

# THE REVELATION OF JOHN AND THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

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Almost all Christian counseling seeks, in some sense, to connect the practice of counseling with the foundational Christian resource, Scripture. Whether this is at the broad and often imprecise level of talking about “biblical themes,” the hyper-literalistic and atomistic level of applying proof texts to common psychological and behavioral maladies, or at one of the healthier levels in between, the Revelation to John plays a very small role—if any—in the task of constructing a biblical model for counseling.

This is perhaps understandable. Many of my own students confess to avoiding Revelation wholesale, like their spiritual parents in their traditions, and consigning it to the periphery when it comes to informing any Christian ministry. Others flock to it, but from a very limited appreciation of its applicability, using it merely as a template for the end times rather than a vision that can transform everyday life. This is more than unfortunate. It is eviscerating. As the only text of its kind in the New Testament, Revelation brings an empowering and enlightening perspective to Christian ministry and discipleship. Just as it expanded the vision and conceptual horizons of its first audience, connecting them with its unique set of resources for discerning and persevering in faithful discipleship, so it offers much-needed supplements to the work of Christian counseling.

Where Christian counseling is critiqued for being too individualistic and remaining inattentive to the social, political, and ideological sources of false consciousness and maladaptive behaviors, Revelation broadens our view to reflect precisely on those forces beyond self and immediate life situation that hinder wholeness. Where inner healing prayer comes under scrutiny for manipulating images of a warm, affirming, earthly Jesus, Revelation challenges us to ponder how Jesus as he lives now—resurrected and glorified—would encounter us and our care receivers. Where

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Christian counseling often moves the locus of divine action to the therapy session and the conversation between two individuals (or a group), Revelation moves the locus of healing to the worshiping community and the presence of the living Christ. It is therefore difficult to imagine a biblical book, perhaps contrary to expectation, that is more congenial to the task of “restoring Christ to counseling and counseling to the church.”

#### A MODEL FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

We need to lay some groundwork, perhaps more than usual, before eliciting answers from Revelation to the questions of primary interest to Christian counselors. Part of the difficulty in appropriating Revelation for the practice of Christian counseling lies in the diversity of approaches taken to interpreting the text—and the deep ideological divisions that result. These approaches are generally divided into four categories. Three are based on the presupposition that Revelation is a book of prophecies, in the sense of “predictions” rather than in the sense of “pronouncements from God,” that must find concrete historical fulfillment at some point in time (and beyond time). Thus, *preterists* argue that most of Revelation’s prophecies (up to chapter 19) were fulfilled by the end of the first century or at least by the Christianization of the empire under Constantine. *Historicists* seek the fulfillment of most of Revelation’s prophecies throughout the course of the two millennia that separate John’s time from ours. *Futurists*, by far the most widely promoted school, regard most of Revelation’s prophecies to await fulfillment in the (not too distant) future. A fourth approach, the *idealist*, regards Revelation as a dynamic portrayal of spiritual truths that are relevant in every generation.<sup>1</sup>

Each school has something to offer us; taken together, they show how Revelation has indeed remained a relevant word to Christians in every generation. However, I wish to position us to engage Revelation somewhat differently, in a way that takes each of its component genres seriously.<sup>2</sup> Revelation is a letter, seen from the use of the standard letter-opening formula in Rev 1:4: “John to the seven churches that are in Asia [Minor]: Grace to you and peace.” John writes to seven specific and real communities of Christians situated within the Roman province of Asia Minor, each facing its own set of particular—and often complex and variegated—challenges. Whatever else we might make of Revelation, John sought to address these believers in the midst of their challenges, and to impact them in a way he believed to be beneficial, even essential, for their continued growth into Christ-likeness.<sup>3</sup> As we understand Revelation as a word to them, reading it as we would every other New Testament epistle in this regard, we arrive at a more profound understanding of its word to us.

John also identifies Revelation as prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). While the announcement of what God will do in the future—normally the forthcoming future—is indeed an important facet of early Christian prophecy (e.g., as seen in the activity of Agabus in Acts 11:27-30; 21:10-14), this has tended to overshadow other equally important facets of prophecy. For example, the seven oracles to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 also represent early Christian prophecy, in which a word from the Lord is brought to bear on the current situation of each congregation, commending what God approves, rebuking what displeases God, calling for an appropriate change or continued commitment, and offering words of promise and warning. Any “foretelling”

here wholly serves the goal of motivating faithful response to Christ in the midst of the churches' situations. Revelation continues to act as "prophecy" as John denounces the unfaithfulness not only of the people of God, but also of the nations that provide the context for the Christians' struggle to remain faithful. Rich engagement of Revelation on these levels has tended to be overlooked in favor of an over-emphasis on the predictive elements.

Perhaps the most overlooked clue to understanding Revelation, however, is to be found in the very opening of the book: "A revelation—an apocalypse—of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:1). We are at something of a disadvantage in that there are very few examples of the genre "apocalypse" in Scripture, only Revelation and half of Daniel. As a result, these apocalypses tend to be lumped together with prophecy, and are taken as representing high-end foretelling. However, dozens of apocalypses were written between the second century BC and second century AD—1 *Enoch*, 2 *Baruch*, 4 *Ezra*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Testament of Levi*, to name a few of the more important examples. These texts, taken together, far more resemble one another than classic prophecy, and so have begun to be studied profitably as their own literary genre. Apocalypses, Revelation included, stretch out a larger canvas for the audience. They look beyond the ordinary, everyday spaces we occupy to describe heavenly and infernal regions, places of reward prepared for the righteous and places of punishment prepared for God's adversaries. They look beyond the ordinary time of the present moment to events in the past that help explain the rise of forces and conflicts experienced behind the present moment, and they look forward to the events by which God will bring resolution to the conflicts experienced by God's faithful ones.<sup>4</sup> This larger canvas provides the context needed for the readers to interpret the realities that surround them in their everyday situation, and to discern and follow the path that represents faithfulness to God. An apocalypse, in other words, provides an opportunity to examine our experience of, and response to, the everyday world in light of "a transcendent... perspective on human experiences and values."<sup>5</sup>

These three indications of Revelation's genre guide us to a reading of Revelation in which we expect Revelation (a) to speak a word on target to seven real communities of faith residing in first-century Asia Minor, (b) to bring a word from the Lord revealing God's perspective on the audiences' behaviors and the challenges facing them, calling them to respond with covenant loyalty, and (c) to cast an interpretive light on the everyday realities surrounding those Christians, such as would illumine the "true" nature of the forces at work around them and the larger stakes inherent in the choices before them. This approach to Revelation asks not so much that we interpret Revelation, but rather understand how Revelation interpreted features of the landscape in which those early Christians moved, and how it positioned them to "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev 14:12). The discussion that follows is the fruit of engagement with Revelation from this angle.

