

Understanding our faith
7

Hope for the Lamb's triumph

Reading

Revelation 5:1-14, 13:1-18, 21:1-22:6

Teaching

How does John's social criticism challenge congregations today?

The book of Revelation, when read carefully, directs us toward a nonviolent path. To begin with, the book identifies itself as a "revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1). Jesus, in his life and teaching, serves as the key that should orient our interpretation. Revelation means to stimulate our following the way of Jesus.

Revelation speaks on a symbolic, imaginative level.

The author, John, faced a double crisis. On the one hand, he feared long-term consequences for churches that found themselves too much at home in Roman society. On the other hand, others faced severe persecution.

John offers a sharp critique of Babylon. Though John's Babylon obviously represents Rome, it also represents most nation states when they demand total allegiance. Chapter eighteen contains the heart of John's critique. The main points of contention include: (a) the idolatrous worship of the empire; (b) Babylon's violence, especially toward people of faith; (c) Babylon's placing such high value on brute power; and (d) Babylon's materialism and unjust economics.

According to Revelation, the way of true power in the world is the way of the Lamb.

However, John's concern went beyond critiquing Babylon as an end in itself. He critiqued the corrupt wider culture in order to argue for faithfulness *within* the Christian culture. John uses his social criticism in order to challenge the churches. In which society are they finding their home—that of the community of faith or of the world around them? Too many Christians, such as those in the church at Laodicea (chapter 3), were too comfortable with the values of their culture.

He offers his readers a choice: Babylon or the New Jerusalem. The portrayal of the fate of Babylon intends to highlight the choices Christians make. Will we let Jesus and his way determine our values? Or will we let the spirit of Babylon provide our framework for living?

Those who choose the way of Jesus will likely find themselves in conflict with "Babylon" (chapter 13). Part of the argument of Revelation is that such conflict cannot separate them from God. They simply need to keep trusting in the power of God's love to empower them to be victorious in resisting Babylon and its Beast. In the end, it is the God of Jesus, not some apocalyptic scheme, that is sovereign in Revelation. The point of Revelation is to shake us up to encounter God.

The God of Revelation, when the book is read as a whole, is the God of Jesus. The victory over evil is won by Jesus' suffering love on the cross (chapter 5). The book ends with the enemies of God (the rebellious nations and the kings of the earth) finding healing in the New Jerusalem (see chapters 21-22). According to Revelation, the way of true power in the world is the way of the Lamb. The source for Truth, the criteria for values and priorities, the way to deal with brokenness and evil—these all lie with God and the Lamb. They do not lie with the schemes and plots of Babylon.