonder there is conflict in the churches. There is a war going on, and often the battlefield is inside the church itself.

We have to understand that we are in a war. We need to have a war mentality and a war footing, and we need to be fighting the good fight of faith. The day of rest will come when Christ returns. Until then, we need to fight the good fight with all of our strength.

The book of Revelation is a field manual for the war. It is the General's plan. It is the unveiling of the tactics of the enemy. It tells us the tactics that Satan is going to use to try to defeat us, and it gives us instructions on how to respond in order to defeat him. Let us fight the good fight of faith. Christ is worthy of our most valiant efforts.

2

Four Interpretive Approaches to Revelation

Revelation is a book of victory. It declares the victory of Christ and His people over sin and Satan. It tells us this victory is both certain and total. Consequently, this book has been a great source of comfort to suffering saints in every century since it was written.

We live in a time of great spiritual warfare and conflict. Satan and his people relentlessly attack us. But the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings. He has the keys to hell and to death, and no one is able to defeat Him.

As we saw in chapter 1, the theme of Revelation from start to finish is that Christ is with His church as together they battle the forces of evil. Christ ensures their victory over those forces of evil even though the battle is long and difficult and painful.

One of our goals as we study Revelation is to understand its structure, its language, its symbolism, and most of all, its message. But understanding requires interpretation. If we are to rightly understand this book, we must properly interpret it. The question is, what principles should we employ to arrive at its proper meaning? This is supremely important, because if we do not employ a proper method of interpretation, we will fail to properly understand the message of the book, and fail to gain the benefit it has for us.

In this chapter, we will examine the four major approaches that have been taken to interpret Revelation. We will set forth the approach we will take, and explain why we believe it is correct. Here are the four major interpretations that historically have been applied to Revelation.

The Preterist View

The term Preterist comes from Latin, and it simply means “past.” We could entitle this the “Past” view. The Preterist view of Revelation is

that the prophecies it contains were either largely or else completely fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman army in AD 70. Everything, or almost everything that Revelation predicts, has been fulfilled for nearly 2,000 years.

There are two schools of thought in the Preterist movement. There are the extreme Preterists, who of course do not call themselves extreme Preterists. They prefer to call themselves “consistent” Preterists. They believe the prophecies contained in the book of Revelation were completely fulfilled in AD 70. They teach that the tribulation, wrath, and judgments described in Revelation were fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem. They believe Jesus actually returned in AD 70, the resurrection occurred in AD 70, and we are now living in the new heaven and the new earth instituted in AD 70.

These positions can only be maintained by a very extreme spiritualizing of the nature of the second coming, the nature of the resurrection, and the nature of the new heaven and the new earth. Those who hold this view of extreme Preterism, or as they would prefer to call it, “consistent” Preterism, are in fact heretics. They fall under the condemnation of 2 Timothy 2:17–18 which says: *“And their word will eat as doth a [cancer]: of whom is Hymenæus and Philetus; ¹⁸ Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.”* Maintaining that the final resurrection of the saints has already occurred is a malignant doctrine. Rather than establishing the faith of believers, it overthrows it.

The second and dominant school of Preterist thought is called “partial” Preterism. The partial Preterists hold that the vast majority of the prophecies in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of Jerusalem. However, they would say that the resurrection of the dead, the second coming of Christ, the final judgment, and the new heavens and the new earth are still in the future and remain yet to be fulfilled. They assert that the bulk of what is spoken of in Revelation did occur in AD 70, but that the final events of chapter 19 and chapters 21 and 22 will be fulfilled in the future, while chapter 20 is currently being fulfilled.

This view is usually associated with a post-millennial view of Revelation 20. Post-millennialism teaches that the kingdom of God will be physically manifested in the governments of the world in a millennial Christian golden age, in which Christianity dominates the world and its governments prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Partial Preterists believe that the events of Matthew 24 and the events of Revelation 1–18 were fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. The only thing that remains is for Christ to come back, the resurrection to occur, the final judgment to take place, and the new heaven and the new earth to be established. (See my interpretation of Matthew 24 in the appendix for a rebuttal of this view.)

There are several problems with the partial Preterist view of the book of Revelation. First of all, this view necessitates that Revelation had to be written very early, certainly before AD 70 when history informs us that Jerusalem fell. Therefore, proponents of this view posit that it was probably written sometime in the AD 60s. However, the vast majority of the evidence and the strongest consensus among scholars is that Revelation was written by the apostle John around AD 95 or 96 in the midst of the persecution that took place during the reign of Domitian, who was the Roman Caesar at that time. Therefore, the theory that Revelation is a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 would not be possible if this book were written after that event.