## REVELATION AND CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

Having outlined a model for reading Revelation, what kinds of information can we elicit from this text that will contribute to a model for Christian counseling, and to its effective practice? What sorts of questions should we ask of John? Here I am especially

indebted to the work of Stanton Jones and Richard Butman, whose own model of analyzing modern psychotherapies is suggestive of the kind of work that needs to be done as we continue to construct biblical models of counseling.<sup>6</sup> They evaluate each school of psychotherapy in terms of its (a) philosophical assumptions, (b) model of personality, (c) model of abnormality, (d) model of health, (e) model of psychotherapy, and (f) demonstrated effectiveness. Scriptural texts are rarely explicit about philosophical assumptions (although Revelation is more transparent than most in this regard) or model of personality (the latter needing especially to be based on a larger sampling than a single text), and yield no data concerning demonstrated effectiveness. Indeed, the last element can only be addressed by controlled studies in actual practice, something rarely conducted by professionals in the field (and never by a New Testament professor).

Moreover, Revelation, like other New Testament texts, was written as a pastoral response to the needs of Christians in community, and not an academic exposition of counseling method, it requires some further adaptation of Jones and Butman's categories. It does not so much articulate a "model of abnormality" as identify what we might call "sources of unwholeness." It does not articulate anything like a "model of psychotherapy," but it does offer distinctive resources that can and should inform Christian counseling or inner healing prayer, and it does illumine facets of the process of transformation in which disciples find themselves engaged. Therefore, we will focus here on the ways in which Revelation can contribute to a biblical model for counseling, and allow it to define those ways in a manner consonant with its pastoral purposes.

## 1 CONTRIBUTIONS TO A VISION OF WHOLENESS

Revelation articulates a vision of wholeness and health most explicitly in chapters 21-22, in its vision of the New Jerusalem. Quite appropriately, given the author's identification of systemic and supernatural sources of unwholeness, this vision comes only at the end of the journey of transformation to which God is subjecting the entire created order. As a corrective against our modern and Western focus on individual wholeness as the goal of counseling and inner healing, John's is also a communal vision.

The New Jerusalem is the absolutization, the visual manifestation, of the life of new selves in community with one another and with God. John speaks as if to describe a physical place, but we miss his point if we mistake the medium for the message. What should human community look like, if it is constructed according to God's designs for us rather than the designs of fallen forces? Describing the kind of place that God will create beyond the end provides us with a window into the kind of life into which God invites his people now, as we "come out" from the existing structures of the world that have distorted human community.

This vision of wholeness-in-community includes, perhaps most prominently, the overwhelming reality of God's presence. God and people are at last "at home" with one another (21:3-4), connected in such a way that God himself can comfort and heal those who have been grieved and abused by the forces of unwholeness and their embodiment. The cubical shape of the New Jerusalem recalls the cubical shape of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple, now expanded in dimensions exponentially as a way of proclaiming that the limited access to God enjoyed in that shadow of things to come (one man, the

high priest, once per year) has been broadened to all the redeemed (all followers of the Lamb, day and night without end). God is as real, as present, as palpable as the light of the sun is for us now (21.22-23; 22:5). Such a vision alerts us that personal wholeness must include a growing awareness of the presence and reality of God in one's life, a spiritual life in which the light of God shines more fully and personally into our hearts and our life together in Christian communities, as forerunners of that greater Dawn. Pruning back what masks God's presence and cultivating face-to-face interaction with God, moreover, reminds us that God is ultimately the counselor whose work Christian counselors merely facilitate. It is He that must "wipe away every tear from the eyes" of those who bear the marks of brokenness.

This vision is also chiefly one of finding comfort and restoration beyond all the struggles of life, specifically of holding onto the life we have in Christ in the midst of difficulty, hostility, and distraction. Hostility arose since the way of the Lamb was so diametrically opposed to the idolatrous, violent, self-protecting and self-serving policies of the domination systems of the world in which John's audiences were enmeshed (more on this to follow). The distraction stems from the fact that those domination systems offered much that was appealing—and in many ways more immediate and "real" than the fruits of following the Lamb. John's vision of the New Jerusalem is offered, however, as an assurance that there is a way of living together in community with one another and with God that is ever so much better than the way of living together in community under the domination systems of this age, and it is offered as a means to enable continued resistance to indulging in the painkillers of, and continuing to embody the maladaptive behaviors promoted by, those domination systems. Christians in John's congregations, particularly those who were flourishing under Roman rule rather than experiencing Roman rule as oppression (for example, those in Laodicea and those supportive of "Jezebel" and the "Nicolaitans"), would have to be willing to sacrifice the short-term gains offered by partnership with the Roman peace in order to discover the long-term gains of a community founded on God's redemptive activity instead.

John is clear that radical surgery is required if this vision for wholeness is ever to be attained. It requires nothing less than the disappearance of the "former things" and all that belongs to the fallen existence. John would guide us to sift very carefully our own values, behaviors, and view of the "way things are," to discover to what extent we have been infected with a "false self," a self formed as a result of socialization into sick systems (represented throughout Revelation by Babylon and the rule of the Beast). How deeply are we indebted to "the futile ways inherited from our forebears, from which Christ would redeem us (1 Pet 1 18-19)?"

We are encouraged by this to continue to help our care receivers discover the ways in which pains and wounds from broken relationships have distorted their self-image, their image of others, their behaviors (e.g., through developing harmful coping mechanisms and becoming enslaved to pain-killers and pain-killing activities of various kinds). But we are pushed further to explore with them ways in which values and ways of life have been stamped upon their consciousness by forces beyond personal relationships with family of origin and the like, which are equally pernicious enemies of wholeness (and which have largely gone unexamined and untouched by the counseling profession). All this John

would tear down, as the new life-in-community is built up—a life that one enters through birth into the people of God (passing through the gates of the twelve patriarchs), and that is built upon the apostolic work and witness (the only foundation mentioned in John's tour of the New Jerusalem) as they mediate to us the teaching and example of Jesus and point the way toward transformation into his likeness.

A striking feature of this new community is that its gates are never shut (21.25), clearly an image of security. There are no enemies to keep out or from whom to hide. The dichotomies of "I/we" against "you/they" are all resolved in a community in which all are "we/us," united by the light of God and the lamb. This is sometimes claimed by champions of universalism,<sup>7</sup> among whom one can hardly place John, but it is certainly a vision of openness and security with regard to the "other." Jesus also sought to move us as disciples toward this ideal as he instructed us to respond even to aggressors out of fearless, generous hearts (Mt 5:38-48), treating them not as "others" posing a threat to personal security and wholeness, but as people with whom to share (and in relationship with whom to manifest) God's wholeness. At both extremes of the New Testament canon, and at plenty of places in between, we are encouraged to take as a measure of wholeness the care receiver's ability to be filled with God's goodness and respond to others out of God's goodness, rather than reflecting and multiplying hurt and brokenness.

