

faith in
focus

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Can we understand
Revelation?

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Editorial

The Revelation of Saint John the Apostle, might possibly be one of the most difficult to understand books/prophesies in the Bible. Down through the ages, this recorded vision of John has perplexed many a reader of the Bible, including theologians. When John wrote this book, his early readers would have understood the prophesy because they were familiar with the figurative language and symbolism which was typical of that day.

Personally, I consider Revelation fascinating and challenging.

At the end of each year, my Bible reading programme brings me to this amazing prophesy. The first three chapters don't seem to pose too much of a problem, although John's description of the living One in 1:12-18 is not only awesome and shows just how glorious is our LORD, but it requires some careful interpretation too. When I get to chapter four that is where the difficulty arises.

What I have found helpful is reading a faithful commentary, listening to a faithful series of sermons and, above all, applying myself to knowing the Bible better. What I have found over the years, is that, when reading Revelation there are times when there is a small window of clarity, because I can relate the content to something that happened in the Old Testament, which I find quite exciting.

One thing that I do know is that the prophesy clearly shows the LORD Jesus has the victory and His people are encouraged to endure. "... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ..." Rev 2:10

Our contributors open some figurative doors to enable us to better understand this amazing book of the Bible.

Mr Vern Sheridan Poythress (Calvinist philosopher, theologian and New Testament scholar) helps unveil Revelation.

Mr Michael Willemse writes about Revelation as a book for today

Mr Michael Flinn helps take away the mystery.

Mr Paul Archbald looks at how Revelation fits in with the rest of Scripture.

Mrs Sally Davey considers the spiritual value of a familiar piece of furniture.

Mrs Jenny Waldron reflects on a wonderful old practice.

Mrs Harriet Haverland provides what interests us with bits'n pieces from around the churches.

Mr Michael Wagner (a regular contributor to *Reformed Perspective*) reflects on the importance of mums and dads.

Mr Joshua and Mrs Hannah Flinn write about life at seminary.

Cover image: *John the Apostle on Patmos* by Jacopo Vignali, <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

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Can we understand Revelation? (1)

Vern Poythress

Can the book of Revelation be understood? Yes, it can. Its message can be summarized in one sentence: God rules history and will bring it to its consummation in Christ. If you read it with that main point in mind, you will be able to understand it. You will not necessarily understand every detail – neither do I. But it is not necessary to understand every detail in order to profit spiritually from it.

The same thing is true of all Scripture. Scripture is inexhaustibly rich, so that we can never plumb all its depths and mysteries. But the main points are clear, so we can know what to believe and how to act (Prov. 1:1-7; Ps. 19:7-13). Second Timothy 3:16-17 tells us not only that all Scripture is inspired, but also that it is “*useful* for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” All Scripture, including Revelation, has practical value for exhortation, comfort, and training in righteousness. Paul underlines this point in 2 Timothy 4:1-5 by drawing a contrast between the solid teaching of the gospel and people’s desire to have teachers who “say what their itching ears want to hear” (4:3). God gave us Revelation not to tickle our fancy, but to strengthen our hearts.

The clarity of Revelation

Revelation itself makes the same point in the first few verses, 1:1-3. It is “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word *revelation*, or *unveiling*, indicates that it discloses rather than conceals its message. This revelation comes in order “to show his servants” something. The word “show” implies that the book can bring its message home to its hearers. Revelation is addressed to “his servants” – not just prophecy buffs, Ph.D.’s, experts, or angels, but *you*. If you are a follower of Christ, this book is for you and you can understand it. The third verse says, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” God knew that some of his

servants would hesitate over this book. So he gives extra encouragement to our readers by pronouncing an explicit blessing. Revelation is the only book in the whole Bible with a blessing pronounced for reading it!¹

But the reading should not be an empty or rote reading, as the continuation makes clear: “take to heart what is written in it.” Revelation should not merely flit through our brain, or lead to vain speculations, but lodge in our heart and produce a practical response, a response of keeping it, just as we are to keep Christ’s commandments by obeying them. (The Greek word *tereo*, translated “take to heart,” is used in the Gospel of John for “keeping” Christ’s commandments.)

Why the confusion?

If Revelation is clear, why do so many people have trouble with it? And why is it so controversial? We have trouble because we approach it from the wrong end. Suppose I start by asking, “What do the bear’s feet in Revelation 13:2 stand for?” If I start with such a detail, and ignore the big picture, I am asking for trouble. God is at the center of Revelation (Rev. 4-5). We must start with him and with the contrasts between him and his satanic opponents. If instead we try right away to puzzle out details, it is as if we tried to use a knife by grasping it by the blade instead of the handle. We are starting at the wrong end. Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don’t try to puzzle it out. Don’t become engrossed in the overall story. Praise the Lord. Cheer for the saints. Detest the Beast. Long for the final victory.

The truth is, some teachers of the book of Revelation set a bad example. They turn the book on its head; they turn it into a puzzle book. They preach obscurity instead of clarity, and of course people end up feeling incompetent.

Do the following responses sound familiar? “I’m confused.” “It’s so complicated.” “I’m lost.” “It’s all a puzzle, and only this expert teacher can make sense of it.” “I give up.”

But a few refuse to give up. Instead, they develop an unhealthy preoccupation. They search for a complicated new

“If Revelation is clear, why do so many people have trouble with it? And why is it so controversial? We have trouble because we approach it from the wrong end.”

scheme to “solve” the puzzle. They end up tickling the fancy and missing the real point.

In contrast, people who have not been influenced by super-duper teachers do better with the book. Let me illustrate.

Once, when I was teaching Revelation, I noticed many children in the congregation. “I want you children to read Revelation, too,” I said. “If you are too young to read it for yourself, have your parents read it to you. You can understand it. In fact, you may understand it better than your parents.”

A boy about twelve years old came up to me afterwards. “I know exactly what you mean. A short time ago I read Revelation, and I felt that I understood it.”

“Praise the Lord!”

“I read it just like a fantasy, except that I knew it was true.”

I thought, “Precisely.”

☆☆☆

This story was so good that I began using it when I taught Revelation in

seminary classes. A student came up afterward.

"You know that twelve-year-old boy?"

"Yes."

"I know exactly what he meant. I can remember reading Revelation when I was about twelve years old, and understanding it. I have been understanding it less and less ever since!"

☆ ☆ ☆

A group of seminary students finished playing basketball in a gym. They noticed the janitor in a corner, reading a book.

"What are you reading?"

"The Bible."

"What part of the Bible?"

"Revelation."

The seminarians thought they'd help this poor soul. "Do you understand what you're reading?" "Yes!"

They were astonished. "What does it mean?"

"Jesus is gonna win!"

☆ ☆ ☆

A charismatic pastor was praying in his study. "What should I preach on next?"

"Revelation."

"Great! I'll get out my seminary notes, dig in, whip up some diagrams, and show my stuff."

"No."

"What do you mean? What am I supposed to do?"

"Read it."

Pause. "That's crazy. I can't just stand up there and read it. Isn't a pastor supposed to teach? What good will I do?"

"Do it."

(Reluctantly) "O.K."

That congregation had the experience of a lifetime. The pastor dutifully read a paragraph, and similar responses followed – and so they continued through the book. The congregation found that, taught by the Spirit of Christ, they did know how to understand! But if the pastor had gotten out those seminary notes and lectured, the congregation might have sunk into a puzzle-book mentality.

☆ ☆ ☆

There is a lesson here. If you are leading a group in studying Revelation, do not become "the expert" in a bad sense. Yes, you can get help with the details by utilizing scholarly resources. And, yes, you can help people over some things that seem mysterious to a modern reader. But do it in a context where ordinary people can experience the book firsthand and follow its powerful drama for themselves, engaging their own hearts in the pictures.

Notes

- 1 In the original context, v. 3 refers to people who read Revelation aloud in a church meeting. The reading and hearing of the Bible in church remains important today and needs greater attention than it usually receives. But the point applies indirectly to those who read and hear in other situations.

This extract is the text (minus a couple of diagrams) of the first five pages of Vern Poythress's commentary on Revelation, The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2000, pp.11-15). Reproduced with permission of the author.



Skala, the modern-day port of Patmos. One would imagine it being more picturesque than in the days of the Apostle John's exile there.

Image by Chris Vlachos: <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

Can we understand Revelation? (2)

Revelation – a book for every Christian, a book for today

M Willemse

Introduction

The book of Revelation has long been a source of puzzlement and even contention for many Christians. In part, this has been the fruit of an approach which has got hung up on details and has resorted to very complex schemes for interpreting the visions Revelation contains. As a result many have concluded that Revelation is too difficult a book for the average Christian to understand. This is a tragedy because Revelation is a book written to encourage ordinary Christians in a world in which they are enduring great suffering for their faith and in which evil seems to be winning. It is a book intended for every Christian.

Background

There is general consensus that Revelation was the last New Testament book written, probably around 95AD. It was written by the apostle John near the end of his life while he was in exile for his faith on the isle of Patmos, which was probably a Roman penal colony. John was the son of Zebedee, the brother of James and a member of Jesus' inner circle. He is also the author of the gospel of John as well as the three epistles of John.

Revelation was written against the backdrop of a Roman empire in which emperor worship (the imperial cult) was growing and in which it would become the litmus test which determined whether Christians would live or die. Although few were being martyred for their faith at the time Revelation was written, within 10 to 15 years this would change dramatically. Towards the end of the emperor Trajan's reign, if someone was suspected of being a Christian, they would be required to curse Christ and worship Caesar. Failure to do so would result

in their execution. Revelation is written to encourage and aid Christians in this situation and its imagery is intended to bring to mind things with which they are very familiar. Revelation is grounded in its historical context. Because Revelation was written for ordinary people facing real problems, its meaning for them should be quite plain and accessible – complex or convoluted explanations of various portions should be treated with healthy suspicion!

Genre

In order to understand any Bible book, it is important to understand what type of literature it is. Revelation, as its name implies, is apocalyptic literature – it unveils or reveals something previously hidden. Like the book of Job, Revelation pulls back the curtain on the goings on in heaven, putting the events of earth in their real perspective.

Apocalyptic writings are, by their very nature, symbolic and pictorial. It is helpful to think of Revelation as the picture book of the New Testament. It is best understood if it is *seen* and, as with art, it is the picture as a whole that matters. Much of the confusion to do with Revelation has resulted because interpreters have sought to press every detail, rather than seeing the picture as a whole. The Mona Lisa is best appreciated by stepping back from it and considering the whole picture, not by inspecting it with a microscope! This can be demonstrated by considering the picture of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. It is called a city and is described in physical terms – foundations, walls, gates, streets – and yet it becomes clear that this city is, in fact, the people of God. Its description of thick walls, gates of pearl, streets of gold and foundations of precious stones is clearly not intended to be understood literally and each detail

pressed – rather it speaks of things like the history, security and preciousness of God's people.