The second problem with a Preterist interpretation of Revelation is that the judgment depicted in Revelation which constitutes God's final wrath is one that falls on all the nations of the earth, not just on Jerusalem. To consider the reference in Revelation to the fall of the city of Babylon as being a reference to the fall of Jerusalem is simply not tenable. Babylon is a term that symbolizes anti-Christian societies wherever they may be found across the world and down through time. It is not a term that is used in the Scriptures to refer to the city of Jerusalem, or to Israel itself.

The depictions in Revelation of God's wrath falling upon all the nations of the world are not compatible with the fall of a single city or nation like that of the fall of Israel and Jerusalem in AD 70. The wrath of God that will most certainly fall on all the nations of the whole earth as described in Revelation will be infinitely greater than the destruction of Israel and Jerusalem in AD 70. The fall of Israel and Jerusalem in AD 70 is not a significant enough event to fulfill the descriptions of the worldwide pouring out of the wrath of God in the trumpets and the vials.

A third major problem with Preterism is that, if it is true, the book of Revelation largely ceased to have direct application to Christians after AD 70. If it had been fulfilled at that point, it would have had

little relevance to those who lived after that time. Revelation would have been intensely relevant to Christians between AD 60 and 70, but after AD 70, the bulk of it would have become not a prophecy of the future but a history book of the past. Preterism confines the direct relevance of the vast majority of the book of Revelation to about a ten-year period and to a single generation, that of the first century.

This is the Preterist position of the interpretation of the book of Revelation. It is a position that says the vast majority of the book was fulfilled in AD 70 in the fall of Jerusalem. The only things that remain to be fulfilled are the second coming of Christ, the resurrection, the final judgment, and the new heavens and the new earth. Everything else has already been finished and fulfilled.

The Historicist View

You might imagine that this view has something to do with history since it is called the “Historicist view,” and you would be correct. The Historicist interpreters of Revelation see the book as a calendar of historic events written in advance.

If someone were to look at the calendar in your home, they would see several events penciled in that you hope to participate in at some point in the future: birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, meetings, and chores. You have a calendar of future events you hope to accomplish. For the Historicist interpreters, this is what the book of Revelation consists of.

According to this view, Revelation predicts specific events that will occur during the time between the first and second coming of Christ. The seals, trumpets, and bowls picture successive stages of church history and events that are going to take place throughout that history. Historical events like the collapse of the Roman Empire, the rise of the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation, and various wars are described by the various pictures and symbols set forth in Revelation. For example, the swarm of locusts coming out of the bottomless pit in Revelation 9 is said by some to represent and predict the rise and spread of Islam and its destructive armies and actions.

Among Historicist interpreters, the historical events that are symbolically predicted in Revelation always seem to be those that occur in European Western civilization. This approach makes the book of

little relevance to the world outside of Western Europe. It also makes it of little direct application to those who lived in the first century, since according to Historicists, most of what is addressed in the book of Revelation would occur centuries ahead of their time. Why would a first-century Christian even care or be impacted by a prophecy of a World War that was going to occur in the twentieth century?

The problem is that each Historicist interpreter views the book of Revelation differently, in order to make it fit the realities of the time in which he lives and the events he considers to be significant in his own historical frame of reference. For example, a Historicist interpreter writing in the 1400s would fit the statements in Revelation into the events that took place from the time of Christ until the 1400s. Someone else writing in the 1600s would fit the statements in Revelation into the events that took place from the time of Christ until the 1600s. Those writing today would engage in a similar methodology.

Some think they can now find the rise of America as a nation in Revelation 12:14 because it talks about the eagle with wings bearing the church into the wilderness. The national symbol of America is the eagle, so the eagle that bears the church on her wings into the wilderness represents the rise of America as a place to which persecuted Christians fled. Someone writing in the 1400s would have never thought of such a thing.

As the centuries unfold, Historicists continually reassess what these various symbols represent and which events they depict. The problem is that each Historicist interpreter conforms his interpretation to fit the realities and the historical events he considers significant.

Furthermore, there is little agreement among Historicists as to what the different symbols in Revelation have referred to over the last 2,000 years. There are nearly as many interpretations as there are Historicist commentators. Given that there is such a wide divergence among them as to which events are predicted by which symbols, it would appear that this approach cannot yield any real hope for ever properly understanding this book.