Finally, the New Jerusalem is a community where healing takes place according to God's provision (the "leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations," Rev 21.2). Again, John refuses to allow us to keep our minds merely on the healing of individuals. No one can be whole apart from the healing of the human community; put another way, my own journey toward wholeness is inseparable from humanity's journey toward—or away from—wholeness. If the work of Christian counseling has been "successful" as far as its customary interests in individuals are concerned, but has left these individuals contributing to the lack of wholeness experienced by others (e.g., by continued participation in domination systems that benefit them but ravage others; by continued enslavement to a mindset that allows lines of national interest to dehumanize or diminish those who are their sisters and brothers in Christ in foreign lands), it has failed by John's standards.

## 2. DIAGNOSIS OF FORCES AND BEHAVIORS THAT SUBVERT WHOLENESS

If John's vision of the New Jerusalem richly encapsulates a vision of where God will bring a redeemed humanity in the end, and thus depicts the "target" toward which the work of redemption (which Christian counselors, like other Christian ministers, serve) is heading, the first twenty chapters of Revelation have much indeed to say about the obstacles to reaching that ideal. The good news of Revelation is, of course, that God has the power, and the Lamb the authority, to overcome each and every one of those obstacles, a confidence in which we can also move as servants of the Lamb (even though disciples continue to manifest that confidence by accepting death at the hands of representatives of domination systems rather than compromising their witness to God's victory).

### *Acknowledging unwholeness and its sources*

Counselors often speak of the therapeutic power of finding a voice in the midst of

suffering or oppression. John finds this voice early in Revelation. He declares, using words from Zechariah, that at the coming of Jesus "all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him" (Rev 1:7). John will not overlook evil; he will not wink at it. He will name it, and boldly denounce what is contrary to God's desires. Our first admission must be, according to John, that so much of what has gone on, what continues to go on around us, is directly at odds with God's purposes for humanity. It is not what God intends for human community, and this awareness gives us strength to name the constituent parts of these evils that impinge on us (and on the "us" or our care receivers) as something that God does not intend, and therefore to find God's redemption for its effects in our lives. This will need to continue to be applied to personal wounds, but also to be applied to the realities and effects of sick systems that enmesh millions in the same conceptual and behavioral traps. Our task as Christian counselors is not complete until we have asked "how deep does the brokenness go?" and set our care receivers in a place where, with God, they can move toward wholeness at every level. John challenges us with this opening declaration that the brokenness goes far deeper than most of us care to admit—it is so deep, that only Jesus' coming will finally reveal its full dimensions, and "all the tribes of the earth will wail" indeed.

### *Satan*

John speaks of a spiritual force, indeed a spirit being, whose venom and activity lie behind major forces hindering wholeness in this world. John would have his readers reckon with the reality of Satan and the means by which he interacts with our world. Deception, lies, seduction are consistently presented as his tools (12:9; 20:3, 7-10), being employed also by his pawns (Rev 2:9; 3:9; 13:14). This means, then, that clear sight (insight), witnessing to the truth, and genuine love and relationship thwart his designs.

Indeed, the Revelation as a whole seeks to provide the antidote to Satan's primary vehicle of deception in the lives of John's hearers, namely the imperial ideology that legitimated and masked the evils of the Roman domination system. Rev 13:1-18 clearly presents the activity of the "beast" (which John's audiences would have understood as a subversive depiction of the emperors, the benefactors of the world who were accorded worship throughout the eastern Mediterranean) and the cult of the beast (which the hearers would have connected with the presence of the imperial cult, a phenomenon well attested in each of the seven cities) as Satan's puppets, through whom he sought to undermine Christians' commitment to the One God. Revelation 17-18, moreover, unveils the goddess Roma for what she is in God's sight—a depraved power suppressing dissenters, imposing "peace" through violence, legitimating her rule with idolatrous religion, maintaining order and stability just to enable a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption.

John recognizes that Satan works through human agents. In the situation of the Christians in Smyrna, for example, John regarded legal actions against the Christians as something orchestrated by the devil (Rev 2:9-10). Such an identification helped those Christians by inviting them to consider the experience from a whole new light—not, for example, as an inconvenience and a source of discomfort and shame (we are talking about actual imprisonment in Rev 2:9, after all), but as a blow leveled against them by an Enemy that must be resisted at all costs. It becomes an opportunity to allow God to shape

us and prove us, to establish what we are rather than what the pressure would have us believe we are (i.e., deviants, shameful members of a family or society). Similarly, John tells the believers in Pergamum that “Satan’s throne” is in their city, and that Satan is living in their city (Rev 2:13), manifesting himself in the hostility that led to the death of the Christian Antipas (the only martyr John names in the seven churches, which indicates that persecution was far from bloody at this point in church history).

Despite all the grandeur of Satan’s agents and the palpable power of his pawns, Revelation speaks of Satan as a defeated enemy whose fury and persistence is but a measure of the certainty of his demise (12:12; 20:1-3, 7-10). It positions us to approach the demonic in all its manifestations as a rearguard approaches “clean-up operations” in a campaign. But it also insists that we “exorcize” the demonic at all levels. If the practice of exorcism and discussion of demonization is regarded with suspicion by some Christian counselors (and pursued all too exuberantly by others), John’s point can still be honored: it is not only our personal demons that need to be confronted, but also the systemic and ideological demons that exercise godlike power over the masses around us, and all too frequently ourselves as well.

### *Domination Systems*

Revelation focuses rather intently on the way in which domination systems—for John’s hearers, the domination systems that constituted Roman imperialism would have been primarily in mind as they read about the beast whose cult united an empire and about the whore whose luxury drove the empire’s economy—hinder our experience of God’s wholeness both in the personal and the corporate dimensions.<sup>8</sup> John echoes Paul’s conviction that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). Such passages concerning “spiritual warfare” are often trivialized as “power encounters” with a person’s individual demons. Both Paul and John are looking at a much more complex set of spiritual powers that dominate the lives of individuals.

Domination systems are ways of thinking, ways of valuing segments of the population, ways of prioritizing talents and outcomes, ways of organizing society, that become so deeply ingrained through generations of practice that their absolute truth is assumed rather than explicitly learned or questioned. They extend from basic and vague ideas, like “more is better,” to complex systems for the unequal acquisition and distribution of goods that assures for some the enjoyment of “more,” to the political and military systems that protect the privileged and their enjoyment. The notion that violence is not only an acceptable, but a necessary component of ensuring peace is an undergirding rationale for the domination system of militarism, which in turn organizes an entire society for mobilization for war, which in turn requires other societies to adopt the same system. The valuing of competition over nurture, of achievement over emotional maturity, of physical strength over relational skill both leads to and derives from patriarchy, one of the most enduring domination systems.

John gives us a snapshot of the overt ills that derive from these systems in the four horsemen of the Apocalypse (6:1-8). The sequence of war, death, famine, and plague—a



natural sequence of ills that humanity inflicts upon itself—alerts us to the social ills that domination systems inflict on one another as we work out our own bent toward self-destruction, which God has often used historically as a punishment. The prophets are full of texts announcing that God is using some domination system (like Babylon), as it does its thing (war, famine, death), as a means of punishing the disobedient.