Because Revelation is highly symbolic, it almost never speaks in literal terms and, like most prophecy, it can allow for multiple fulfilments – literal interpretations of various portions, especially those which pin them down to one particular fulfilment should be treated with a great deal of caution. Read with an eye for the big picture – often the broad thrust of a portion will be quite straightforward.

Lots of sevens

One feature of Revelation which becomes immediately obvious is the use of the

“Revelation is very much a book for our day. There are only two kinds of worship – true or false. There is only worship of the living God or idolatry.”

number seven. There are seven lampstands, seven stars, seven spirits, seven letters, seven churches, seven trumpets, seven bowls, seven angels, seven seals, seven plagues – not to mention seven horns, seven eyes, seven hills and seven heads! Clearly the number seven is significant in Revelation but in what way?

While we will probably never understand the full significance of the number seven (or some of the other numbers which recur) in Revelation this side of heaven, it is important to note that seven is the number of fullness or completion. After six days of creation, God rested on the seventh day and set aside this day as a day of worship. Seven thus symbolised completeness and it also functions this way in Revelation. The seven spirits denote the fullness of God's Spirit. The seven churches – though they were actual churches in Asia Minor, real churches facing particular challenges – represent the Church as a whole. The seven kings / seven hills seem to represent the fullness of opposition to Christ and his Kingdom and so on.

Similarly, the use of the number seven helps us grapple with the structure of the book as a whole. Since seven denotes completeness, each cycle of seven found in Revelation likely denotes a complete cycle. This means that the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven bowls containing seven plagues and so on, each picture the same event – God's judgement on the earth – from a different perspective. Thus Revelation, in

keeping with apocalyptic literature in general (e.g. Daniel chapters 7 through 12) does not follow a linear, consecutive approach with each "seven" following the last. Rather it retells the same set of events several times, highlighting different aspects – each retelling serving to fill out the picture. This repetition also serves to show the completeness of God's victory over His enemies and His judgement on those who oppose Him.

A book about worship

One seven which is easily overlooked in Revelation is a series of seven doxological scenes – seven scenes of worship in which glory is ascribed to God (Revelation 1:4-8; 4:1-5:14; 7:9-17; 11:15-19; 14:1-5; 15:1-8; 19:1-10). In fact, worship perhaps gives us our clearest window into what Revelation is all about.

More than any other New Testament book, Revelation resounds with worship and praise of God. When this fact is considered in relation to the age in which Revelation was written, it becomes clear that one of its primary concerns is that of right worship. Or, put another way, Revelation unfolds a theology of power – who holds the key to the future, with whom does real power rest and who is therefore worthy of worship? Against the claims that real power rests with Rome and with Caesar, Revelation shows that "the future belongs not to the Roman emperor ... but only to Christ who was crucified for the salvation of mankind ... Real power rests with Christ, the Lion."¹

Revelation places before the reader the stark choice about whom to worship. Will they worship demons and idols (9:20), the dragon (13:4), the beast and his image (13:4,8,12,15 etc), or will they worship God and the lamb? Revelation shows that which choice they make will have both cosmic and eternal consequences.

In this sense, Revelation is very much a book for our day. There are only two kinds of worship – true or false. There is only worship of the living God or idolatry. Revelation places before us, too, the consequences of our worship.

It is also worth considering the fact that Revelation is written after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. For Jews living at this time, there must have been a real temptation to believe that Rome had triumphed over Jerusalem and, perhaps, even over their God. Yet Revelation shows that God has been building the true Jerusalem and that it is there that true power rests. Revelation 21 shows this Jerusalem descending from above – not vanquished but victorious, not a ruin but a city which eclipses even Rome with its glory and beauty. This city is an enormous cube with each side the length of the distance from Adelaide to Darwin. The only other cube in the Bible is the Holy of Holies in the temple – the place of God's dwelling on earth. Yet about this city, the New Jerusalem, it is said "Now the dwelling of God is with man, and he will live with them." (21:3) and "I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." God's people – those who have worshipped him – have now become the Holy of Holies where God dwells!

Conclusion

Revelation is a challenging book and we must approach it with a good deal of humility. Yet it is an important book for every Christian. While there are many things that we cannot pin down precisely, its broad thrusts are plain. It shows us where true power resides and who is worthy of worship. It shows us the victory of God and of the Lamb – as one song writer has said "I've read the back of the book and we win!"

Revelation can be read with great benefit by every Christian if we remember a few broad principles. It was written to give comfort and encouragement to ordinary Christians in a real situation and was meant to be understood by them – and by us. It is written in symbolic,



Monastery of Saint John the Theologian on Patmos. Image by Valeria Casali, <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

pictorial language – don't get hung up on details, drink in the big picture, the broad contours. It's about worship and its consequences – let it lead you to right worship of God and the Lamb.

So how should we approach Revelation? It is hard to put it in better terms than those of New Testament scholar, Vern Poythress: "Let the images 'soak into you'. Get involved in the Book.

Don't try to puzzle it out. Enjoy it. Sing about it. Cheer for the saints. Detest the beast. Rejoice in God's power and glory. Praise the Lamb."²

(I want to record my thanks to Dr. Steve Voorwinde whose very helpful article "Worship – True or False?" was invaluable in preparing this article.)

- 1 L Morris. *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (second edition). Leicester: IVP, 1987, 22-23.
- 2 V.S. Poythress "The Book of Revelation: A Guide for Understanding" Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary. 2

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Can we understand Revelation? (3)

Demystifying the Book of Revelation

What it means for you and me

Michael Flinn

The final book of the Bible has given rise to much head scratching, especially among modern readers. It tells of great events heralded by trumpet blasts and angels pouring out bowls of wrath on the earth with terrifying consequences. It speaks of a grotesque, adulterous woman, riding on a multi-headed beast and committing adultery with the kings of the earth. Then we have the rider on the white horse, the thousand-year reign and the establishment of the New Jerusalem. What does it all mean?

Things wouldn't be so challenging if everyone, or nearly everyone, interpreted the book in the same way. If there were such a thing as a *standard interpretation* of the book of Revelation, we would be well on the way to grasping its message. However, the many different interpretations of the book, especially in the modern period, have made the final book of the Bible controversial for some and an obvious candidate for the "too hard basket" for others.

A Book to be read and understood

This situation is hardly satisfactory when we consider what the book has to say about itself. In Revelation 1:3, it is stated that the one who reads the words of this prophecy is blessed. The Greek word translated "read" in the NIV is *ana-*

gignosko. It means to know *again* or to know well. When applied to written material, as it is here, this word means to read in the sense of poring over something, and reading it with understanding. This verse is telling us that the one who reads this book in this way is blessed. Furthermore, those who *hear* this material and take to heart what is written in it are also blessed. The implication is that this material was not to be kept secret or hidden away in the too hard basket. It was to be read aloud to the churches and explained so that Christians would be encouraged and blessed by it. Clearly, the book does not say of itself that it is mysterious, frightening, or that it is best to give it a wide berth. Neither does it say that only the wise or intelligent can get anything from this book. On the contrary, it says of itself that it is to be read, understood, and appreciated. Blessed is the one who reads this, hears it, and takes to heart what is written in it.

The circumstances of the Book

The book's relevance and poignancy become even more striking when we consider the circumstances faced by God's people at the time when it was written. From Revelation 1:9, we learn that when the apostle John received this information, he was in exile on the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean Sea. He



St John at Patmos. <http://whos-right-kestal.blogspot.co.nz>

had been placed there "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus". In other words, he was experiencing the consequences of persecution. Furthermore, he writes of himself as "your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." In other words, those who would receive this message could clearly identify with John in his suffering and patient endurance. They were *brothers and companions* with him in this hardship. This is the first clue in the book that it was written during a time

of hardship and persecution for Christians and that its message was designed to be a blessing and encouragement for believers in difficult circumstances.

Later on, these circumstances are confirmed again and again as the book unfolds. In the letters to the churches, for example, (chapters 2,3) there are numerous references to hardships and suffering endured by Christians or shortly to be endured (cf. 2:3,10,13; 3:10) and a constant call to be patient and to overcome in the face of these trials. In chapter 6:9,10 we read of the souls of those who had been martyred in service to Jesus asking how long this situation will continue before the Lord judges those who have killed them. In chapter 13:10,11 we read of people going into captivity and being killed with the sword and again, there is a call for

“The message of the book is one of patient endurance, because God has his protective mark upon his people and even if we are called to pay the ultimate price in service to Christ, we are safely in the Lord’s hands.”

patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints as they live in these difficult times.

So what else does the book have to say by way of encouragement for believers in times of hardship and persecution? In the remainder of this article, we will explore some of these themes.

Jesus is present, not absent

In times of trial and hardship, one of the first thoughts that comes to mind is that Jesus is absent and distant. After all, he ascended into heaven and is no longer with his disciples as he was during his earthly ministry. And we are left to suffer here on earth without him.

Chapters 1-3 show that the risen Christ is with his people and knows exactly what they are going through. The opening chapter presents a symbolic picture of the risen and glorified Christ. He is the First and the Last and the Living One. He was dead, but now he is alive forever and ever and he holds the keys of death and Hades (vs. 18). Of all the disciples, John was the closest to the Lord Jesus Christ, but when he sees his Lord revealed in his glory, the only appropriate response is to fall at his feet as though dead (vs. 17).

Then we have a symbolic picture of the churches in Asia Minor. They appear as lampstands (1:20). For our purposes, the significant thing to notice is that Jesus appears walking among the lampstands (1:13) and that he holds the stars, the angels of the churches, in his right hand (1:16,20). The word angel, *angelos* in the Greek, means angel or messenger. Most likely, this is a reference to the pastors or other spiritual leaders of the congregations who had the responsibility of receiving this information and reading it out to their congregations. The point is that Jesus is present with his churches and is upholding those who lead the churches. Jesus is *not* absent and distant from his people in their suffering. On the contrary, he is right there with them, and as the subsequent letters reveal, he has intimate knowledge of what the churches are experiencing and of their spiritual state. Jesus does not write “form letters”. He writes individual, personal communications that show just how much he values and understands his people.

God is in control

Chapters 4 and 5, in particular, point to God’s sovereignty in the hardships that Christians face. Through a door

standing open in heaven (vs. 1) John sees a throne room with God seated on his throne surrounded with heavenly creatures and elders who praise him continuously. It is important to realise that this is not some sort of alternative universe that functions independently and separately from what is happening on earth. Instead, the message is that God in heaven is completely sovereign over what happens on earth. He both knows, inaugurates and controls the future.