It is also telling that while insisting that all of history is set forth in this book under these various symbols, there has been no consensus among Historicists as to the events in history that these various visions symbolize. In 2,000 years, one would think that at least the main outline of human history would have emerged with some clarity, but this has not yet been the case. It seems that this Historicist approach

in interpreting the book of Revelation can never yield any certainty as to its meaning.

Moreover, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, the unfolding of the events in Revelation are not chronological, but cyclic. The seals, trumpets, and vials do not occur sequentially in time, but in parallel with one another. Therefore, the seals, trumpets, and vials cannot represent the chronological order of Western Civilization in history. Instead, the seals, the trumpets, and the vials represent the same time frame looked at from different perspectives.

The Historicists' view of the interpretation of Revelation was largely held by the Reformers. It is a perspective that figures prominently in their writings. They saw the Pope as the beast, the man of sin, and the Antichrist. They saw the Roman Catholic Church as the great whore, Babylon, whom Christ would destroy with His second coming. We see this in the major Reformed Confessions of Faith in which the Pope is identified as the Antichrist. This identification arose out of the Historicist view of the interpretation of Revelation.

The Futurist View

As the name suggests, the Futurist method of interpreting the book of Revelation holds that the vast majority of the book has yet to be fulfilled at some point in the future. This is the inverse of the Preterist view. The Preterist view says that the vast majority of the book has already been fulfilled, but the Futurist view says the vast majority of the book has yet to be fulfilled.

The Futurist view of the book of Revelation is the dominant view in our day among Evangelical Christendom. It has been widely popularized by dispensational premillennialism and by prolific end-times books and movies that have been produced for popular audiences.

According to the Futurists, the first three chapters of Revelation describe seven literal churches that existed in John's day during the first century, and these seven churches also represent seven periods of church history from John's day until the rapture.

Strangely enough, Futurists are therefore Historicists in their interpretation of chapters 1 to 3 of Revelation because they say that the churches of chapters 1 to 3 are prophetic of seven successive periods of church history as they chronologically unfold up until the rapture of the church. The characteristics of each of the seven churches are

said to also characterize the period of church history that they represent.

For example, the church at Ephesus, the first church mentioned, represents the period of history from Pentecost to about AD 100, the apostolic era.

The second church mentioned, the suffering church Smyrna, represents the period from AD 100 to 300, when the church suffered under the great persecutions of the Caesars until Constantine ended that suffering with the Edict of Milan.

The third church mentioned, Pergamos, represents the period from AD 300 to 800, during which time great compromise occurred. This involved the integration of the church with the world through Constantine, the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church, and the union of church and state.

This scheme goes on in similar fashion with each of the remaining churches. The seventh church, the lukewarm church of Laodicea, represents the church that exists in the last days just before the rapture of the church.

Following the rapture of the church is a seven-year tribulation, the second coming of Christ, a thousand-year millennium, and finally, the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. Three different judgments occur during these events: one at the rapture, one at the second coming, and one at the end of the millennium.

Dispensational premillennialism is Historicist in its view of chapters 1 to 3, but then becomes Futurist with reference to the remainder of the book. Apart from the letters to the churches in chapters 1 to 3, the remainder of the book details the events that will immediately precede the second coming of Christ. The Futurist interpretation holds that chapters 4 to 19 have had no bearing on, or any fulfillment in, or any application to the last 2,000 years of church history.

According to this view, Revelation is not focused on the first-century Christians and neither is it focused on the last 2,000 years of church history. The Futurist view sees chapters 4 to 19 as focused on a very small and short period of time yet to come. In particular, chapters 4 to 19 refer only to a seven-year period of time called the Great Tribulation. They believe that the Great Tribulation will begin with the rapture of the church, which they say is described in Revelation 4:1. This Great Tribulation will last seven years, and it will end with the second coming of Christ in chapter 19. Chapter 4 to chapter 19

describes the seven-year Great Tribulation that will begin after the rapture and end at the second coming.

Futurists believe that chapter 20 details a millennium on this present earth that begins with the second coming of Christ, lasts a literal 1,000 years, concludes with the final judgment, and is followed by the new heavens and the new earth as described in chapters 21 and 22. Futurists see chapters 4 to 22 as not only future to our time, but they also see them as occurring chronologically. Chapters 4 to 22 are seen as representing the actual historical order of events as they unfold. The seals are followed by the trumpets which are followed by the bowls, and so on. The events of chapter 20 occur chronologically after the events of chapter 19.

Furthermore, Futurists not only see chapters 4 to 22 as an actual chronology, but they also literalize the symbolic language and imagery as much as possible. Literalism is a major characteristic of Futurism.

