

The Glory of Christ to His Churches (Revelation 2-3)

Tuesday of this past week on the SermonAudio News in Focus page I read an article by Eric Metaxas, historian author of a biography of WW2 pastor martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He said the U.S. has chilling parallels with the social and political climate of 1930s Germany where Bonhoeffer pastored.¹ Metaxas was discussing last month when a Houston mayor subpoenaed the sermons of pastors for religious speech opposing radical LGBT legislation. On the national level, the same day an article² on USA Today's Washington Bureau chief said the U.S. government is 'more dangerous' to the press than any in U.S. history, adding to voices from CBS news, NY Times editor, etc.

The day before the article by Metaxas, another News in Focus headline was 'The criminalization of Christianity is here' (written from one of the pastors in Texas under legal scrutiny, he remembers how persecution started in the country he grew up in, communist Vietnam). He fled to our country to have freedom of speech and religion.³ Closer to home, last weekend's headlines include how churches have been told they must pay for elective abortions⁴ and that's just a sample of stories just the last week. Comfortable lukewarm churches in America need to wake up, and that's also a key point of Rev 2-3

The letters Jesus gave to churches in Rev 2-3 tell of opposition to Christians that was on the rise, and the cries of the more severely persecuted in Rev 6. Since last weekend, international headlines have included a Christian school in the UK threatened to close if they won't 'actively promote' other faiths.⁵ The same day in Nigeria, headlines included 25 school girls kidnapped by Boko Haram (in addition to the 200 grade school girls already hostage). As we gathered to worship last Sunday, another headline from last weekend in Nigeria said as 2 churches in that country were worshipping as we are now, armed Muslims stormed the church, killing 31, including 2 pastors and the pastor's only son. The head of the Christian Reformed Church there said it's 'the third time that the Muslims have attacked Christians on a Sunday' and said 'the killings have caused excruciating pain for the Reformed Church in Nigeria...' "Muslims seem determined to wipe out Christians in this country" he said ... Last year 1,783 Nigerian Christians were killed for their faith, according to Jubilee Campaign...[nearly that many in just 1st half of 2014]⁶

In the middle east we've heard much about ISIS in Syria and Iraq executing Christians but don't forget persecuted Christians farther east. Last Tuesday the headline read: 'China continues to demolish crosses, harass churches.'⁷

How do we think about these types of news items in biblical focus? There's a NT book written for times like these. I've heard Pastor MacArthur say as communist Russia opened up to westerners, their pastors asked him to teach on Revelation, and especially the end of the book. It's a book for persecuted churches and suffering saints. It sustained martyrs who died for their faith in the 1st century and start of the 2nd century. It's also for churches in the 21st century and rebukes modern loveless lukewarm affluent 'tolerant' churches.

As we come to Revelation 2, in God's providence, today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and that really ties in with what some of the churches in Revelation 2-3 were going through or about to go through when this book was written. This is a revelation of Jesus Christ for believers in tribulation, preparing them for greater persecution to come by giving them a vision of the glory of the supreme and sovereign Lord of all.

Rev 1:1 *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place ...* In v. 9 John says he's their partner in tribulation in exile on Patmos when he hears a voice saying, v. 11 *"Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches..."* and John sees in v. 12-16 and writes of the glory of the risen reigning Christ who is walking among the lampstands (which are churches, as v. 20 says), meaning He is with His churches in their tribulation and in future greater persecution.

[He also rebukes their sin and will reward faithfulness]

Why these 7 churches? There were other churches in Asia Minor but Jesus singles out these 7 for these messages at the beginning of His last revelation

- I don't think it's because these churches are just symbols of 7 stages or ages of church history like historicists and dispensationalists used to claim (ex: Sardis was the reformation church, we're Philadelphia, Laodicea?) Most today see they're real letters to 1st century churches that are around when John wrote, they're not predictions of churches that didn't exist till later. Based on Rev 1:19 future prophecy of later events comes later: *'... write the things you have seen, those that are [chapters 1-3] and those that are to take place after [later chapters]'*)
- These are letters to literal churches that are in these cities and in real situations described here, and like all the NT, they're not just for the original churches, they have application for today. But why these 7? A famous archaeologist William Ramsay may have the best answer from archaeology and geography: these 7 were on a trade and postal route in the same order the cities are listed in Rev 2-3, and each city was a central hub of communication to pass on to other churches.⁸

- Rev 1:3 promises a blessing to the one who reads aloud this book, so this was a book intended to be read in church and heard and heeded, and read in other churches beyond the original 7. You can see that in Rev 2:7 “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*” (plural, not just this one church). That’s repeated for all 7
- Jesus choosing 7 as a number may also signify or symbolize totality or completeness, as 7 often does in this book, so 7 churches are the complete representative of all churches thru history till Jesus returns (1:20 mentions 7 stars and 7 lampstands that symbolize the churches and their representatives. Rev 3:1 mentions 7 spirits of God, maybe a reference to God's seven-fold Spirit, God's perfect complete Spirit)
- It may also be that Jesus singles out these 7 churches because they're not only congregations who John knew (that was true), they're also churches in cities where emperor worship was strong as archaeology has shown. So Christians who refused to worship the emperor were beginning to experience persecution and it would get worse. Rev 2-3 is writing to these churches in the heart of the emperor cult, 6 of the 7 had temples dedicated to the emperor, 5 of the 7 had priests who sacrificed on altars to worship the emperor, and all had connections to the emperor cult, so Jesus writes to strengthen these to endure.