This is brought out in particular with the scroll in chapter 5. John laments because no-one is found worthy to open the scroll and look inside (vs. 4). But then he is told by one of the elders that the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed and he is able to open the scroll and its seven seals (vs. 5). These expressions are further depictions of the Lord Jesus Christ, who now comes forward as a Lamb (vss. 6ff). Having taken the scroll, he begins to open the seven seals (6:1ff) and at each stage of this process, more information is provided about what is happening *on earth*.

The message for suffering Christians is that God knows exactly what is happening in our lives because he plans and brings these things about. Especially when disasters occur, Christians commonly want to distance God from these events. This must be something that the devil is doing. How could God ever be involved in tragedy? However, the message of the book of Revelation is that God is working out his sovereign purposes even in the times of trial and hardship and disaster. We might not know exactly what that purpose is in the short term, but the book reveals that the God who resides in heaven is in complete control at every point!

Christians are set apart

When his people were persecuted in Egypt in the days of Moses, God sent a series of plagues by way of judgement upon the Egyptians. At each point, his own people were protected and spared. This comes out most vividly in the Passover, in which the angel of death passes over the houses of the Israelites because of the blood of the lamb that was sprinkled upon their doorposts. We find something similar occurring in the book of Revelation in chapter 7. 144,000 people (a symbolic number for the entire church) are sealed on their foreheads (vs. 3). This has to be done before the

avenging angel pours out wrath upon the earth.

The message for the persecuted church is that God will protect his people from harm. This does not necessarily mean that Christians will be spared from any more persecution and that there will be no more martyrdom. On the contrary, the book goes on to speak of enemies who will do their utmost to trample and destroy God's people. And the number of martyrs is yet to be completed (6:11). However, Jesus pointed out that we should not fear those who can kill the body only, but the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28). And in the book of Revelation, we read that God's people cannot be harmed by "the second death" (cf. 2:11; 20:6), which is defined in the book itself as the fires of eternal judgement (20:14).

Again, the message of the book is one of patient endurance, because God has his protective mark upon his people and even if we are called to pay the ultimate price in service to Christ, we are safely in the Lord's hands.

God's enemies and ours will be defeated

This is the message of chapters 13 to 18. It would go beyond the scope of this article to identify the fierce and implacable enemies of God and of the Lord's people that are depicted in these pages. Suffice it to say that they are all judged and destroyed by God in the end. The entire book of Revelation can be summed up in two words: Jesus wins. Ultimately, this is the answer to the cry of the martyrs in 6:10.

When things seem hopeless for the church, especially because of the power and authority of the Lord's enemies, this is precisely what we need to remember. No matter how strong the enemy appears, his doom is sure and certain. Jesus wins!

No more tears

Finally, we have the picture of the New Jerusalem in chapter 21. This is the new order of things, when heaven comes down and subsumes and purifies everything on earth. In this eternal state there will be no more death or mourn-

ing or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (vs. 4). Take note especially that God himself will be with his people eternally, and that he personally *will wipe every tear from their eyes* (vs. 4).

Conclusion

It was not my intention in this article to try to interpret for you all the details of the book of Revelation. Clearly, that is simply not possible. Although the details are important and fascinating, it is also valuable to stand back and look at the book in broad brushstrokes and themes. Revelation is filled with large and dramatic scenes and the overall message is one of encouragement and blessing for God's people, especially when they are going through times of trial and hardship brought about through persecution. Blessed indeed are those who read, hear, and take to heart what is written in this wonderful book.

Mr Michael Flinn is an emeritus minister and member of the Reformed Church of Palmerston North.

Can we understand Revelation? (4)

Genesis to Revelation

Paul Archbald

In this article, we will be looking at how the Book of Revelation fits in with the rest of the Bible. That is a crucial question, the answer to which will influence how we interpret the book. It is also an issue that has many other questions nested in it – how one views the overall direction or "movement" of the Bible; what specific principles of interpretation one accepts; how one sees the OT and NT connecting; and even what date one accepts for the book. It is no wonder that there are so many different interpretations of Revelation. It sometimes seems that there are as many interpretations as there are Christians!

In this article, I am not planning to give the definitive answer on the various

issues that arise in connection with this Book. I do intend to show how much it relies upon the Old Testament – upon various symbols and apocalyptic passages from the OT. I would suggest that the reason for this is that these OT passages dealt with attacks upon the church of the Old Testament. They demonstrated how the Lord protected His people and dealt with His enemies at that time. These passages, and symbols derived from them, therefore suit the purpose of the visions of Revelation very well. The less one sees those connections to the Old Testament, the more likely it is that fanciful interpretations will be forthcoming.

Of course, every NT Book has quotes from and allusions to, the OT. But the extent to which Revelation relies upon OT symbols and themes has probably

been underestimated in the past. More recently, G.K. Beale's excellent commentary, *The Book of Revelation* – originally published in 1999 – has provided extensive cross-referencing to the OT, making these connections clear.

It would take too long to list all the OT passages that inform Revelation. However, I will mention some of the main ones.

The description of paradise

Some elements from the description of the Garden in Gen. 1-2 are found in Revelation's description of Paradise-Restored. The abundance of water (Gen. 2:6, 10-14), implying life, is picked up in Rev. 22:1-2. Likewise the Tree of Life (Gen. 2:9;/Rev. 22:2). The precious stones of the Garden also re-appear, in

greater variety, indicating great wealth and value (Gen. 2:11-2 and Ezk. 28:13, with Rev. 21:11, 18-21). Paradise-Restored is put in terms of a New Jerusalem, building on the theme of God's holy city, which runs through the whole OT. The City is a symbol of His Presence. The OT Temple is also brought into the picture. In Ezk. 40, the prophet has a vision of a man measuring the Temple. But in Rev. 21:15-17, it is the New Jerusalem being measured. The whole City/Paradise becomes a "temple" where God dwells. The Lord knows its "measurements" well – He has it all under His care. His whole church, OT and NT, is represented by the 24 elders, who are seen constantly praising God with the angels (Rev. 4, 7 etc).

Several passages from Isaiah also feed into Revelation's description of the new world. Is. 52:1, 61:10, 62:1-5 and 65:17-18 are picked up in Rev. 21:2f. This includes the picture of the church as a bride (Is. 61:10, 62:5).

The description of the Son of Man

Revelation 1:12-16 gives a symbolic description of Christ, as "One like a Son of Man," This description draws from the prophecy of Dan. 7:9-10, 13-14, 10:5-6, and Ezk. 1:26-28. This Son of Man stands between 7 golden lampstands, a reference to the universal church. The symbolism is drawn from the golden

lampstand of the Tabernacle/Temple (Ex. 25:31f), which is also picked up in the vision of Zech. 4:1ff. The Son of Man has a sword coming from His mouth – He comes in judgement – fulfilling Is. 49:2. The Lord Jesus appears again at the end of the Book, where He describes Himself as the "root and descendant of David, and the bright morning star" (Rev. 22:16). These terms are taken from Is. 11:1 and Num. 24:17, respectively.

The Lord Jesus Christ is also depicted in Revelation as both a lion and a lamb (Rev. 5:5-6). As a lamb, there is the background in the Passover Lamb. As a lion, there is a connection to Gen. 49:9 – the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

The believer's "name"

Revelation speaks of believers being given a "name," sometimes referred to as being written on a white stone (Rev. 2:17), or marking their foreheads (7:3, 14:1) – as opposed to having the "mark of the beast." This indicates that God knows intimately those who are His, and guards their holy character. Believers are God's bondslaves, branded with His Name/character. This symbol draws on passages like Is. 56:5, 62:2, 65:15 and Ezk. 9f. The contrast between those with Christ's name upon them, and those bearing the number 666, indicates that the latter is not referring to bar-codes, social security numbers and the like, but

is a symbol of the allegiance of unbelieving men, ultimately to Satan.

The Book of Life

Believers also have their names recorded in the "Book of Life" (Rev. 3:5, 20:12, 15, 21:37). This has an OT background in Ex. 32:32-33, Is. 4:3, Dan. 12:1 and Mal. 3:16. The point is that the Lord does not forget those who belong to Him and fear Him.

The sealed books

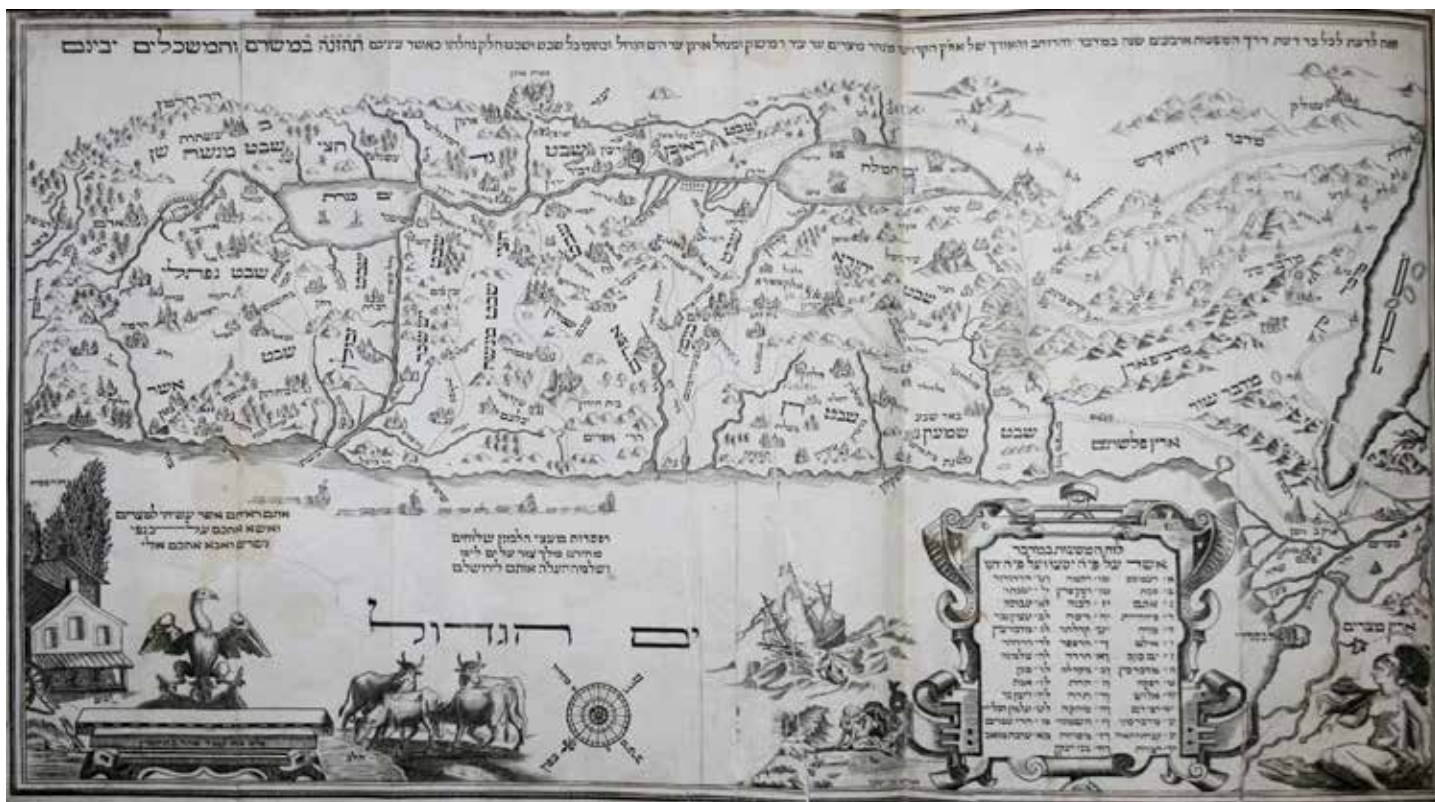
A "seal" represents something either concealed or guaranteed as authentic. When they are opened, mysteries are revealed. We find this picture in Rev. 5, 6, 8, 10:4 and 22:10. The OT background is found in Is. 29:11 and Dan. 12:9-10. Ezk. 2-3 is similar, where the scroll is eaten rather than sealed up.