Thus, the mark of the beast is literally a physical mark in the forehead and hand, like a tattoo or an embedded computer chip. An actual one-third of all the creatures in the sea perish, and an actual one-third of all ships sink when the second trumpet is sounded, and so on. Language that is clearly symbolic is interpreted literally.

For Christians who live prior to the rapture, chapters 4 through 19 merely provide us with an exciting preview of what the Great Tribulation will be like, but they have no direct personal application to us, nor for the people of God who have lived during the last 2,000 years. It is not for them, but only for those who live during the Tribulation.

Chapters 4 to 19 are a mere curiosity to us, because even if we are alive when the Tribulation described in those chapters begins, we will completely miss it. We will have been raptured up into heaven before it begins, and we will come back with Christ after it is over. We are guaranteed to have zero participation in the events that occur on earth described in chapters 4 to 19.

This Futurist approach largely robs the book of any significance to the early Christians of John's day, and all subsequent generations as well. Chapters 4 to 19 apply only to those living during the seven-year Tribulation. Yet this is entirely contrary to the stated recipients of this book, which are the seven churches. These represent the church universal throughout this entire age. This book is meant for all believers in all periods of history, not just for those living during a brief seven years under the Great Tribulation.

The Idealist View

The Idealist view sees the entire book of Revelation as a symbolic presentation of the battle between Christ and Satan, between the followers of Christ and the followers of Satan, and between good and evil. In a word, the book of Revelation is a symbolic depiction of spiritual warfare. It depicts the participants in that warfare, the struggles of that warfare, and the outcome of that warfare. It depicts the warfare the church will experience in every generation between the first and second coming of Christ.

Key to understanding the book of Revelation is realizing that it is cyclic in its structure, not linear. It repeatedly takes us on a journey through the period between the first and the second coming of Christ, showing us in each of those journeys the nature and outcome of spiritual conflict from various perspectives.

In the imagery of the seven seals, John takes us on a journey through the time period between the first and second coming of Jesus and describes what spiritual warfare will look like from one perspective during that time period.

In the imagery of the seven trumpets, John takes us on a second journey through the same time period from the first coming to the second coming of Christ and describes from a second perspective what spiritual warfare will look like during that time period.

In the imagery of the seven vials, John takes us on a third journey through the same time period from the first coming to the second coming of Christ and describes from a third perspective what spiritual warfare will look like during that time period.

The seals, the trumpets, and the vials all run concurrently with one another from the first to the second coming. Each of them describes the spiritual warfare that takes place during that time from a different perspective and with reference to the various participants and their outcomes. Each of them describes the types of things we will experience and the wicked will experience as that time frame unfolds.

The seals, the trumpets, and the bowls teach us about the spiritual conflict that exists in every generation, and the struggles every generation will experience between the first and second coming of Christ. They tell us about the faithfulness we must exercise in the face of persecution and the victory we shall obtain if we do.

This is not to say that every single thing in the book is merely a de-

scription of spiritual warfare. There are certainly predictive passages in the book that will be fulfilled during the end times.

The rise of the antichrist, the second coming of Christ, the final judgment, the disposition of the saved into the new heaven and the new earth, and the disposition of the lost into the lake of fire are all yet future, and they will occur in the end times. But the vast majority of the book is a description in symbolic language of the kind of spiritual warfare that will occur between the first and second coming of Christ before those specific end times events occur.

The second coming of Christ, the resurrection, the final judgment, the disposition of the saved and lost, and their respective eternal destinies are repeatedly, and with increasing clarity, set forth as we move from the beginning to the end of the book, and they will all be fulfilled in the future. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the book speaks of the nature of the spiritual warfare that each generation of Christians will have to fight until Christ returns.

What this means is that every generation must deal with the issues the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 had to deal with. Every generation experiences the events described in the seals, the trumpets, and the vials. Every generation does battle with the dragon and the beast and the false prophet. Every generation must resist the seductions of the great whore Babylon. Every generation must refuse the mark of the beast. Every generation must obtain the seal of God in the forehead.

Therefore, this book and its message are of equally compelling relevance and value to all believers of all generations between the first and second coming of Christ. It is equally relevant to first-century Christians, to fifteenth-century Christians, and to twenty-first-century Christians.

Since Revelation is a depiction of the spiritual warfare we will engage in between the first and second coming of Christ, it is therefore designed to inspire persecuted, suffering, and battle-weary Christians of every generation to keep up the good fight of faith and to endure to the end, knowing that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ. He shall reign forever and ever, and we shall reign with Him.