Domination systems (militarism, nationalism, exploitative economics, patriarchy, with their attendant devaluing and often dehumanization of major sectors of populations) are a major source of unwholeness for the human race, thus for every individual caught up in that systemic evil.<sup>9</sup> We may not necessarily be the victims of many of those evils, sharing rather in the spoils gained by oppression. The major challenge that John poses to us and our care receivers (particularly for us who live in the great Western nations) is to consider closely how we have partnered with Babylon, and how we ignorantly—though not innocently—prosper as a result of the evils of the domination systems in which we were raised and from whose golden chalice we have drunk deeply. In other ways, or for other clients (especially those who are part of a minority group), we may experience oppression at the hands of Western domination systems, in which case it would be part of the healing process to deal with that, to hear God's word against what has happened to them and against the powers they are up against.

#### *Compromise with our society*

A potent source of unwholeness is represented by the brand of Christianity preached by the Nicolaitans and Jezebel (Rev 2:14-15, 20).<sup>10</sup> These disciples resisted the idea that the Gospel might require a complete break with all that was comfortable, all that supported self-image and economic security, in first-century Roman provincial society. The end result of their teaching would have included making room for some token acknowledgments of idols (particularly in regard to emperor cult), to pave the way for ongoing participation and prosperity in the local economy. Since the worship of traditional (pagan) deities, including the deified Roma and her emperors, was ubiquitous in Greco-Roman society (from private dinner parties to trade guild association meetings to civic festivals), some accommodation of the first and second commandments to the realities of everyday life seemed only reasonable.

John regards these voices as pernicious reincarnations of the false prophets of old that led the people of God astray (labeling them disciples of Balaam and naming a female prophet Jezebel). Jesus speaks against them in the strongest of terms, announcing his displeasure with them and his judgment upon them. Why? They represent the internal accommodation of God's life-giving message, of God's call out from participation in and legitimation of the death-dealing domination systems at work in first-century Asia Minor. If the Nicolaitans had their way, there would no longer be a distinctive, dissenting voice in Asia Minor calling all people by word and example away from the glorification of power and prosperity and to the worship of the One God, the only source of true and authentic life-in-community.

If Christian counselors merely assist individuals to become better-adjusted participants in Babylon, we have failed in our task. It is too easy for our care receivers, many of whom have already tainted the Gospel with a conviction that God exists to help them achieve a

prosperous lifestyle and protect the goods they currently enjoy, to regard “happiness in relationships” as one more perquisite. John would have us press much further as we are engaged to move them toward wholeness. How have they been seduced into eating from the table of idols and committing fornication? Are there places in their lives where they have compromised God’s call to single-hearted obedience and made room for sin because it was pleasant or easy or seemingly advantageous? Are there places where they have let the dominant culture’s way of thinking and its values take root in their lives so that they are really sowing to that field alongside sowing to the Lord? These are the kinds of questions John puts to the forefront of our self-examination and that of our care receivers, since he sees grave danger here to the authenticity of our relationship with God.

### 3. RESOURCES FOR HEALING AND RESTORATION

In the midst of seemingly towering forces that work against our journey toward wholeness as disciples in community, John pointed his congregations, and us, to far more powerful resources that will guide us toward and empower us to reach the journey’s end.

#### *Divine Revelation*

John shares with other early Christians the conviction—indeed, the expectation—that God interacts with human beings and invades everyday experience. From the opening verses of the Apocalypse, we are presented with divine revelation as a reality, insofar as John presents his apocalypse as nothing less than a revelation from God. John thus cultivates in us an expectation that God can speak to those whom we counsel directly or through us, and when we are in need, can speak to us directly or through people with the gift of prophetic utterance. By “prophetic utterance,” I do not wish to conjure up images of a particular style of delivery or doctrine of spiritual gifts. Across the spectrum of Christian traditions we are taught to listen for a word from the Lord, and to discern his voice. This, in a tradition-appropriate way, would be an indispensable resource of which John would have us avail ourselves.

#### *Jesus*

The Apocalypse is aptly called “The Revelation of Jesus Christ,” insofar as it forcefully presents Jesus as a living and powerful resource, both in terms of his accomplished work and his ongoing presence. Jesus is “the one who loves us and freed us from our sins” (Rev 1:4), from their hold over us and our lives, even from the sins of others and the power they have over our lives. This is who Jesus is; this is the deliverance he seeks to bring. Knowing this about him, we can look forward expectantly to how Jesus will make that deliverance real for us, how we can come to enjoy the fullness of that promise. Jesus has made us a kingdom, priests to his God (Rev 1:5-6). Under whose authority are we? What is our dignity as people redeemed by Jesus? We are God’s special possession, his kingdom, consecrated and privileged as priests to have access to God and to mediate the presence of the divine as we carry out the calling with which God has graced us. John invites us to watch for ways in which God will apply this identity in Christ to our care receivers, as part of their own identity formation and as a basis for healing.

It is ironic that Revelation is used mainly to speak about Jesus’ coming again at some

future date. This expectation is part and parcel of the early Christian Gospel. The real surprise for John's audience would be the revelation of Jesus standing in the midst of his churches and standing beside John in the midst of his trials (Rev 1:9-20). While on Patmos, whence John had been exiled (no doubt seen as a subversive agitator, appropriately enough given the content of Revelation), John is visited by Jesus, who stands beside him, strengthens, empowers and commissions him. Revelation thus invites us to look for ways in which Jesus will be present to us and our care receivers, how Jesus might appear to strengthen and encourage in whatever place of exile we or our care receivers occupy.

That Jesus stands in the midst of his people even now gives him immediate access to our situation, and us immediate access to him in the midst of that situation. In the seven oracles to the churches, we find Jesus revealing what he "knows" about their experience, about "where they live" (Rev 2:13; see also 2:2-3, 2:9). What does it mean for him to know where we dwell, to know our circumstances? What would it mean to bring our care receivers to a place where they can hear Jesus speaking to them: "I know what you're up against." "I know what you're experiencing." "I know how hard it has been for you to remain faithful, to keep seeking me and seeking healing in the midst of the circumstances that beset you." How can we facilitate our care receivers' encounter with this Jesus who knows their pain, their sin, their life situation so well? Surely such intimate knowledge will facilitate their trust in this Jesus to lead them through their situation.

John presents a rather different picture of Jesus from those we tend to carry about in our minds or, if we use guided imagery, in the minds of our care receivers. In Revelation, Jesus meets and confronts us as the Glorified Christ, whose body shines with the radiance of the resurrected life, whose word has the power of a sword, who now has authority to open and shut death and Hell itself. John challenges us to seek to know Jesus as he is, and not only as we might sentimentally recall him. There is therapeutic value in imagining Jesus as a warm body that can hug us. Are we willing to go where John goes, to know Jesus "no longer as on distant shores in Palestine," and discover what therapeutic value awaits us in those discoveries?