Measuring and numbering

Taking measurements of things or numbering them is a way of showing that the Lord knows all about us and has everything under control. He has infinite ability to provide for us and protect us. We find examples of this in Rev. 21:15-17 and 11:1, correlating with Num. 1, Ezk. 40 and 42:20.

Signs of God's presence

The OT often describes *theophanies* – visible manifestations of God's glory. For



1695 Eretz Israel map in Amsterdam Haggada by Abraham Bar-Jacob. Image by Valeria Casali, <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

example, when God's Presence rests on Mt. Sinai, the people see fire, smoke/cloud, and lightning; they hear loud noises like the blast of many horns; they feel tremors (Ex. 19:16f). Thus the holiness and glory of the Lord are represented, reminding us that we must fear Him. Revelation draws frequently upon these theophanic symbols (Rev. 1:10, 14-15; 4:1, 5, 11:19, 16:18 etc). This also reminds us that the Lord rules the world from heaven, with infinite power and glory, judging those who oppose Him and saving His people.

By the sea of crystal

Revelation mentions something that resembles a "sea of crystal" beneath God's heavenly throne (4:6; 15:2). Rev. 21:1 states that in the New Creation, "there is no longer any sea." Many regard the sea as a symbol of chaotic rebellion against God by the nations, and argue that this means there will no longer be any opposition to God in that Day. Others regard the sea as an allusion to the bronze laver of the OT Tabernacle/Temple. The sea mixed with fire in Rev. 15:2 is thought by some to draw on imagery from Ex. 14, where God destroyed the Egyptians pursuing Israel. Though the jury is still out on this one, it seems to me that there is a link with the expanse of crystal which Ezk. 1:22 sees overhead. Ezekiel's vision is a view from below, whereas John is taken in the spirit and given a view from heaven looking down. One sees the sea of crystal from above, one from below. Perhaps the crystal expanse/sea refers to the separation between heaven and earth, that must remain in place until sin is utterly removed from Creation. Then there will be no more "sea," no more barrier. In the meantime, this barrier is, of course, transparent to God.

The living creatures

Revelation's heavenly scenes often involve "living creatures" that appear as hybrids of various creatures of power or influence (4:6-9, 5:6, 8, 11 and 14, 6:1, 6, 7:11, 14:3, 15:7 and 19:4). These creatures represent the Lord's control over all aspects of creation, even those of greatest power. We find a similar image in Ezk. 1:5-14 and chapter 10. In Ezk. 10, they are identified as *cherubim*, which were also represented in the Most Holy Place of the OT Tabernacle/Temple. Cherubim are associated with God's heavenly throne (Ps. 80:1, 99:1).

God's judgements

Revelation shows how the Lord not only saves His people, He also judges His enemies. The judgements upon those who have persecuted His people and rejected His Word are put in a series of roughly parallel visions, using such images as the four horsemen, the four winds, the seven seals, the 7 trumpets and the seven bowls of wrath. On the four horsemen, compare the four chariots of Zech. 6:1-8, each one pulled by horses of different colour. On the four (whirl)winds, see Is. 66:15-16. There may also be a connection between the four "spirits" of Zech. 6:5 and the four winds of Revelation. Mt. 24:30 quotes Dan. 7:13 concerning the Son of Man coming on the clouds with judgement – referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The image is one of God's stormy winds of judgement driving the clouds. These passages are all basically depicting God's judgement by means of war, plague, storm, death and such terrors.

In these judgements, the sun, moon and stars are sometimes blotted out or darkened, much as we find in Mt. 24:29. See, for example, Rev.6:12-13 and 8:12. This is also the language of judgement, often used to describe the way the Lord used the armies of the nations to visit His wrath on cities by laying siege to them (Ezk. 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31, 3:15; Amos 8:9; Zeph. 1:15).

The plagues that are mentioned in some of these passages often sound very much like the plagues upon Egypt at the time of the Exodus – as, for example, in Rev. 8.

In the day of judgement, people will seek to hide from God's wrath, but they will not be able to. They will wish the mountains would fall on them and hide them (Rev. 6:16-17). This kind of language is found in the OT, in such passages as Is. 2:19 and Hos. 10:8.

The beasts

Rev. 13 describes the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth. These appear to represent Satan's use of political power and false religion, respectively, to persecute God's people. The background is found especially in the four beasts of Dan. 7, which represent particular kingdoms or empires. Like the beasts of Rev. 13, those of Dan. 7 possess a number of horns, as Dan. 8 goes on to explain further. The horn is a symbol of power in the Bible – think of a bull's horn, especially. When Ps. 89:17 says

“If you want to interpret Revelation correctly, you have to be familiar with the OT. Even then, there will still no doubt be questions, and disagreements too.”

that God exalts the "horn" of His people, it means He provides us with strength.

The 144,000

Rev. 7 speaks of God's servants receiving His seal on their foreheads. The number of those sealed is said to be 144,000 (7:4, 14:1, 3). This is a symbolic number, rather than literal. It is also referred to as a "great multitude which no one could count" (7:9). The symbolic number probably comes from 12 (tribes of Israel, the OT church) X 12 (apostles of the NT church) X 1,000 (a great number). The idea of a great multitude ties in with the covenant promise that Abraham's descendants would be too numerous to count (Gen. 15:5, 17:4 etc.).

Time-spans

Revelation makes use of a number of time-segments, such as 1,260 days (12:6), 42 months (11:2, 13:5) and 3½ years (12:14). These numbers are not to be taken literally. They represents the time during which the church will be persecuted, but when the Lord will protect her. This connects with Dan. 7:25 and 12:7, which states that God's people will suffer for "a time, times and half a time," which is a way of saying 3½ years. In fact, all these numbers refer to the same period of time, for 3½ years

is 42 months or 1,260 days. The time of persecution is actually this entire age, until the Lord Jesus returns. So these symbolic numbers cover the whole “millennium” of Revelation 20:2-7.

The great tribulation

Rev. 7:13-17 mentions those who have come out of the Great Tribulation. Similarly, Dan. 12:1 speaks of an unprecedented time of distress for God’s people. Mt. 24:21 and parallel passages use similar language in respect of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Many see this as a “double prophecy,” pointing to a Great Tribulation to come, shortly before the Lord returns. I am not convinced that the Scripture teaches that, though it certainly does indicate that this entire age will *include* tribulation, sometimes of a very high degree.

The woman and the dragon

Rev. 12 describes the pursuit of the woman by the red dragon. The woman gives birth to a child. She flees to the wilderness, where she is nourished for – guess how long? – 1,260 days! The woman represents the church. The Child is Christ. The red dragon is Satan. The fact that the church is protected by the Lord for 1,260 days is good evidence that this period represents the entire time before the Lord returns, for that is, in fact, the measure of His protection of His people – He *never* deserts us! This chapter relies upon a great deal of OT background. The dragon reminds us of the serpent in the Garden, only revealed here as very fierce in his wrath, instead of subtle in his approach (in the Garden) – here he has seven heads and ten horns. He sweeps away a third of the stars of heaven, much as in Dan. 8:10. This probably indicates that Satan is permitted to do some limited harm to the church, though ultimately he does not prevail. The church as a woman in labour is found, for example, in Is. 54:1 and 66:7. Her flight to the wilderness is reminiscent of Israel’s flight from Egypt, where the Lord sustained His people and delivered them by taking them through the wilderness.

Satan’s accusation

In Rev. 12:10, Satan is described as the “accuser of our brethren...who accuses them before our God day and night.” We readily think of Job 1:6-11. We may also consider Zech. 3:1, where the prophet is given a vision of Satan accusing Joshua the high priest in God’s presence. On

both cases, the Lord preserves His servant despite these accusations – as He does for us, through the merits of His Son.

Babylon’s demise

Revelation is a “Tale of Two Cities” – Babylon, representing the world, and Jerusalem, representing the church (Rev. 17-18). Babylon is wealthy and supported by powerful regimes. She seeks to seduce God’s people with her wealth and power. She seeks, ultimately, the destruction of the church. However, in the end it is she who is destroyed – to the great grief of all those who have invested their lives in her (the “merchants”). In the OT, a similar picture is painted of some of the wealthy, powerful cities of the time: Ezk. 26-28 (Tyre), Is. 23 (Tyre), and Jer. 51 (Babylon).

Armageddon

Rev. 16:13-16 speaks of the final battle, in which the kings of the earth gather at Armageddon and wage war against the Lord, and by implication, against His people. “Armageddon” is derived from the Hebrew for “the hill of Megiddo,” a site famous in the OT for great battles in which Israel fought against their enemies (2 Kgs. 23:29f, 2 Chron. 35:22) – but where they also experienced great deliverances by the Lord (Judg. 4-5). Ezk. 38-39 is, perhaps, speaking of the same area, when it tells of how “Gog of the land of Magog” would attack Israel in the future. Rev. 20:7-10 speaks of Satan freed at the end of the “thousand years” to deceive the nations once more and gather the ends of the earth, “Gog and Magog,” to surround the camp of the saints and the beloved city. But the Lord delivers His people and throws the devil and his allies into the lake of fire. Zech. 12 also foretells a day when the Lord would deliver Jerusalem from all the nations that come against her. Zech. 12:11 mentions that the mourning that will be like that on the plain of Megiddo. Many take all this as an indication that there will be a literal gathering of armies against Jerusalem just before the end. Those who believe that Israel, as a geographic location, no longer holds any special place in God’s plan, take this as a symbol of the fierce opposition that the church will experience in the last days. Some still expect that opposition to increase just before the Lord returns. Others take it to mean that opposition will be there throughout the last days, and will still be fierce when the Lord returns.

