

Ecclesiology in the Book of Revelation

People often misread and misinterpret Revelation because they pay little or no attention to its actual historical context. Closely examining the Church (Ecclesiology) addressed in the Book of Revelation aids interpretation. As we all know, the first audience for the visions of St. John in the late First Century AD was made up of the Christian communities in South Asia Minor, represented by the seven, mentioned and directly addressed in the book, namely, Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Pergamum, Philadelphia, Sardis and Laodicea. The prophecies, proclamations, and letters were read to the hearing of these Christian assemblies. The life-situation and experiences of the addressed Churches formed the background for the ecclesiological content of the book of Revelation. However, it is also clear from the number of the Churches addressed, seven, and from the message and visions, that the universal Church is in view. While these first particular Churches received their instructions in their time, the Church, everywhere and for all time, equally receives the message for doctrinal, catechetical, and didactic purposes.

A close look at the letters to the seven Churches in Revelation 2 & 3 reveals a variety of experiences, ranging from praise-worthy and virtuous to rebuke-worthy and outright vicious behavior. Despite the wonderful performances noted in the Churches at Philadelphia and Smyrna, the general impression is that the Church communities were a mixture of fruitful and failed disciples, both good and bad people. That, in itself, is not unexpected since Jesus already intimated his disciples on such mixtures in his parables of the Sower, Tares in the midst of Wheat, and Dragnet (Matthew 13). The letters, however, show that Christ was dissatisfied with such situations, and invites all to reform and move from evil to good before it is too late. The prophecies gave exhortations and warnings: that encourage good disciples to persevere in their goodness, and exhort weaker members to reform their ways, and sternly warn those who are outright evil of the impending punishment that is due to anyone who refuses to live according the dictates of the gospel. So, these Church communities were definitely faced with challenges to orthodoxy from false teachings. There was also the allurements of alternate social networks that were inimical to Christian life (Nicolaitans and those of the synagogue of Satan, or those branded with the mark of the beast). And there were also persecutions.

A persecuted Church: While it is true that the Church faced some internal problems, she was also a persecuted Church, a situation, which arose from forces external to her, made up mainly of religious opponents and oppressive rulers of the time. It has often been said that the persecutions of Christians by emperor Domitian (81-96 AD) may still have been either ongoing or fresh in the minds of Christians at the time of the prophecies. Throughout the book, one finds different portraits of this persecuted Church and the need for Christians to endure these persecutions. Significantly, Christ identifies closely with this imperfect and persecuted Church (as God's Church, under the care of the Lamb, who would shepherd them from darkness into light).

The book's attentive reader also encounters familiar elements, often liturgical, throughout. References to reading, hearing, altar, censor, incense, lampstands, torches, worships, hymns, blessings, book, scroll, Eucharistic host (2:17), sign of the cross (7:3; 14:1), the Gloria (15:2-3), the Alleluia (19: 1, 2, 4, 6), etc. remind the reader of our liturgical heritage. These are all Church related terms, most of which remain with us today. That is why some have suggested that the proper context for hearing and interpreting Revelation should be liturgical.

Past, Present, and Future: The Church is presented in Revelation in its past, present and future dimensions. Its past is bound to the ministry and Paschal mystery of Jesus, who is presented as the Lamb that was slain, and to the witness of the martyrs, who unite themselves with the Lamb through their Christian witness in the midst of adversity. The present is fraught with the constant

struggle with the forces of evil that torment God's people, mediated by the conventional political, economic, social, and systemic structures, to make life difficult for God's children in the present time. Revelation identifies the devil and Satan (chaps. 12 & 13) as the main adversaries of God's people and "principal, yet hidden enemy of the Church." The devil's power is manifested through the agency of institutional and human mediators, through the advocacy of "deceptive theology and religion," and through anti-God cultures and civilizations as well as the allurements of wealth, fame, immorality, luxury and idolatry.

An Eschatological Dimension: In the end, there is a final judgment in which the source, causes, and agents of evil are destroyed and put to death along with those who have their mark on their foreheads, while those sealed with the mark of the Lamb, whose names are written in the Book of Life, are welcome to eternal life to celebrate the wedding feast of the Lamb and to participate eternally in the heavenly liturgy before the throne; before God and the Lamb. They will be completely vindicated and will receive the reward of their painful witness. Together with the heavenly hosts, they form the Church triumphant.

There lies the future of the Church.

A fitting conclusion to this discussion is found in Peter Williamson point that: "The Church consists of the faithful people of God of the Old and New Testaments, depicted corporately as a woman, the mother of the Messiah (12:1-2, 5). The members of the Church are the offspring of the woman, 'those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus' (12:17). Their role in the conflict is to bear witness to Jesus and remain faithful in the face of persecution and temptation. At the end of the book, Christ appears as the victorious 'King of kings and Lord of lords,' to destroy the adversaries of God's people (19:11-21)" (*Revelation*, 34).

Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) is not presented systematically in the Book of Revelation, but it is woven throughout the book's visions, letters, and symbols. Revelation portrays the church as a worshiping, suffering, witnessing, and victorious community centered on the reign of Christ. Here are the major ecclesiological themes:

1. **The Church as the People of God** (2-3, 5:9; 7:9; 1:4-20; 7:9-17; 21:12-140).
2. **Christ as Head and Lord of the Church** (1:12-20). Christ is in the midst of his Church.
3. **The Church as a Worshiping Community** (4-5) The church's primary vocation is worship.
4. **The Church as a Prophetic Witness** (the two witnesses, Rev. 11; 12:11). Lampstands.
5. **The Church as a Suffering Community:** e.g., Smyrna (2:8-11) Philadelphia (3:7-13) and the souls under the altar (6:9-11)
6. **The Church Called to Holiness.** "a kingdom and priests to serve our God" (Rev. 1:6; 5:10).
7. **The Church as the Bride of Christ** (Revelation 19 and 21)
8. **The Church in Spiritual Warfare** with political, religious, economic, and spiritual forces opposed to God. The church's weapons are: faithfulness, endurance, truth, prayer, the word of God and the blood of the Lamb. Victory belongs ultimately to Christ.
9. **The Church as an Eschatological Community** (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20).
10. **The Church as the New Jerusalem** (Revelation 21-22)
11. **The Church as the Victorious Community**

How are these characteristics reflected in the Church today? And what is the Spirit saying to today's Church, to you and me?