In chapters 2-3, we are taught that Jesus is still able to speak a word to us, and that we need to listen to Jesus for that word. John impresses upon us again and again—seven times—the importance of having an ear to hear what the Spirit would speak to us, through us, for the building up of each disciple as an individual as well as the building up of God's churches (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). What is his diagnosis of where we are at any given time? What would he say about our strengths, our achievements, our positive progress in our journey toward wholeness and our walk of discipleship. Where is the word of affirmation? Where is the word of correction? What do we need to deal with in order to be a whole people in Christ, and to have whole communities of faith in Christ? (We remember the connection between becoming a whole person and living within Christian community.) How does Jesus' word give us direction as to where to focus our efforts and grow and repent and overcome and seek God's resources for healing? John raises our expectation that the One who still stands in the midst of His churches can and will communicate these things to those who listen for his voice—perhaps the most important skill we can teach in the course of Christian counseling.<sup>11</sup>

Given that people more often seek counseling in the midst of pain and heartache

rather than as an exercise in self-examination, we should especially pay attention to the word of promise, the word of encouragement that Jesus is speaking to our care receivers. Jesus speaks to the beleaguered Christians in Philadelphia, whose place in the people of God is called into question by the synagogue there, "I have set before you an open door that no one is able to shut" (Rev 3:7-8).<sup>12</sup> Despite their lack of political or social power, the way forward for them is assured. How many care receivers might need to hear such a word from Jesus on this road to healing, to wholeness: "I have opened this door; no one can shut you in; no one can keep you from moving forward as long as you stay connected with me." How many people, like those early Christians in Philadelphia, need to hear Jesus' assurance that he will vindicate them in the sight of those who have abused and slandered them (Rev 3:9)? There is something vitally important in seeing Jesus stand up for the worth and value of the person who has been beaten down, abused, broken, etc., and in Jesus communicating that value to those who have mistreated and devalued that person. For some, this might be a subject for the therapeutic use of guided imagery (more to follow) as a foretaste of the eschatological horizon, where Jesus will testify to the world (and, in particular, our detractors) about us: "This is one whom I value, whom I have loved, redeemed, and made my own and part of my father's family. This one whom you have beaten down, abused, tried to destroy and subject to the life of your own false selves."

As Revelation concludes, it issues an invitation to Christ to come, and an invitation to the thirsting to come (22:17). Bringing these two parties together, inviting both into one space, is the essence of Christian counseling. This requires great humility, a humility that John incidentally models. In Revelation, John does not assume authority over the hearers, nor does he insist that they heed his admonitions regarding their situations. Rather, he comes alongside them as a "brother" who shares their hope and their plight (Rev 1:9), and opens them up to hear the voice of Jesus, of God, of the Spirit. The Godhead is the pastoral voice in Revelation, and John the facilitator; so in the counseling office, Christ is the Counselor, and we are the facilitators.

### *The presence of God*

The presence of God, and helping care receivers find a "safe place" in God's presence, is an essential resource in inner healing and Christian counseling. John provides a stunning depiction of God's character and heart for those who have suffered in Rev 7:15-17. He is the one who shelters, comforts, wipes away the tears from the eyes of those who have suffered, who have known loss and hardship because of their faithfulness to God's call. Passages such as this one are healthfully used to inform and invite new images of God, perhaps, where God had hitherto been imagined as the archetype of the rejecting or abusive parent. Here, God is a safe place, one who will accept all our pain and crying, who will affirm our dearness to him in his responses to our openness before him.

Earlier in Revelation, we see the martyrs taking advantage of this aspect of God's character as they huddle beneath the shelter of the altar and cry out their deep pain to God, calling for the vindication of their lives, the healing, that only God can bring (Rev 6:9-11). Their example invites our care receivers to cry out to God when they feel that injustice has been done to them, when they need to find their voice.<sup>13</sup> So much brokenness is the result of being diminished, in some sense, by a situation, another person, or a

demonic system, that the martyrs' specific cry for vindication—for affirmation of their worth by some action of God in their lives and in the lives of those who have harmed them—will often resonate with care receivers. The souls of the martyrs experience assurance from God as they crowd underneath his altar and cry out; from their experience we learn that we don't have to get what we cry out for, but we need to cry out. We want blood, we want vengeance; God offers a gift of a renewed life, the opportunity to become pure and clean in him, and the summons to patience, resting in God and trusting him that in his time all things shall unfold as they should. John captures in this vignette (the "fifth seal") the healthful transformation that needs to happen in the lives of many of our care receivers.

### *Worship and Prayer*

In Revelation 4-5, we are invited into scenes of worship around the throne of God. These scenes of worship, and those that will follow throughout Revelation, are essential to John's pastoral strategy. His congregations move about in a world where they are a deviant minority, pulling themselves away from traditional foci of worship (the Greco-Roman and local deities, the imperial cult) and from the social settings of such worship that involve the vast majority of their neighbors and leave the Christians in the periphery. Here John's choice of genre—apocalypse—begins to make its power felt. John allows the heavens to part over his congregations, and invites them to witness the activity of the realm beyond sight. There in concentric circles around the throne of God and around the Lamb, the various orders of angels in ever-increasing numbers gather around the true center of the cosmos, climaxing in "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth" joining in the worship of the One God (Rev 5:13). It is from *this* center that true power and judgment over the earth radiate (seen graphically in chapter six).

In light of this vision, those who gather around idols and around the worship of the emperors emerge as the real minority and the true deviants (9:20-21, 13:11-18). *They* are the ones who disrupt the cosmic order, who subvert piety, and not the Christians as their neighbors aver. Indeed, Satan (the dragon) is the ultimate recipient of their worship (13:4). The worship of the traditional Greco-Roman gods was regarded by Jews as the worship of demons (see 1 Cor 10:19-20); as the Christians' neighbors worshiped the gods that upheld the "peaceful" rule of the emperors, they were in fact casting in their lot with God's enemy, the dragon, whose power upheld the beast.

It is in congregational worship of God and Jesus, then, that the Christians found their place around the true center of the cosmos, and fell in line with the harmonious order of "angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven." It is also from the vantage point of worship that they were able to neutralize the draw of the dominant majority's devotion to idols, and all the social pressures that pushed Christians back toward those centers of worship. It is also in worship that God's presence becomes real and weightily felt for the audiences. As the audience locates itself in the company of the redeemed gathered before the throne (Rev 7:9-17, 15:2-4, etc.), they "find themselves" and are able to go back into the world and not be victimized by it, nor swayed and shaped by it, but can rather shape it and sway it as a witness and a channel of God's outreach.

Worship also involves not only the experience of presence, but also the communication

of content. The themes of worship here include first God's creation of each of us, by his pleasure and for his pleasure. What does this tell us about who we are in God's sight (an object of God's delight), and what will be congruent with our true selves (living for God's pleasure)? The second theme is Jesus' redemption of each one of us. What are we worth in God's sight? What are we worth to Jesus? What is the value and dignity that Jesus gives us (5:9-10; see 1:5-6 again)? How does this heal our self-image and counterbalance ways in which we have been made to look at ourselves by dysfunctional families (e.g., as victims of sexual abuse), or by our own drinking in too much of the world's ethos of how worth and significance are achieved and recognized? John encourages us to reflect together about the power of well-designed worship to facilitate the transformational journey. How would care receivers be transformed by structuring in times of private and corporate worship into their weeks? How might we direct them to attend to worship in ways that would help them find themselves in God, and find in God a strong center from which to respond afresh to the life situations, emotional turmoil, and deep wounds they face?