The new song

Revelation provides us with several “songs,” which are Psalm-like in style and content – though with their Christ-centredness made more overt (Rev. 4:8, 11, 5:12, 13, 14:3, 15:3, 4). Hence, the “Song of Moses” is also the “song of the Lamb” (15:3). These songs are sometimes called “new” (14:3), a term that also comes from the Psalms (Pss. 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1), meaning that God’s people are called to praise God anew each day, as they become more aware of the extent of His mighty works and grace. In terms of content, these songs and ascriptions of praise draw from a number of Psalms, such as 33, 40, 47, 89, and 139. Looking at the songs individually, they do not always seem to quote from just one Psalm, but are more of a medley derived from several Psalms. Perhaps this is a reminder that any hymns or spiritual songs sung by the NT church should be more closely modelled upon the psalms than is often the case today!

The covenant fulfilled

Revelation contains many references to the covenant, both its promised blessings and its curses. Compare Rev. 21:8, 22:14-15, 19 with Dt. 23:18, 27:15f, 4:2 and 12:32. God is seen to be with His people in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:3), fulfilling the Abrahamic promise that lies at the heart of the covenant (Gen. 17:7) – God will be our God and we His people. The Davidic covenant of 2 Sam. 7 and Ezk. 37:24ff. is also fulfilled in Christ (Rev. 22:16, 3:7, 5:5).

What I have drawn to our attention here is just a scratching of the surface. As we have seen, Revelation draws heavily on the visions of Daniel 7 and 12, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. It uses images of judgement, blessing, and the promised new creation, from the prophets – especially Isaiah and Jeremiah. It models its songs upon the Psalms. It links with Genesis 1-3 to enclose the Bible in a movement from Paradise to Paradise-Restored. The main symbols that have so perplexed believers for centuries – the dragon, the beasts, Babylon, the Four Horsemen, Armageddon, etc – these are all derived from the OT. This makes it very clear that if you want to interpret Revelation correctly, *you have to be familiar with the OT*. Even then, there will still no doubt be questions, and disagreements too. But at least it is a start.

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Outward focus

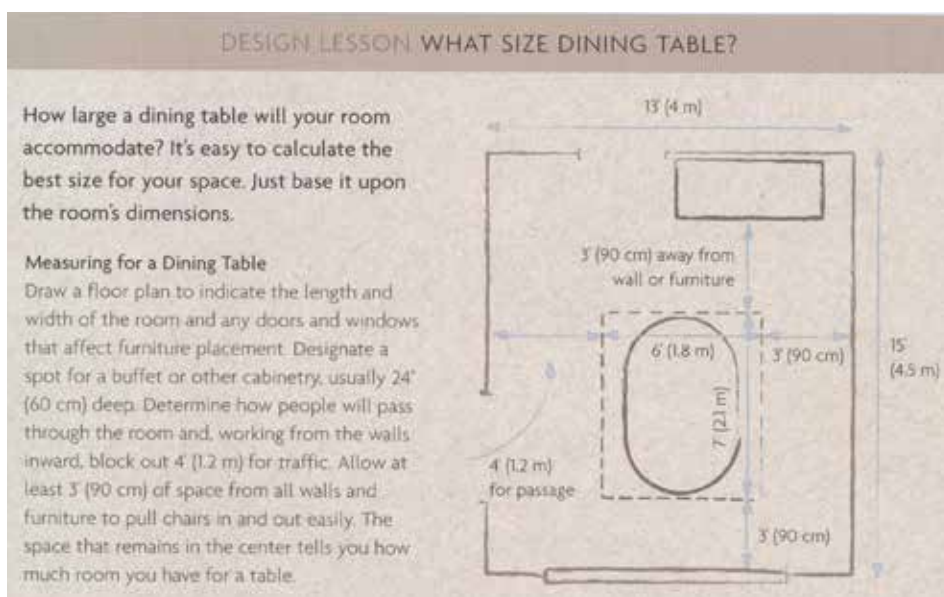
Sally Davey

Your most important piece of furniture

Perhaps you are very fond of a good night's sleep – so a comfortable bed comes at the top of your “must have” list of furniture items. Or you may be an avid reader, in which case, a commodious bookshelf – or three – are your pride and joy. Maybe you're a serious student – and a well-designed, practical desk with plenty of drawers and a cubby-hole for every work tool makes your study a pleasure. Needless to say, for many folks there is nothing more important in their house than their big-screen TV (though given the issues *that* raises, we won't go there...). But do you know what really *is* the best, and most important, piece of furniture in any Christian's house – one worth careful thought and good investment? Your dining table.

Your dining table is an inherently *social* piece of furniture. You meet with other people around it; you give them your time, your words, your food, and your love and thoughtfulness in preparing it for them. There you are, a metre across the table, or at the most a couple of metres along the table, face to face and with an hour or maybe more of conversational time to share with them. It's the perfect situation for family interaction, for training your children, for welcoming the lonely, for sharing the gospel, and for discipling young believers in their life of faith. In summary, it is the prime place in your house for fulfilling the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19; making disciples and teaching them to walk with Christ. So choose a large table, with comfortable chairs, and make it a relaxing place for good conversation. Make it a place where people will want to sit with you, and prepare to spend a lot of time there!

Others whose thoughts I really appreciate have said similar things, and



Plan well for your table space.³

better. Blogger Tim Challies recently wrote a useful list of the reasons he and his family still eat together (not a given in today's busy North American world). Among them were the following:

It keeps us relationally healthy

Because of our busy schedules we can usually only manage to guarantee one meal all together each day. When we eat this meal, we try to make sure that it has relational value, not just nutritional value. It is here that we are able to slow down and just talk as a family. It is here that we talk about what we experienced that day and what plans we have for the next day. We sit and talk about whatever is interesting or important to us – the girls hear the experience of their brother as he navigates high school, while he hears about my workday, and Aileen tells us what she did that day. It keeps us in-touch with one another and adds to our relational health. While we might all prefer to grab a plate and go, there is value in

inconveniencing ourselves for the sake of the others.

It keeps us spiritually healthy

Eating together is also an important part of our family's spiritual health. Through the years we have found it nearly impossible to carry on family devotions unless we eat together – we just do not have the opportunity or the discipline to create the opportunity. And so we closely associate eating together with family devotions. We begin our meals by praying to thank God for his provision. We end our meals by reading a short passage of the Bible together, talking about it, and praying once more to ask God's blessing on us. This is a critical part of our family's spiritual health and training. Slowly, day by day and year after year, the kids are exposed to God and his Word through these short times of worship.

It keeps us behaviorally healthy

Okay, so I may be pushing a little too hard on the “healthy” theme here, but

let me explain what I mean. Study after study shows a correlation between eating alone and rebellion, so that teens who do not eat with their families are many times more likely to be involved in drinking and drugs and other destructive behavior. While eating family meals is no guarantee against rebellion, it does provide a means to prevent, detect, and respond to it. The author of one study writes, "While substance abuse can strike any family, regardless of ethnicity, affluence, age, or gender, the parental engagement fostered at the dinner table can be a simple, effective tool to help prevent it."

And so we eat together as often as possible and try to make the most of it. Now let's be clear and realistic – we are a pack of sinners, just like every other family, and we are busy, just like every other family. Sometimes we cannot eat together, sometimes we are rushed and don't have time to read the Bible together. Sometimes we can barely stand the sight of each other, the conversation tiptoes along the edge of civility, and the kids seem to want to rip each other's heads off. But we measure long, not short, and continue to eat together night after night. We continue to count it a great blessing.¹

Tom and Jane Patete of Atlanta, Georgia, also had it right where their own table was concerned. Here is how Jane described their use of it:

Not very fancy, even less expensive, sometimes a bit wobbly – that's the venue where much of our family's spiritual history unfolded. The kitchen table, the site of meals and a myriad of other

gatherings, is an icon of the cumulative relationships, communication, and attempts at a Godward focus that contributed to our 'corporate' growth in grace.

More than just formal family worship, the teaching/learning events that took place here were primarily those that flow out of daily routines, both joys and sorrows, children's questions, life along the way. Experience was the backdrop for lessons in the deep things of God. To 'think Christianly' was our goal, and be it by discipling or by discipline, to see the minds of children (indeed, of us all) gradually captured for Christ is the fruit to be cherished.

The round Formica-clad surface of this table also provided a comfort circle for visits by church members and neighbors alike. One particular ministry opportunity, recurring and still memorable, were the young wives/mothers seeking counsel. Among them, a single mum (whose life was a mess) stands out because together we navigated so many difficult trials with her. Troubles and problems were not always alleviated, and never easily, but the welcoming ambiance of a faith-based home supplied solace and a stage for teaching.

As varied portions of our extended family or other out-of-towners would come through our door, somehow the intimacy of the small table made it the center of fellowship. This perhaps gave us a natural ease in carrying on with those traditions that reflected the spiritual dimension of our home. On one such occasion, that pattern resulted in the husband of a visiting couple coming to terms with the Gospel he had heard

many times previously – the witness that impacted him, quite to our amazement, was merely seeing a Christian family live as usual.

This so-called covenant table – a bit more wobbly now – continues today after more than three decades of uninterrupted use. Grandchildren now gather there to hear Bible stories, learn the catechism, and pray. Of special note is a comment by one of them in an early-morning conversation with Grandmum in which he observed that he needed to pray for a servant's heart. Seeing covenant kids develop as kingdom citizens is what it's all about!²

You get the point: eating together as a family allows you all to achieve the kinds of interaction that God has designed family life for. But it also facilitates other kinds of interaction that are important priorities for Christians. Consider the development of friendships, the consolation of the weary, the worried, the lonely and those far away from home. Including others at our dining table is one of the most important ways to include them in our lives.

How do you use the most important piece of furniture in your house?

Notes

- 1 Tim Challies, *Five Reasons We Eat Together as a Family*, daily email, 6th January, 2015. (See challies.com)
- 2 Quoted in Susan Hunt, *A Place of Grace* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2000), pp.103-4)
- 3 Samantha Moss, ed., *The Complete Book of the Home: Creative Inspiration & Design Solutions* (Murdoch Books, Millers Point, NSW, 2005), p. 99.