The *Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands* explains under Emperor Domitian (81-96), 'persecution of Christians broke out in the Empire about 90 AD ... Domitian generally enforced emperor worship. Upon refusal to participate, Christians were charged with treason. Some were martyred, some dispossessed of property, and others banished. It was during this persecution that the Apostle John was exiled to the Isle of Patmos [Rev 1:9]'

But history records persecution was about to grow worse under Trajan in 98 AD and later, which fits John's references to endurance and future suffering:

2:1 “*To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*”² “*I know your works, your toil and your **patient endurance**...*

...⁸ “*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.*”⁹ *I know your **tribulation** and your poverty (but you are rich) **and the slander** of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*¹⁰ ***Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.***

¹¹ *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.* ¹² *And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.* ¹³ *I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells ... [and in Rev 3:10 to the church in Philadelphia it says] Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.*

If you're taking notes, let's see first Christ's Glory to churches in persecution

We can't unpack every verse in chapters 2-3, like all the arguments for who these 7 angels are (the word can mean messenger, human or heavenly, or it may refer to the spirit of each church in the sense of the prevailing attitude). Some think the 7 were those who were to deliver the letters or to read them, or church leadership representatives or pastors (all I know is I'm no angel). I don't know if even angels know what all the symbols in Revelation mean.

Even writers who claim to be the most literal interpreters argue v. 10 here is not a literal hour of trial limited to 60 minutes and they apply the promise to this literal church symbolically to the end times, but others aren't so sure. If you're hoping to hear all the speculations on the Nicolaitans in 2:14 or who Jezebel was in 2:20, I'm sorry to disappoint. In 2:17 when Jesus speaks of getting hidden manna, a white stone and a name written that no one knows ... I hope you don't expect me to know what the name is that no one knows.

But what I want to do today and in future weeks is not focus on the hard-to-understand details in this picture John is painting in Revelation, I want us to fix our eyes on the big picture of our big God and how He reveals the glory of His Son in the bigger sections of this book, looking at the broader strokes to see how they magnify and glorify Christ on the backdrop of dark history.

At the time John writes this Emperor Domitian had a coin in circulation that has the firstborn son of the emperor sitting on the world with both his hands open to seven stars. It glorifies and deifies this son who had died. It makes the son out to be a god, his kingdom is the earth that he sits on to show his dominion as conqueror reaching out to the 7 stars. It was minted in 82 AD before John wrote, the denarius coin mentioned in Rev 6:6, a day's wages. The words on the coin read "the divine ... son of the emperor Domitian."⁹

But what does John see? The true divine Son of the emperor of the universe, the true '*Son of God*' as Rev 2:18 calls Jesus. Rev 2:1 begins saying this Son '*holds the seven stars in His right hand*'! He's not a boy reaching for 7 stars with two hands; He's the God-man who holds all in one hand! He's the real Conqueror and Ruler of the planet. v. 8 says God's Son '*died and came to life again*.' Rev 1:5 calls Jesus '*the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth*' and in v. 6 the Father gives Him '*glory and dominion*'

Some of Domitian's coins had the initials PM for *pontifex maximus* - 'high priest' of the Roman religion. In v. 13 of chapter 1 John sees a vision of the Lord Jesus walking among gold lampstands in a long robe and golden sash. That's what Jewish high priests did in their temple, walking among golden lampstands in a long robe (Josephus says at this time the front was woven with gold). The implication: Domitian is no high priest, Jesus is the true one

Rev 2:1 begins with Ephesus and v. 2 mentions their '*patient endurance*.' In Ephesus there was a 25-foot tall statue of the Emperor Domitian¹⁰ and there was a temple to Domitian and emperor worship flourished there, but it is here where Jesus reminds them He's the One whose hand holds the 7 stars.

In v. 8 Smyrna is mentioned and their coming persecution for 'ten days' as v. 10 says. Even those who are more literal interpreters, say this may mean a limited period of time (just like "hour of trial" in 3:10 no one interprets as limited to 60 minutes). *Geneva Bible Notes* point out Trajan's persecution lasted 10 years. History records that Polycarp, who had been taught by John and was the pastor at Smyrna, was faithful to death in the later persecution.