Closely connected with adoration and worship is prayer. In Revelation 8:1-5, we are reminded of the resource of prayer and given images that help us trust its effectiveness. We are invited to visualize our prayers as incense rising before the throne of God, presented by an angelic minister appointed for the task. Our prayers are indeed present to God, reaching God, rising up to God's nostrils. And the same censer that holds the incense in God's presence is cast down to the earth, causing all kinds of manifestations upon earth as well as the advance of the seven angels with their trumpets. This second liturgical act in the scene graphically depicts the efficacy of prayer, assuring us that it has definite consequences for life on this earth.

#### *Resources for guided imagery*

As a visionary experience into which whole congregations are invited, Revelation is the "guided imagery" resource par excellence. One set of images that runs throughout Revelation involves the believer's clothing. In Rev 3:4-5, the spiritual state of the Christians in Sardis is described using the image of people soiling or not soiling their clothes, and of people walking or not walking clad in white. In Rev 7:14, we encounter the souls of people who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The last of the seven beatitudes in Revelation pronounces them favored who "wash their robes" (Rev 22:14). These dynamic images of defilement, cleansing, restoration, and renewal that served John so well can also serve us well as the basis for guided imagery exercises.

Consider, as another example, the single image in 7:16: "the sun will not scorch them, nor any burning heat." This is an image that resonates with people in agrarian setting who know what it is to labor through the heat of the day, to feel the sun's draining of their energy, causing real pain and discomfort. It is an image reflective of toil and labor in adverse conditions. It is also a promise of the end of the labors that beset us, the struggle to press on and get through and the way that wears on us and drains us like the sun at noonday. God promises to become himself a shelter, a place of shade, in the midst of the burning heat of the day. How might such images be used to help clients see and take hold of what God offers in the midst of, and promises for the end of, their struggles.

John repeatedly invites his congregations to contemplate scenes of victory (e.g., Rev 7:9-17; 11.15-18; 15:1-4). John clearly values the ability to see the end of the journey as something already accomplished as a resource for enabling perseverance *and* for providing direction for responding to the specific challenges of the disciples' situation (here, resistance to participation in imperial cult and the prosperity of Rome). He gave repeated attention to cultivating an ability to see the victory on the other side of the conflict, to know that we will come to the place where we can celebrate God's deliverance, faithfulness, and justice. John uses this kind of guided imagery as a tool in his own pastoral context, serving his own pastoral goals for these seven communities. How might we incorporate that into the process of healing for individuals (e.g., in worship, in guided imagery, in prayer)? What would that do for our care receivers? When or how might it be helpful to invite our clients to ask God for visions of life "on the other side" of healing, or of releasing the old self with all its poisons and restrictions and compulsions, to form a vision of life lived from the new self that can help sustain the difficult journey? Those who can visualize a better future are far more willing to make the sacrifices and investments necessary to attain it, and have a compass that can help them discern when they are moving toward, and when they are moving away from, that desired end.

#### 4. CONTRIBUTIONS TO A MODEL OF TRANSFORMATION

In addition to pointing us to a host of resources for the transformational journey to which Christian counseling seeks to contribute (usually at crisis points), Revelation also provides substantial material for reflecting on the process of transformation.

##### *Listening for, and Internalizing, God's Words*

The image of the scroll in chapter 10:8-11 an apt image for an important component of the process of inner healing and Christian counseling, namely what we do with the words we receive from God. The Word of God, the word of judgment written in the scroll, on the one hand is pleasant to John's taste; it is only once its implications become clear for life in this world, for how we view the realities around us, for how we must respond to the word God has given us that the weight begins to be understood.

There is an analogy here for God's communication of timely words to the people whom we counsel. Whether they receive words from God directly, or through us, or through some other means, it is often a joy to hear God's liberating voice of truth. These words make sense, they click and connect, they illumine and set free. They are sweet words. But then when its implications really sink in, when they are compelled by it to re-examine our lives, to release comfortable and comforting sins, to change, it becomes a great burden and source of anguish. When they have to grow into those words in the midst of a real-life situation that may not be remotely supportive of where those words are leading that person (as, indeed, John's and John's churches' environment was not remotely supportive of where Christ's words were leading them), it becomes anguish and bitterness.

We can prepare people for this, even as the angel prepared John for the transition from the sweet and liberating experience of receiving the word from God to the bitter experience of holding to that word in the thick of unsupportive life situations. We can talk to our care receivers about the words they will receive from God being sweet, nourishing,

and life-giving. We can caution them that the word will carry with it great responsibility and burden, often pain, anxiety, and anguish, on the way to their really digesting and embodying the word that God gives them, especially in light of opposition that they will encounter. They will face internal opposition as they give up coping mechanisms and their compensators, and have to build from the ground up again in some areas of life. They will face external opposition from those with whom they are or have been in relationship, as those relationships have to change, as sins and wounds have to be confronted and worked through, perhaps as relationships even have to be broken and put aside for the sake of healing. As the course of responding to God's word takes them further into confronting, in concert with the Christian community, the ways in which domination systems have impacted their lives, the resistance and hostility will only intensify. Society is supportive of its members finding greater mental health up to a point, but not when that quest leads its members to question the fundamental assumptions and arrangements of the society itself. There is a lot of bitterness to the stomach that accompanies the process of healing and responding to God's very sweet word.

The believer who responds healthfully to Jesus' word is acclaimed a conqueror (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21, see also 15:2). This is an image that can also embolden and encourage our care receivers, who are often engaged in nothing less strenuous than a contest or battle, an attempt to wrestle with the hand that they have been dealt in life. They need to both to hear Jesus' summons to conquer and to see the visions of those who have conquered, so as not to be overcome, for example, by the force of a destiny imposed on them by dysfunctional relationships or oppressive social structures.

### *Denial versus Repentance*

Readers of Revelation are struck by the attitude of unrepentance among the people visited by God's plagues and punishments (Rev 9:20-21; 16:4-11). But John merely depicts graphically what we know to be a persistent problem with humanity. Even when we reap the whirlwind in the consequences of our poor choices, our self-destructive habits, our inclinations to sin; even when the consequences hit us in the face and bring us down low, there is the real possibility that we will not repent. We will resist; we will cling to our sin and to our painkillers (substance abuse, sexual gratification, materialism and consumerism, to name but a few) rather than be chastened, corrected, and repent and have a chance at a new kind of life.

John poses to us, and to those whom we counsel, the pressing question: what do we do when in God's ordering the wounds we have inflicted come back upon us? John envisions one response—flying from our responsibility by blaming and cursing God (Rev 16:9, 11). The "false self" is so strong that it now stops at nothing to preserve itself from its great enemy, namely facing itself, acknowledging God's justice, repenting, and casting the naked and real self before God for mercy. The latter course, which is what Jesus seeks from his churches when confronted with his admonitions in the seven oracles, makes possible the redemption of any life, any situation, any relationship, no matter how broken.