Prayer in Parliament

A decision was made in Parliament not to change the prayer that has been said in the New Zealand Parliament since 1962. MPs gave feedback to the Speaker whether they would like to adopt a new prayer – which would see references to "true religion" and "Jesus Christ our Lord" removed. The Lord has overruled this attempt to further secularise our nation. Please continue to pray for our nation and for those who govern us. "I urge, then first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:1-2)



Jenny Waldron

Close the table and taste and see that the LORD is good

When I first heard the expression “closing the table” I had no idea what that meant –except maybe folding up the table extension? However, I have come to appreciate “closing the table” at meal time with a Bible reading and prayer. This gives a sense of completeness, and the additional time spent together binds those around the table closer.

Family Devotions or “closing the table” isn’t just for families with children. If you are a couple who don’t have children, or a widow, or if you are single, I encourage you to have a practice of reading the Bible and praying after a meal each day. As you do this, not only will you be blessed with a closer walk with the Lord but also, when you have friends and family over, Christian and non-Christian, or you have flatmates or boarders, you will be able to quite comfortably “close the table” as is your normal custom.

Many of us carry the burden of family members who are estranged from the Lord. Closing the table with a Bible reading, devotion and prayer can be a time (however short, but often poignant) when they hear the Word of God spoken.

Family traditions and habits are what make up the fabric of family life and a regular family devotion time can become a very strong pattern and custom that is passed down through generations.

However, sometimes, we do what we do, and do it for years and years regardless of how our circumstances change. Sometimes, habits become ruts and it may be good to revamp the way we do things to revitalise them and inject new life into our devotional time. Fourteen-year-old boys do not still need to be read to from a children’s Bible. On the other hand a 4 year-old will probably not understand the Table Talk¹ devotions. The reason we “close the table” with devo-

tions is to learn about God; but also to really know the Gospel, God’s Word and Christ himself. Not just as ‘head knowledge’ but passing on God’s amazing redemption plan and holding fast to His wonderful grace and the love that He has for us. We are called to pass on the faith from generation to generation, so let’s do this in a way that is not by rote, or something to get through before we can dash off to “real life” but in a way that will help everyone grow and love Jesus Christ.

One of the hidden benefits of family devotions is that children are also being trained for the worship services on Sundays. They learn to sit still. They learn to listen attentively. They learn about prayer and how to read the Bible.

So, let us look at the table we are going to close.

Set the table

“Setting the table” is scheduling a time and place to close the table and having the Bibles (and hymnbooks) ready. This may mean that you gather together for breakfast before everyone is off to work, school or wherever. Breakfast together, around God’s Word, is a lovely way to start the day afresh. However, this may not work for everyone in your household. Or it may work on Sundays but not the rest of the week. Dinner or even lunch might be the time that suits you best. The aim is to set aside at least one meal a day, for family devotions, so make the schedule work for you and your family.

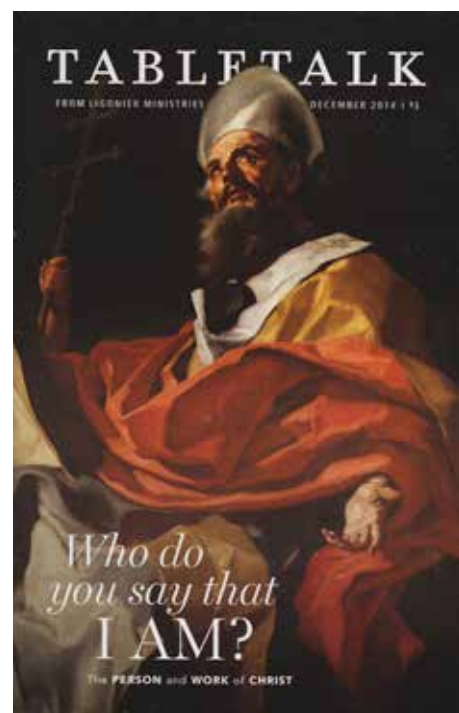
Encourage each person around the table to have a Bible in front of them and to be prepared to read or follow along (even young children can sit on a parent’s knee and be helped to “read” the Bible). Doing this also helps everyone become familiar with the Bible, chapter and verse. We bought 10 small and very inexpensive Bibles and 10 hymnbooks

for devotion time. They are stored close to the table so no-one has to dash off and find a Bible (or remember where they left it) and everyone has the same version so we are all on the same page, as it were.

Eat the Bread and drink the Water

God’s son, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life” and “I am the living water.” He is also described in John 1:1 as The Word. The reading of God’s Word is spiritual nourishment for the whole family.

Bible reading should form the foundation of your devotion time. If you are using a devotional book, be sure to read the Bible verses related to it. Reading through the Bible, using some sort of plan,² means the family gets to hear the whole counsel of God, without falling into the traps of avoiding what may seem awkward³ or boring,⁴ picking favourite passages or the danger of taking



verses out of context. Rather, we can come to understand God's Word in all its fullness. We have used Murray Robert McCheyne's Bible Reading Plan over the years.⁵ Sometimes there is a break from the normal reading pattern which makes Proverbs, with its 31 chapters, ideal to read by the day of the month e.g. Read the seventh chapter on the seventh day of the month. This book is full of wisdom, which we are always in need of, as naturally foolish human beings.

You may like to have different people take turns at reading. This is particularly great for young learning-to-readers, who with some help (we all struggle with those Hebrew and Greek names too!) will gain a real sense of belonging and maturity as they participate actively. Use a good version. Even a young child can understand most modern versions.

Many families use devotional books to ground their devotion time. These can range from the very helpful to the theologically suspect. Ask others in your church or Bible study group what they use. Ask to see the book. Is it age-appropriate? Is it doctrinally sound? Don't dumb down your children but always read to the eldest's age group and, if there is a big age range, briefly retell or explain for younger ones.

Chew on the meat

To really get the most out of reading the Bible we need get to the meat of the passage either with the help of a devotional book or by asking and/or receiving questions. Ask questions that are relevant to the passage, and are appropriate to the age of those around the table and encourage them to ask questions in return. If the adults in the family don't know the answer, write the question down and either research it or ask your elder or pastor. You don't have to know all the answers. Our family is very blessed to have a pastor at the end of the table, and sometimes even he says, "I'll have to do some research on that and get back to you." All too often people have been lost to Christ because we do not engage with them when they query the Bible, but offer them pat answers that do not help, or fob them off altogether. Search the Scriptures together as a family, ask others, and read relevant books on the subject.

When we close the table after Sunday lunch, our practice is to discuss that morning's sermon. The younger children might remember the Scripture readings, or a hymn that they sang. Older ones

may know the sermon points and the illustrations (if any) that were used. Young adults (and older ones) are encouraged to ask questions they have and to discuss various aspects of the sermon.

Pass the salt please

We are called to be salt in the world and one of the ways we can be equipped to do this, is through family devotions. We can be encouraged and strengthened to live in a world that does not know Jesus Christ and mostly doesn't want to either. Apply to life the Bible reading or devotion, and talk about circumstances we have experienced the Holy Spirit's help. When we see faith evident in other's lives, when we hear how God is working in and through us, and through reading God's Word we, too, can all learn to be salt in a wicked world.

Singing

I am going to put in a plug here for making singing a regular part of your family devotions. When we first started attending reformed churches we knew hardly any of the psalms and hymns that were sung during services. Thankfully, we had hymnbooks so we started practising songs that we had heard on Sundays or at Bible study nights. Sometimes it all turned 'pear-shaped' and we would have to try another time or wait until people were visiting who knew the song we were trying to learn. My husband wasn't much of a singer when we began this practice but he has become a good singer over the years we have been doing this regularly. Singing regularly makes a difference! At first our attempts were pretty feeble but we have all learnt and grown to thoroughly enjoy singing after dinner. An offshoot to singing at family devotion time, is that guests often enjoy singing. We have been known to get totally carried away and sing many songs, sometimes accompanied by several instruments. A joyful sound was heard by all! Singing aloud, if you are on your own or no-one is very musical, may seem a bit odd but you could put on a CD, or listen to a playlist from your phone (apparently this is a thing with people younger than me!) and sing along with it. Sing a new song to the Lord.

Prayer

Jesus gave his disciples an example of how to pray so that they (and we) would know how to talk to God. Praying aloud becomes a natural thing to do when we

do it regularly. Dad or Mum may pray or you may go around the table and have each person pray. This is good practice for praying aloud in Bible study or youth groups etc. Some households have a list they pray through. It might be a photo album of family members and missionaries, the church phone directory or some churches provide a prayer list of members of the congregation along with missionaries and other churches in the denomination to pray. You might like to ask those around the table if they can think of anyone we can pray for.

So as you close the table with family devotions, having "set the table", eat the bread of life, drink the living water, chew on the meat, pass the salt on, sing and pray and taste and see that the Lord is good.

- 1 *Table Talk*: Ligonier Publications
- 2 Several different Bible Reading plans are listed here: www.ligonier.org/blog/bible-reading-plans/
- 3 *Song of Solomon*
- 4 The genealogies in *Numbers*
- 5 <http://www.mcheyne.info/calendar.pdf> (The Introduction is particularly helpful and eloquent.)

Jenny is the wife of David Waldron, Pastor of the Christchurch Reformed Church. They live in Christchurch with 3 of their 7 children.

Email: reformedpastorswife@gmail.com

Blog: <http://womenmentoring.wordpress.com>

LADIES PRESBYTERIAL

Saturday, 21 March 2015

9.30 - 3.30 pm

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata

Christine Whetton and Doris Cooper from CBI Ministries (<http://cbi.fm/>), together with John Goris, will be speaking on the topic:

*"Bound - Now Free"
New Life in Christ*

We also have a fun afternoon planned where you can sit back, relax over coffee and cake while watching a second-hand fashion show and then purchase those clothes with all proceeds going towards CBI. If you're not interested in fashion - don't worry - we have other things planned!

Mark your calendars now for a day of fun and fellowship with other ladies of the Wellington Presbytery.

We hope to see you there!

An eternal friendship cemented

Jack Sawyer

With relief I was able to find my way to the village of Pauahatanui, to a spot I had discovered as a homesick, young minister three decades before. There lies a small memorial erected to “record the grateful thanks of the people of New Zealand to the United States Marine Corps ...” and particularly to the 10th Marines who camped here in 1942-1943, training for the horrific, Pacific battle of Tarawa. With a majestic vista of trees, harbour, and mountains, the monument is simple and tasteful. An inscription reads “Half the World Distant From Home ... they camped at this spot while helping defend this country ... later they fought in the Pacific Islands and many made the supreme sacrifice ... and cemented an eternal friendship.”