Years later that pastor from Smyrna experienced what v. 10 promised to the church there for his refusal to call the Emperor "Lord." In v. 2 it mentions "patient endurance" and the same phrase was used in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the pastor of the city of v. 8: 'For even when they were so torn by whips that the internal structure of their flesh was visible as far as the inner veins and arteries, they **endured so patiently...**' (3.2). One writes how v. 10 was fulfilled with Polycarp: 'Accepting his death, when the police burst into his residence, he simply said, "May God's will be done" (7.1). The soldiers found him waiting and composed. Polycarp even offered to feed the tired police. After all, they had spent so much time trying to find him! [the other accounts say he prayed for them as well]. The police...tried to convince him to repent of his faith in Christ. They said, "What's wrong with saying, Caesar is Lord?"(8.2) ... After a while, Herod and Nicetes (who incidentally

was not very nice) beat him and led him to the stadium to meet death. At the stadium, Polycarp saw a crowd call out for blood and a Proconsul who relished judgment. The proconsul told Polycarp to consider his age and act responsibly. For someone at his old age, why risk death for such a foolish thing as the Christian faith? ... Polycarp braced himself and replied, "For eighty-six years, I have served him and he has done me no injustice. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me" (9.3).¹¹ He died burned at the stake fulfilling the words of Rev 2:10 '**Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**'¹¹ *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'*

That's how Jesus is glorified in/through His church in persecution (point #1)

... now a 2nd point in Rev 2-3: **His glory is also to affect churches in sin**

⁴ *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.* ⁵ *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand*

...

The glorious Christ of v. 1 who walks among the lampstands (the churches that are to be a light to the world by their love), He also remove churches or takes away their influence if lose their first love for the Lord and His people - if you have lost or left this love, repent, and re-commit to loving service. To the church in Smyrna, v. 15 warns of false teaching: '*So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*'¹⁶ *Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.'*

According to my Study Bible on v. 6, it seems the Nicolaitan heresy had to do with pagan practices by Christians and 'assaulted the church with sensual temptation. Clement [church father around this time] says 'They abandoned themselves to pleasure like goats leading a life of self-indulgence.' The Lord of glory with the sword of His mouth will war against unrepentant hedonists¹⁸ *And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze...[look at v. 20] I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols...'*

The Son of God whose feet are glowing like hot metal from a furnace, He's too holy to stand for those who will stand for anything. The tolerant church He rebukes, those who pride themselves on being tolerant of great sin, Jesus cannot tolerate them. Churches that won't disciple sin Jesus will discipline.

3:1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. " 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die ...[this is His rebuke to the dead spiritually though outwardly busy, even big churches w/ appearance of life]

His last rebuke is lukewarm Laodicea, v. 15: ... *I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!*¹⁶ *So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.* In v. 17 they're rich and prosperous and self-sufficient physically but they're spiritually destitute. It's a tragedy of the prosperity gospel and a temptation for Americans in general who are wealthy compared to the rest of the world.

Where are we? Where are you? Before we come to communion we're called to examine ourselves. Has our church lost love? Are you lukewarm? Do I live like the world as self-indulgent? Are you lifeless spiritually although you have a reputation that makes others think church busyness is godliness? Are you living in sin or tolerant of sin? Let's examine ourselves and repent. The Lord of glory whose eyes in 2:18 are like a flame of fire has a searching penetrating vision of our hearts. His glory is to affect His people in sin (#2), now 3rdly and finally: He has glorious promises for the church in the future.

True saints persevere/overcome. Sin won't conquer them, they'll conquer it. **3:5** *The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life ...* Emperor Domitian was hated by the Romans, even his own wife who had him killed, the government was so ashamed of him after he died that they erased his name, blotting it out of everywhere they could. But Jesus isn't ashamed of us and won't erase ours

To the Philadelphia church in v. 12 is this promise: *The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it...* History tells us the city was known for earthquakes collapsing buildings and if one shook while in a temple you better run out quick. But in the heavenly city God's people have a stable and permanent place and we'll never go out.

The end of Rev 2 has arguably the most astonishing jaw-dropping promise: **2:26** *The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations,²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.²⁸ And I will give him the morning star.*

In Rev 22:16 Christ Himself is '*the morning star*,' so He gives Himself as a gift. G.K. Beale connects this with the prophecy of Numbers 24:17 of a star from Jacob, the Messiah to conquer nations and crush them with his scepter of authority and Psalm 2:8-9 where it says God's Begotten Son will rule the nations '*with a rod of iron [and] shall shatter them like earthenware.*' Jesus amazingly astonishingly promises to share His authority and rule over nations