Repenting is essential to finding wholeness. This is a constant refrain of the seven oracles (Rev 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19). We are challenged to help those we counsel to take responsibility for the sins they have indulged, for which they have made room in our



lives, and to say "I'm not going to make room for this any more." The Nicolaitans taught that one could eat at the Lord's table and the table of demons; one could keep one's faith compartmentalized here and make room for indulgence there. John retorts that there can be no wholeness until we bring ourselves wholly to the Lord.

One thing that facilitates repentance (as opposed to retrenchment) is the fact that the Accuser has been overthrown (12:10). Sins are brought to light not for accusation, calling for denial and defense, but for the purpose of restoration. As the power of the "accuser" recedes, confronting sin can lead to the experience of God's deliverance, power, and kingdom breaking into the lives of the believers. The difference is found in the blood of the Lamb: through confession, forgiveness, and adoption we triumph in Christ over the work of the accuser.

### *Inner Healing in Microcosm*

The oracle to the church in Laodicea (Rev 3:14-22) has always been a focus of special interest, usually because of a perennial sense that this is *the* oracle to our generation (though, tellingly, this would only be true of the rich, prosperous, complacent churches in the great Western nations; the oracle to Laodicea has little to say to the majority of the churches of our generation, who in their faithful obedience—often unto death—more resemble the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia).<sup>14</sup>

The Christians in Laodicea were taken in by the lure of Rome's prosperity. They are far from being a persecuted church—they are a prospering church, and they have so internalized their civic identity that Jesus addresses them on that basis (with references to Laodicea's aqueducts, its medical school, and its garment industry) rather than on anything distinctively Christian. They have swallowed the myth that prosperity makes for security, and so have been halted in their progress toward Christ-likeness by self-deception.

Encountering these Christians, Jesus peels off the mask of the false self that says "I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing" (Rev 3:17a), laying bare the true state of need: they are "wretched, poor, naked, pitiable, and blind" (Rev 3:17b). Then Jesus invites those believers to find what they need in Jesus, giving up their pretensions to having filled their need by way of their prosperous economy in Laodicea, since money can't touch the inner needs of the human being (Rev 3:18). This oracle (Rev 3:14-21) is a microcosm of the inner healing process.<sup>15</sup> People come to seek help because of the difficulties in particular life situations, but beneath those difficulties lie the deeper issues. First, Jesus seeks to strip away the painkillers and the false self they maintain. He seeks to enable our care receivers to see, acknowledge, and allow themselves to feel what is going on beneath the painkillers. Then he invites them to bring those needs to Jesus to be met in him in a way that brings freedom rather than bondage and dysfunction. Most appropriate here is the promise of intimate communion with those who respond to his rebuke and invitation (Rev 3:18-20), an invitation that gives our care receivers the courage to make this difficult journey.

### *Emerging from Domination Systems*

Revelation's most distinctive contribution to Christian counseling remains the way it pushes us beyond dealing with an individual's relational problems, personal core wounds,

individualistic lies, and the like, and compels us to face the impact of complicity with domination systems upon our personal wholeness.

In Revelation 13 and 17-18, John reveals two major ways by which Satan was deceiving the people in the world of his audience: Roman imperial ideology—the glorification, the deification of the emperors and the myth of *Roma Aeterna* propagated by cult, coin, and court epic—and the system of gross violence and exploitation that it masked.<sup>16</sup> Court poets lauded Rome and her emperors as the chosen vessels by which the gods would bring order, rule by law, and peace to the *orbis terrarum*, the circle of the lands around the Mediterranean that constituted, in their minds, the “world that counted.” Augustus was revered in Italy and the provinces alike as the savior and benefactor of that world, who ushered in an era of peace after a generation of civil wars. The provinces responded to Augustus and his successors by offering cultic honors—worship—as an appropriately magnificent token of gratitude and loyalty. Such titles as “highest priest, father of the fatherland, son of his deified father” adorned the emperor in inscriptions, coins, and official documents. Rome herself was worshiped as a beneficent goddess: in a particularly telling coin image, the goddess Roma stands beside the deified emperor, whom she crowns with a laurel of victory, inside a temple erected “to Rome and the Augusti.” Christians in the seven cities were constantly confronted with such images—why should they not be good citizens as well as good Christians, as the Nicolaitans argued?!

Only the vivid language of apocalyptic and the possibilities the genre of apocalypse provided for getting “outside” the system to look at it from a vantage point from without would enable people caught up within that system to “wake up” and see who it was that they were in bed with. John exposes the underside of imperialism. Is not the self-glorification and the worship of Rome and her emperors an affront of the first order to the One God, who commands us not to share his glory with another? How many thousands had to die to ensure Roman “peace”? How many dissenters were silenced, many of them our Christian sisters and brothers, because they were deemed a threat to this “order”? Whose interests are really served by this allegedly beneficent system? When the wealth is drained from the provinces to satisfy the insatiable consumption of Rome’s citizens, when entire economic systems are in place to ensure the enjoyment of luxurious plenty by a precious few, how can we can this goddess anything but a harlot?

Revelation issues a summons to us to reflect on how modern domination systems “deceive,” how they create and reinforce “false selves” and “false consciousness” into which we, as subjects raised within these overlapping systems, are immersed. How do these domination systems contribute to our experience of distorted relationships, or to the denial and destruction of relationship? Patriarchy, for example, has consistently led to a pattern of domination in relationships across gender lines, inviting intimidation, abuse, and manipulation. How has that distorted male/female relationships for millennia? It has also led to cutting women off from a host of expressions of talent and calling, relegating women to private spaces (and also relegating men to public spaces), leading incidentally to the formation of a “corporate culture” that is distorted by virtue of embracing only stereotyped “male” values that spawns its own evils (e.g., in terms of ecological rape, valuing of profit over people, etc.). Nationalism, for another example, exercises its constraints against the Christian idea of a global Body of Christ. The economic system of

capitalism maximizes profit and efficiency at the cost of commitment to people, the well-being of families and local communities, and the earth. It also inscribes an ethos of competition versus cooperation, which then fights very hard against the Spirit, whose values are quite the opposite. Material gain and the pursuit of commodities become painkillers, and our lives become inauthentic shadows insofar as we organize our lives around, and invest our energies in, their acquisition. Revelation thus calls us to become sensitive to how Satanic deception has entered into our own, our churches', and our care receivers' consciousness, experience, and mental processes at these and other points.