Meditating, I tried to envision the fears and sacrificial courage of teenage Marines far from home. It dawned on me that my service while far less daunting, was from an eternal perspective, equally important. Strengthened through prayer, I was able to finish my pastoral tour of duty. Thirty years later, in reflection at this very spot, it struck me that in the providence of God and from half the world distant, the OPC has since 1960 routinely sent her sons to New Zealand. There with Kiwi colleagues who have issued call after call to come over and help, they have as comrades earnestly contended for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. With respect, one borrows the words of the Pauahatanui monument, “an eternal friendship has been cemented,” the fruit of which has been applied ecumenicity, a partnership in Gospel faith and service.

Friendship was renewed as Mark Bube and myself were cordially welcomed to the 28th Synod of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand at Christchurch’s Bishopdale Congregation, September 13-19th. Highlights included: final approval of a sterling Psalter Hymnal; intense matters of discipline, dealt with in a scriptural and good church orderly way; structure of the Overseas Missions



The monument at Pauahatanui.

Board, maximizing the effectiveness of the missionary in Papua, New Guinea; interchurch relations were stressed, OPC delegates used meal times for bi-lateral meetings with foreign delegations; the inspirational missionary presentation by Mark was deeply appreciated.

The RCNZ continue to express need for ministers willing to go “Half the World Distant From Home,” Gospel soldiers who camping there for a season will further cement the eternal friendship which Jesus has established between our churches.

Focus on home

Harriet Haverland

Gleanings

THE GLEANINGS

TEAM:

Odette De Kock –
Auckland Presbytery

Yvonne Walraven –
Wellington Presbytery

Frances Watson –
South Island Presbytery

Collated and edited by
Harriet Haverland

MINISTERS AND CHURCH WORKERS

Vicar Ben McDonald is continuing with his Vicariate in the Reformed Church of Masterton and will sit his Presbytery exam before the Wellington Presbytery in the first half of this year.

Mr André Posthuma will DV serve a ministry internship at Bishopdale this year.

Rev John Rogers traveled to South Africa early January to represent our churches at the Synod of the Reformed Churches of South Africa.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH & EVANGELISM

Avondale: The Reformed Church of Avondale took the message of the birth of our Saviour to some local homes for seniors with Christmas Carolling.

Bucklands Beach: The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bucklands Beach hosted an 'open air carol service' for the local community, commencing with coffee and dessert.

Hamilton: The Reformed Church of Hamilton held a Carol Service just before Christmas, preceded by a letterbox drop in the area around the church and put up posters in the local shops.

Pukekohe: The Reformed Church of Pukekohe led a Christmas service at the Pukekohe Hospital.

MISSIONS

Overseas Mission Board: At the last Synod, the OMB submitted a proposal that the RCNZ support sending a mission worker to PNG to assist with the management of the Reformed Churches Bible College compound. Synod approved this plan and the OMB is now asking the churches to prayerfully consider raising the initial set-up cost that the RCNZ has committed to, which is 1/3 of the total set-up cost (the other 2 mission boards in Canada and Australia are also supporting the new worker at a similar amount). The aim (Lord willing) is to be ready to place a man on the field in June 2015. Therefore, the OMB would like to aim to raise the NZD \$133,000 by May 2015. Please pray for this proposal and the work in PNG, that the Lord would provide both the resources and the man for the task.

CAMPS & CONFERENCES

Shepherding the Heart Tour: In March 2015 Ted and Margy Tripp will DV tour NZ and speak in Auckland (March 20th to 23rd), Palmerston North, Hastings and Christchurch. In an age of countless parenting philosophies and theories, you can't afford to miss hearing solid biblical teaching on this vitally important area. Ted is the author of *Shepherding a Child's Heart* and together they have written *Instructing a Child's Heart*. Ted's

books and videos are used throughout the world. For more information Telephone: 06 876 6079 or 027 479 0002 or visit <http://shepherdingthehearttour.co.nz/>

Auckland Ladies' Presbyterial Day will be held in Pukekohe on Saturday the March 28th.

The main speaker will be Mrs Sarah Bosgra and the day will follow a missions theme.

Hamilton Easter Convention: The 21st Hamilton Easter Convention will be held on 3rd and 4th of April 2015, DV. Our speaker this year is Rev. Andrew Stewart, the minister at the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Geelong (VIC). More details will be made available in due course.

TOURNAMENTS

Auckland Presbytery Youth Group Ultimate Frisbee Tournament: The North Shore youth group hosted the second annual Frisbee tournament for the Auckland Presbytery youth in February at the Massey University Albany's Recreation Centre (North Shore, Auckland).

ACTIVITIES

A Holiday Tip From Your Pastor (Erik Stolte) – Dunedin

If you are anything like me, going on holiday often means holidaying from all that is routine in life. The break in

MISSIONS

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routine often extends to our communion with God. In the late nights and sleep-ins we leave aside our private and family reading of the Word. Often prayer gets pushed to the background in the rush to get to where we are supposed to be. Then there is the often neglected service of worship. As we plan our holidays we conveniently forget to plan a local church we can attend on the Lord's Day. Our holidays are too short to spend the Sunday with God and his people.

Well, maybe I'm overstating what actually happens. But either way, let's get out of the 'spiritual holiday' mode. Let's make these holidays a time where we are not only physically refreshed, but where we recharge our batteries of service for our King.

So if you are going on holiday, spending the time at home, or just have the stats off, open your Bibles, spend time in prayer, take a good spiritually up-building book, and plan to attend worship. Then along with the blessed of Psalm 1 you will be refreshed at the stream of God's wisdom and grace, ready to bear fruit.

Must read article for all parents

If you gave one of your children an electronic device (with internet access on it) for Christmas, here is a must read article for you. If your children already have electronic devices of this nature, this is also a must read article. The internet is the major gateway for access to pornography. In order to be aware of the dangers, and to help protect your children from them, this article contains much that is useful. The article is titled 'Please don't give them porn for Christmas'. See the following link: <http://www.challies.com/articles/please-dont-give-them-porn-for-christmas>.

Persecution update

Ukraine – Recently we heard that the Russians and separatists are contacting Protestant churches in Donetsk and telling them not to meet. They are only allowing Russian Orthodox churches to have services. When speaking to one of our beloved students who is in the eastern part of Ukraine, he told us that he cannot remember the last time he smiled. He said everything is dark. He knows he will be contacted sooner than later as well as all our other pastors who are still in that region. Will he be able to preach this Sunday? Please pray that God will hold up our Christian brothers and sisters in these difficult times and give them much wisdom and His comfort and peace. From RITE – a Reformed seminary training organisation in Canada.

☆ ☆ ☆

With the year 2014 having come to a close, persecution is more fierce than ever. As we are busy in our little corner, let us not forget those who are not as privileged as we are, as you can read from the following example. Please keep "Joel" and all the others in your prayers, especially this time of the year. Little 3-year-old "Joel" was on his way home from Sunday school when Islamic terrorists ripped his children's Bible from his hands and tossed it onto a burning pile. Joel ran after his Bible and tried to scoot it out of the flames with a stick. When one of the insurgents saw him, he shoved Joel's head into the fire and held it down with his boot. "You stubborn infidel," the man hissed.

You are invited to the 21st Hamilton Easter Convention

Friday 3rd and Saturday 4th April 2015

Our guest speaker this year is

Rev. Andrew Stewart

Minister at the Reformed Presbyterian
Church of Geelong, Victoria

Andrew will be speaking on the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) with the theme: *The Parable of the Two Lost Sons*. The focus will be on the loving Father and his desire for the restoration of both sons.

Inquiries

Pieter van der Wel

Ph. 07-849 6401

E-mail easterconvention@gmail.com

Andrew Stewart is a native of Northern Ireland who has ministered for sixteen years in the Geelong Congregation of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia. He is married to Katie and they have two children Adam (15) and Mei (12). He has written commentaries on First and Second Chronicles and Deuteronomy in the Welwyn Commentary series and has from time to time taught courses at the Reformed Theological College in Geelong. For relaxation he has returned to some of his childhood hobbies – collecting stamps and breeding poultry (Buff Sussex and Old English Game).



Big box office hit get its theology dead wrong by Jon Dykstra

God's Not Dead made more than \$60 million in its theatrical release this summer, and when you consider that it cost only \$2 million to make, it has to be one of the most profitable Christian films ever made. But it is only now that it is out on DVD that most Canadians will be able to take a look. So should

you run, not walk, to your nearest Christian bookstore to get a copy of this one?

The short and very definitive answer is, nope. The story is compelling, particularly for anyone who has had an anti-God professor (and there are more than a few of us). Philosophy professor Jeffrey Radisson begins his first class by demanding all his students write "God is dead" on a piece of paper, and sign it. Our hero, courageous student Josh Wheaton won't sign, and instead ends of asking

his professor if the class can put "God on trial" with the professor as the prosecutor, Josh as defense, and the class weighing in as judge. Though the film's writers clearly didn't recognize the arrogance underlying Wheaton's proposal, the idea of humans putting God on trial is incomparably arrogant nonetheless. Things don't improve much when we get to hear the defense that Josh mounts. He does successfully poke some holes

in the atheistic evolutionary account of our origins, but the alternative he offers is some ill-defined form of God-driven evolution. And here is where things get downright tricky: viewers who aren't paying close attention could easily miss that the explanation Josh offers actually conflicts with the plain reading of Genesis 1. In fact when the creationist organization Answers in Genesis pointed out that Josh was offering an explanation that involved millions of years, and also, necessarily involved evolution, some of their own supporters didn't believe them.

But despite the impression Josh leaves viewers, he is not offering anything close to a creationist defense of the Bible or God.

God's not Dead is a "message film" that gets its underlying theology dead wrong. So even though it is quite entertaining in parts, this is not a film worth watching.

Or, rather, it is not worth watching as entertainment, but could be put to good use for educational reasons. We watched it with a group of college students and tried to figure out what sort of presentation Josh *should* have made, and what sort of answer we should have for those who question the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15). A useful resource to that end is Answer in Genesis's review at tinyurl.com/AnswersToGods-NotDead. The Problem of Evil is also raised, and while Josh effectively shows that atheists have no basis on which to complain about evil (from where does an atheist derive the ultimate standard needed to discern good from evil?) the answer he gives is an explicitly Arminian one. RC Spoul Sr. offers a much better one at www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/answering-evil/.

So *God's Not Dead* gets 2.5 out of 4 stars for the acting and overall presentation, but 0 stars for this message film's theological content.



"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."
Prov 1:7

Teacher Vacancy

Silverstream Christian School is seeking the services of a Reformed Primary/Intermediate School Teacher for the 2015 school year. Silverstream Christian School is a school set up to provide Christian education to our covenant children. Our aim is to develop a biblically consistent world and life view in our students based on the Reformed Faith. Applicants must be committed to the Reformed Faith and Reformed Christian Education. This is an opportunity to be a part of a vibrant covenant community.