To achieve this goal of depicting the spiritual warfare that is going to take place, symbolic language is employed. Symbolic language is used to depict the struggles believers will have and the triumph they

will achieve through the power of Christ and His saving work. It is used to depict the wrath of God's judgments that will fall on the ungodly for their persecution of the saints. It is used to depict the work and the witness of the church in conveying the message of God to the world.

In vision after vision, with symbol after symbol, the truth is emphasized that God is sovereign and controls both people and events so that His purposes are always being achieved. This makes for a very thrilling book—one that comforts us, strengthens us, and fills us with joy and awe as we see God destroying His enemies, delivering His people, and advancing His cause and kingdom in every generation to the end of time.

The key to understanding these symbols and visions in Revelation is found in the Old Testament. There is not a symbol in the book of Revelation that is not contained in the Old Testament. As first-century Christians read this book they were saturated with a knowledge of the Old Testament, and as John referred to this symbol or that symbol, they immediately knew what that symbol represented from their knowledge of how it was used in the Old Testament.

The Idealist view is what we will be using as we interpret the book of Revelation. This view understands that the book of Revelation is a manual of spiritual warfare.

Therefore, as we interpret this book, we are not going to say it was largely fulfilled in AD 70, and it is mostly history. We are not going to say that when Columbus sailed across the ocean in 1492 to discover America, this was predicted in the first seal. We are not going to say you should not worry about what is in chapter 6 because that refers to the Great Tribulation, and you are going to be raptured out before it occurs. Such teaching does nothing to strengthen and sustain persecuted suffering saints throughout this age.

What we are going to say is that the book of Revelation describes the tribulation that all first-century Christians went through and all subsequent-century Christians go through until Christ returns. As we read Revelation and interpret these symbols and visions, you will see that these are the things you are experiencing in your own spiritual warfare. These are the things that are happening right now in your life. These are things that have happened to you in the last decade. These are the kinds of things you are going to struggle with in the next decade of your life. Every generation does.

What you have in Revelation is a description of the good fight of faith that you fight every day of your life. This is the fight every Christian has fought and will fight between the first and second coming of Christ. This battle will only end when Jesus returns. Revelation teaches us about the spiritual warfare we will experience until the second coming occurs and the battle is done. Then we go into the new heavens and the new earth, where we will never have to do battle again.

The Idealist view is the only view that makes proper sense out of the symbols and pictures set before us in the visions in Revelation, and this is the method of interpretation we will use.

In the next chapter, we are going to talk about specific principles of interpretation. These principles will be pursued within the framework of Idealism; that is, that the book of Revelation is a book that describes the spiritual warfare of every generation between the first and second coming of Christ. Revelation becomes increasingly clear about the end times and the second coming of Christ as it moves from the beginning to the end of the book. The book is progressive in its clarity regarding the end times, while being cyclic in its structure, as it teaches us from various perspectives about the spiritual warfare every generation will experience as we proceed toward the second coming.

3

Three Principles to Interpret Revelation

The purpose of the book of Revelation is to comfort and encourage the persecuted church in its battle to advance the kingdom of God. Encouragement and comfort arise from each section of this book.

First, we are comforted by seeing Christ in the midst of His churches in chapters 1 to 3. It is a great comfort to know that Christ loves His churches, and His letters show His heart toward them. They make it clear that His whole focus and affection are upon them. Christ is intensely concerned for the welfare of His churches, and He is determined that they will overcome in the conflict and persecution they are facing. We are comforted in these opening chapters by knowing that Jesus is with His church, Jesus is for His church, Jesus is in the midst of His church, Jesus is guiding and protecting His church, and Jesus is bringing His church to triumph and victory.

Second, we are comforted as we see God the Father seated on His throne in heaven in chapters 4 and 5. For believers to know that God the Father is sovereignly ruling over the world and all that occurs in it with infinite wisdom and power fills the churches with comfort and confidence. All of God's enemies are known to Him and are under His control and therefore we do not need to fear.

Third, we are comforted as we see the outcome of our warfare in chapters 6 and 7. Even though there are tremendous struggles and conflicts which we experience in this age, in the end, the wicked are crying out for the rocks to fall on them to protect them from the wrath of God, while the Christians are worshipping and rejoicing around the throne of God in heaven.

Fourth, we are comforted as we see God's wrath poured out on the persecutors of the church in chapters 8 through 11 when the seven trumpets are sounded. There we see that the wicked are severely dealt with by God in this life as well as in the next, and He does not relent in His punishment of them. We see that the wicked have it far harder than the righteous, because God is with us in our sufferings; but God