Revelation 18:4-8 holds before us a dimension of spiritual formation, of growing into Christ-likeness, that is easy to overlook—and that, frankly, the “kingdoms of this world” hope we will overlook in our own formation and in our work with others. Domination systems like Rome are built and maintained by violence, legitimated by deceptive and seductive ideologies, protected by suppression of God’s prophetic witnesses, fed by sucking the earth dry to maintain the idolatrous consumerism of her elites. Domination systems never speak about themselves in this way; they develop “false selves” or “idealized selves” that they project, and they invite their members to view their place in the domination system as a place of cooperation within, even contribution to, the domination system seen in its “false self,” not as unreflective servitude to the domination system in its real self. At the social, political, and economic level, therefore, a “false self” or “false consciousness” is being nurtured within us from birth, so that we will grow up to serve the domination systems in which we are entangled, never knowing freedom from it, acting instead like batteries fueling the monstrous system.

Insight, repentance, and regeneration have to happen at this level in our lives and in our care receivers' lives and our churches' lives as well, if we are to attain to the vision of wholeness that God holds out for human community. How, then, do we respond to the summons, “come out of her, my people, so that you do not share in her sins and receive her punishments”? Surely any process of Christian counseling or inner healing that fails to address this level of “demonization,” or help believers-in-community to examine and reject their collusion with (their bond-service to) domination systems, fails to achieve the liberation it promises.

### *Recovering Spiritual Virginity*

Revelation often “works” by creating contrasting pictures, impelling the hearers to identify with one of these pictures and experience revulsion at the other. John’s overarching goal, after all, is to liberate the hearers from the draw of the forces of unwholeness around them and impel them forward toward single-hearted devotion to Christ, in which wholeness (integration and integrity) is to be found. Revelation 14.1-5 is a positive image of the redeemed gathered around the Lamb, juxtaposed to the revolting vision of worshippers gathered around the cult of the beast, and the treatment of those who refuse to offer cultic honors to the beast (Rev 13:11-18). John’s hearers are impelled thereby to identify with the privileged company in Rev 14.1-5, which becomes a graphic depiction of an ideal of discipleship.

Key to understanding this image of 144,000 male virgins is our ability to push through the literal level and read it in light of the sexual and relational imagery that pervades

Revelation. John is not literally calling women a source of defilement, nor promoting abstinence from all sexual relations as a path to special distinction in God's sight. Rather, this ideal is seen in the context of a book that has spoken about committing fornication or adultery with Jezebel (e.g., through "getting in bed" with her compromised Gospel. Rev 2:20-22); eating idol meats and committing fornication (that is, compromising one's complete allegiance to the One God and the Lamb for the sake of temporal gain and the avoidance of conflict, Rev 2:14, 20); Babylon's cup full of the passion of her fornication (Rev 14:8; 17-18); Babylon's love-hate relationship with the Beast (Rev 17:3, 16-17); the Bride adorned for union with the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9; 21.2). The chastity of the 144,000 signals their refusal to be seduced by the lures of prosperity, or violated by the pressures put upon them to join in idolatrous unions with false gods.

The 144,000 represent an ideal that can be achieved by the pathway of (a) self-examination of complicity with the gods of this age and how that is defiling our hearts, relationships, and behaviors; (b) renunciation and confession, "making our robes white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:14); (c) finding strength, hope, and acceptance standing in Jesus' presence (the 144,000 stand beside the Lamb in a context of ongoing conflict); and (d) following the Lamb's leading, wherever that takes us. Significantly, the 144,000 speak the truth, having heard it first from God. They exhibit the courage required by all who would grow into wholeness in Christ, hearing God's truth, embodying God's truth, renouncing every lie and every counterfeit of life. Together with the host of other images presented in Revelation, they contribute to pointing the way toward the "perfect freedom" that is our inheritance in Christ.

#### NOTES

1. These four approaches are defined more fully in R. H. Mounce, *Revelation* (rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 24-30. Mounce helpfully notes that John himself could be described as representing all four schools at once—the problem of having to choose one school over another is "an accident of history" since the return of Jesus did not happen as "quickly" as the text might lead the reader to expect (1 I, 3:11, 22:7, 12, 20). See also Steve Gregg (ed.), *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), but this book needs to be used with considerable caution (see D. A. deSilva, "Review of Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views*," *Ashland Theological Journal* 31 (1999) 153-156).

2. See the further discussion in D. A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 885-891; Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 1-8.

3. Literature on this topic is immense. Places to begin would include: W. M. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia* (revised edition; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [original edition, 1905]), a work to a large extent replaced by the more thorough and more recent C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986); A. Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); D. A. deSilva, "The Social Setting of the Apocalypse of John: Conflicts Within, Fears Without," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992) 273-302; *idem*, "The Image of the Beast and the Christians in Asia Minor," *Trinity Journal* 12NS (1991) 185-206; *idem*, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 898-906, 912-923. See also the introductions and the treatment of Revelation 2-3 in the major, recent commentaries: G. K. Beale, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); Mounce, *Revelation*, 64-115.

4. The seminal work on defining and exploring this genre is John J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia 14, Missoula, MN: Scholars Press, 1979). For a reading of Revelation in light of Collins's definition of the genre, and in light of cultural-anthropological studies of religion, see D. A. deSilva, "The Construction and Social Function of a Counter-Cosmos in the Revelation of John," *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 9:1-2 (1993) 47-61.
5. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1997), lxxxii.
6. See S. L. Jones and R. E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 30-35.
7. This is seen more popularly, for example, in the words of the song, "The Holy City" by Stephen Adams, "and all who would might enter, and no one was denied"—beautiful sentiments, but not shared by the author of Rev 21:8; 22:14-15.
8. See D. A. deSilva, "The 'Image of the Beast' and the Christians in Asia Minor," *Trinity Journal* 12NS (1991) 185-206, and the extensive literature on this subject therein cited.
9. An outstanding, and helpfully concise, exploration of these domination systems can be found in Dale C. White, *Making a Just Peace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998).
10. For a more detailed discussion, see deSilva, "Social Setting," 292-296.
11. See, further, Terry Wardle, *Healing Care, Healing Prayer* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2001), 85-125.
12. On the tensions between church and synagogue in late first-century Asia Minor, see Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 8-10; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 162-163; deSilva, "Social Setting," 287-289.
13. In this regard, the psalms of lament are also first-order resources for teaching people that it is safe to open up their darkest and most desperate feelings before God.
14. I reject the popular reading of these seven oracles as periodizations of church history getting us from John's time to the time of the end. This reading grossly caricatures the periods of church history it purports to describe, as if the essence of the global church in any era could be sketched out on a seven-verse canvas (the variety of church situations in Asia Minor more closely represents the variety of church situations to be found in every epoch). More problematic is its blatant Anglocentrism and partisan view of the church: this reading presumes that God, in revealing this information, is really only concerned with the Western church up through the Reformation period, and thereafter only with the Protestant churches, largely in America. This reading, then, says less about the history of the church and more about the ideological lenses and biases through which its inventors construct a history of the church that is meaningful for them.
15. See Wardle, *Healing Care, Healing Prayer*, 127-210.
16. See the more detailed description of these imposing phenomena in the lives of the Christians in first-century Asia Minor and exposition of John's engagement with them in Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*; deSilva, "Image of the Beast"; *idem*, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 898-902, 916-919.