If you have any questions or wish to apply please email:

board@silverstreamchristian.school.nz
or phone Koen van der Werff on (04) 5297 558

Mum and Dad still on top

By Michael Wagner



Society wants us to affirm every other familial arrangement, but we do so at a very high cost to the next generation

A married mum and dad, with their biological or adopted children, still form the best and healthiest kind of family. It's old-fashioned, yes, but the traditional family give children the best opportunity to flourish – that's the inescapable conclusion of social science research over the last few decades.

Marriage matters

In 2011 the third edition of *Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences* was released by the Institute for American Values, a US-based think tank. This report was produced by a team of family scholars chaired by W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia. It summarizes the results of key social science research that compares the traditional family with other lifestyles to see how family structure impacts social wellbeing.

They found that, by every measure, the traditional family far surpasses the other alternatives.

But while traditional marriage remains the best, it is doesn't remain the most popular. Whereas the vast majority of people in previous generations wanted to get married and have children, nowadays a large proportion of the population deliberately avoids marriage. Cohabitation (that is, a man and woman living together outside of marriage), or just a series of romantic relationships, is preferable to many people today.

That's a problem, and for more than just these couples – this shift away from marriage is the root of many social problems that have worsened in recent years. Cohabitation, single-parent families, and divorce are three major alternatives to traditional life-long marriage. All three of those alternatives reduce the social

wellbeing of the people involved. It's especially notable that children are negatively affected when their parents are not in a marriage.

Cohabitation

People who cohabit do so for a variety of reasons. Some see it as a prelude to marriage; some see it as just a convenient dating relationship; some see it as an alternative to marriage, and there may be other perspectives as well. Even the couple may disagree about their reason for cohabiting – a woman might see it as a prelude to marriage, but her boyfriend considers it only a temporary relationship until his next love interest comes along.

The bottom line is that cohabiting relationships break up at a much higher rate than marriages. That is, cohabitation is inherently unstable. When children are involved, this becomes an especially serious problem. Children are harmed by the instability of their parents' relationship, and that harm increases when their parents' relationship comes to an end.

Wilcox and his team make this plain, writing, "children living in cohabiting unions do not fare as well as children living in intact, married families." And it's not just the children who are negatively impacted by this form of relationship; cohabiting couples,

...report relationships of lower quality than do married couples

“Children of divorced families are also more likely to live in poverty, and boys in particular are more likely to become involved in crime.”

– with cohabiters reporting more conflict, more violence, and lower levels of satisfaction and commitment.

As a result, cohabiters have higher levels of depression than married people.

Divorce

Divorce laws were liberalized in many Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s to create an escape from unhappy marriages. This was supposed to benefit the children of the unhappy marriages as well as the parents who wanted out. But the supporters of divorce liberalization have been proven wrong. In most cases, divorce is harmful to the husband and wife as well as the children.

Children are harmed by the divorce of their parents in many ways. As Wilcox and his group report:

Parental divorce or nonmarriage has a significant, long-term negative impact on children's educational attainment. Children of divorced or unwed parents have lower grades and other measures of academic achievement, are more likely to be held back, and are more likely to drop out of high school.

Divorce also increases the incidence of physical health problems in children as well as the incidence of psychological problems, mental illness, suicide attempts, and accidents that result in injuries.

In the last few decades suicide rates for teens have increased notably. Some scholars believe that the biggest single factor contributing to this increase has been the large number of divorces since the 1970s. Children of divorced families are also more likely to live in poverty, and boys in particular are more likely to become involved in crime.

The divorcing adults are also affected negatively. They have lower life expectancy than married couples, and higher rates of illness and injury.

Family structure is an important factor in domestic violence. Women living in intact, traditional marriages are the least likely to experience violence from their partners. Children living with single mothers, a step-family, or in a household with their mother's boyfriend, are much more likely to become victims of child abuse than children in traditional families.

Believing in marriage = happy marriages

Interestingly, people with conservative views about marriage are more likely to

“The children's well-being is sacrificed for the benefit of the parents.”

have happy marriages because they see it as permanent, and therefore give themselves unreservedly to the relationship. People with more liberal views, who see lifelong marriage as less important than their conservative counterparts, aren't as likely to have happy marriages.

This is how Wilcox and his team state the situation:

Individuals who value the institution of marriage for its own sake – that is, who oppose easy divorce, who believe that children ought to be born into marriage, and who think marriage is better than cohabitation – are more likely to invest themselves in their marriages and to experience high-quality marital relationships. Ironically, individuals who embrace a conditional ethic to marriage – that is, one that suggests marriages ought to continue only so long as both spouses are happy – are less happy in their marriages.

Sacrificing the children

Many people today see marriage and the traditional family as overly restrictive. They want to live their own lives, make their own choices, and not be bound by the institutions of previous generations. If they want to cohabit or have a series of lovers, that's no one else's business.

However, a problem arises if children result from any of these relationships. The children of such carefree people don't have the stability or other benefits of traditional family life. These children are likely to suffer some of the negative consequences of growing up in a single-parent home or otherwise unstable home.

It is important to note that this inferior family situation is not a choice the children have made; it was the choice made for them by the adults who want to live life on their own terms. In making their choices to avoid traditional family

life these adults have removed choices from their own children. The children's wellbeing is sacrificed for the benefit of the parents.

The choice by adults to avoid marriage or break up a marriage can easily damage the chances of their children having good relationships in the future. As Wilcox notes,

Children whose parents divorce or fail to marry are more likely to become young unwed parents, to enter their marriages with lower commitment, to experience divorce themselves someday, to marry as teenagers, and to have unhappy marriages and/or relationships.

The children suffer negative consequences because their parents don't want to get married or be bound by their marriage vows.

Conclusion

The key point of *Why Marriage Matters* is that the traditional family – mum, dad and their biological or adopted children – produces much higher social wellbeing than any of the alternatives. The traditional family is not a solution for all the world's problems; the members of such a family are still sinners and so a perfect family life is unattainable.

Nevertheless, the traditional family is a better arrangement for family life than

any alternative known to mankind. This should not be surprising because God instituted the traditional family and His precepts always enhance human wellbeing.

Thus when adults make private choices to avoid marriage and the traditional family, there are negative public consequences. The "retreat from marriage" (as Wilcox calls it) is clearly leading to decreased social wellbeing for the individuals involved as well as society as a whole.

Reproduced with permission from Reformed Perspective, July/August 2014.

Our life at Seminary

Wow has time flown! We are already in our second year of seminary. It is going so quickly.

We would like to thank everyone for your prayers and generosity. Without either one we would not have been able to come here to seminary.

Hannah and I wanted to bring you up to date a little on what we have been doing:

Home

We live in amongst a community of flats; we have a communal washing machine for each block and we get to share the tennis courts (there are over 100 flats in Barberry Apartments). The area is very walk-about friendly and people smile at you as you saunter on past. The neighborhood is very flat though and it is nice to see a hill when we get out of Chicago every so often. One of the major highlights here is that there are large numbers of cute squirrels bounding around. There was also a little rabbit that once lived in our front lawn but it disappeared one day around Easter last year. Our apartment is just over some train tracks from seminary so I walk to school each day (about 5 minutes). The temperatures tend to be a bit more extreme than back at home (37 deg in Summer but can get down to -40 in winter). Thankfully the houses are warmer inside! The owner

in the apartment below us normally has her heat on so we get free under-floor heating.

Church

We attend Redeemer Church which is United Reformed and have been enjoying learning under Rev. Roets (who is originally from South Africa). Albert and Hanneke Couperus also attend our church as Albert completes his studies here. People have been very welcoming and loving and both Hannah and I have fit in well to our new church family (There is even another kiwi couple at church besides us!).

It has been a remarkable blessing to be able to get to know our sister churches here in America. It took a while to get past the billions of acronyms that they have here because there are just so many different Reformed and Presbyterian denominations (OPC, URC, CRC, PCA, RCA and many more). I have been able to develop many ties in these denominations and it has once again affirmed what a joy it is to be part of an international body of Christ.

Seminary

Mid-America Reformed Seminary is located just south of Chicago in Dyer, Indiana. It is a small seminary compared to some others, boasting about

25-30 full-time students. Almost all of these students are studying for the pastoral ministry so it creates a valuable environment to sharpen iron with iron. There are also students from all over the world who have backgrounds in very different church environments before they came to the Reformed faith. We have people studying here who have come from Holland, England, China, Korea, not to mention a couple of other recent students from Chile and the Middle East.

The lecturers are all serving as associate pastors in various Reformed congregations in the area and have had significant pastoral experience. This also means that the academic nature of our studies is constantly tempered by realistic and practical advice. All of our lecturers are extremely good and it is a privilege to learn under them. Some of you may remember Dr. Venema, the president of the seminary, as he came out to NZ a couple of years back for a conference in our churches.

At the moment we are studying Ecclesiology (doctrine of the church), Missiology (Evangelism and Missions), Ethics, Applied Apologetics and Old Testament Theology. It is hard to pick a highlight as all the courses are very stimulating and the reading requirements are very valuable.

Internships

Over last summer (your winter) we had the privilege of going on an internship. This is essentially a 10 week opportunity to serve in a church under an experienced pastor. Hannah and I were invited to go and serve in a United Reformed Church in British Columbia, Canada. We were able to drive there across most of America and back (we never thought we would get to see so much of America let alone Canada!!).

We stayed at a chicken farm during this time (stock chickens) and were given our own little house next door to one of the church families. We saw bears, coyotes, bald eagles and more squirrels. It was once again such a blessing to get to know more Christian brothers and sisters and we were able to develop some life-long friendships.

Over the summer I was able to exhort 13 times at the church I was interning at, plus one other. Pastor Steve Swets and

the congregations were very encouraging and gave valuable feedback. I also had the opportunity to be involved in visitation both alongside Pastor Swets and on my own (or with Hannah). I met up regularly with the Pastor and we discussed both my exhorting and other matters. I attended all the meetings and also had a review from the whole consistory (elders) toward the end of my time there. I was also able to be involved in the Vacation Bible School (I ended up being a spy!).



Exhorting

I felt as if the study in the first year was very good preparation for both pulpit and pastoral ministry. Having come back from internship now I am required to exhort at least 8 times this year. I have been exhorting in the local congregations on various occasions and certain people are asked to fill out a reflection sheet where they provide feedback on how I run a service. This has been very edifying and revealing, and I have enjoyed being in the pulpit. By the time I finish my training here at Mid-America I would have led a minimum of 40 services (including the two internships). I am getting more and more comfortable and am able to practice what I have been learning.

Both Hannah and I are overjoyed to be here and thankful for this opportunity to learn more about our God and savior. We highly recommend it to anyone else who has been thinking about the pastoral ministry!

Till next time,

Joshua and Hannah Flinn