William Hendriksen in *More Than Conquerors* explains the conquering of v. 26: 'The conqueror is the man who fights against sin, the devil, and his whole dominion and in his love for Christ perseveres to the very end.'¹² It's not that we're great warriors on our own, it's that we're with a warrior-king so '*we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us so*' (Rom 8:37)

In glorious love v. 26 promises conquerors a share in authority over nations! Rev 5:10 says of the redeemed '*they shall reign on the earth*' and in Rev 20 the martyrs who overcome do as they '*reign with Christ*' (v. 4, 6). Can this be a literal earthly reign? In Mt 19:28 Jesus said to His followers: *Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging...*

If Rev 2:26 isn't clear enough, Jesus makes clear He'll give saints authority over nations at '*the end*' it says in v. 26, and Jesus explains it as '*in the new world*' or '*at the regeneration/renewal*' (Rev 20 I think). The faithful judge nations (Rev 20 is judgment) before the final consummation (Rev 21-22). 1 Corinthians 3 & 6: '*do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ... Do you not know that we are to judge angels?*' Paul explains '*all things are yours, whether ... the world or life or death or the present or the future —all are yours, and you are Christ's*' [i.e., it's all because we're in Christ]

And just when you thought it couldn't possible be any bigger, Rev 3 ends in something even bigger and better, stunning staggering glory, shocking grace **3:21** *The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne* [can that be possible and literal? This is not just in an obscure prophecy, 2 Tim 2:12 promises clearly '*if we endure, we will also reign with him*' ... also Eph 2:6]

It doesn't get any more incredible, infinite glory, and so intimate, personal. Or does it in v. 20? *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him* [1-on-1 individual intimate fellowship, 'I' and 'him' not 'them'], *and he with me.*

KJV *'I will come in to sup with him and he with me.'* The Lord wants to sup with individuals in intimate fellowship, and in a spiritual sense that's what the Lord's Supper pictures. As we partake of it, He *'eats with'* us. It was at the 'last supper' as He instituted communion and called the disciples friends, He told them: *'I have earnestly desired to eat this...with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God ... from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'* And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, *'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'* And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, *'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood...[John who wrote Revelation was reclining and leaning on Jesus when He added]... I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging...'* (Lk 22)

[we should look forward as much or more as we look back to the cross]

Communion is a preview of coming glory in the kingdom's consummation, a foretaste of glory divine. Lk 22 wasn't the 'last supper' with Jesus. Today disciples of Jesus participate in the Lord's Supper. He sups with us and we with Him in intimate fellowship. If one hears His voice, He comes in to eat with him or her at the Lord's Table. There's a special spiritual presence of fellowship in communion like v. 20 but one day in His physical presence He'll personally eat and drink with us in His coming kingdom! The Lord's Supper previews the 2nd Coming Lamb's Supper wedding feast in Rev 19! The intimacy is even greater then, bride and groom, we sit with Him, 3:21! v. 22 *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

Paul said in communion, as often as we eat of the bread and drink of the cup we proclaim the Lord's Death until He comes. We proclaim the gospel and look forward to His coming. This table is only for disciples who understand and are not partaking in an unworthy manner. If you're not sure what all this means or if it's for you, better not to partake but take this time to pray and to repent. Rev 2-3 also calls believers to repent before it gets to Rev 3:20, this eating and drinking with Christ. Being baptized or a believer isn't enough, it says in Scripture 'let a person first examine himself and then let him eat...' If you have ears to here there's something the Spirit has said to you in church:

- repent of any lovelessness, lukewarmness, laxity to sin, lethargy/deadness
- resolve to take action to strengthen relationships or deal with sin today
- rejoice if you've repented or when you do for the glorious promises here
- remember the body of Christ locally and globally, esp. persecuted church
- remember Him, not just what Christ has done for us but what He will do

¹ <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2014/10/27/bonhoeffer-author-fired-up-over-sermon-subpoena-controversy-everyone-in-america-should-be-freaking-out/>

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2014/10/27/usa-todays-susan-page-obama-administration-most-dangerous-to-media-in-history/?hpid=z2>

³ <http://www.wnd.com/2014/10/the-criminalization-of-christianity-is-here/>

⁴ http://www.sermonaudio.com/new_details.asp?ID=40962

⁵ <http://www.christian.org.uk/news/threatened-christian-school-change-british-values-rules/>

⁶ <http://www.christianheadlines.com/news/muslim-extremists-kill-31-christians-in-taraba-state-nigeria.html>

⁷ http://www.sermonaudio.com/new_details.asp?ID=40987

⁸ William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*.

⁹ <http://plymouthbrethren.wordpress.com/2008/02/01/coins-and-the-book-of-revelation-gordon-franz/>

¹⁰ <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/01/18/the-king-and-i-the-apostle-john-and-emperor-domitian-part-1.aspx#Article>

¹¹ <http://thecripplegate.com/polycarp-dying-well/>

¹² William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, p. 63.