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REVELATION

SPIRITUALLY UNDERSTOOD

PART 1

REVELATION 1:1-12

**FIRST PRINCIPLES:
FOR WHOM WRITTEN?**

BY: CHARLES D. ALEXANDER

This series on the Book of Revelation was first distributed at no cost in the 1970's by The Bible Exposition Fellowship.

The following informational note is included in these issues:

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REVELATION SPIRITUALLY UNDERSTOOD

PART ONE

FIRST PRINCIPLES: FOR WHOM WRITTEN

The Book of Revelation is prophecy -upon that, all are agreed. And prophecy shows that all is settled and sure in God's purposes. History is divine, and proceeds according to a plan designed by consummate wisdom. All therefore in human history is settled and sure; the end is in the beginning and the last event is as sure as the originating cause. The place of human initiative, the rise of human or satanic pride, power and boasting against God and His people, all find place in the over-ruling sovereignty of God. The Book of Job has assured us that behind the afflictions of God's people is the envy and hate of the Evil One. The same book also assures us that Satan can do nothing without the divine permission; his liberty to do evil is harnessed to the secret purpose of God to confound him by the faith and patience of the sorely tried Church of God. The overall purpose is the vindication of the divine righteousness, the glory of the Eternal Son of God, and the everlasting joy and felicity of the redeemed Church.

That is a great word in the Book of Revelation – “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev.12.11). That is the testimony of the true Church in all ages. Not by physical or political power, policy or art, but solely by their faith in Christ and the preaching of the Word of God, victory lies with the people of God.

This is what all history is about, and this is what the last inspired word of God to be uttered - the Book of Revelation - is about. Behind all the power of this world as it raises itself up against the Lord's people, is the power of that Old Serpent, the devil and Satan, no matter what earthly form that opposition may take. “We war not against flesh and blood but against (unseen) principalities and powers, against the (invisible) rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high (heavenly, or spiritual) places,” and “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal , but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds”.

(Ephesians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 10:4)

Without the word of prophecy all human history, especially the history of the Church, is dark and confused, and often terrifying. There is no clue to the meaning of the seemingly aimless and endless tangle of events. What is it all about? To what does it lead? What is the end and purpose of it all? No-one can answer these questions except through the sure word of prophecy, which is as a light shining in a dark place (2 Peter 1:19). And the Book of Revelation is prophecy; its chapters graphically describe in advance the progressive march of events to a grand and eternally glorious conclusion. Trouble and anguish, struggle and conflict, lead unerringly to the goal which is the unity of God with redeemed man, in an eternal marriage state of joy and felicity realised in Christ, the Incarnate Deity, the God-Man, who has redeemed His Church by His own blood, and through death has destroyed death for ever.

In prophecy God scans the future because He has fixed it. If in fact God has determined the future, it must be because of AIL settled and all-glorious purpose, so that however baffling the events which make up the chapters of history, the end is sure. If at present we see as through a glass darkly when trying to reduce to order the facts of history, this is only because we are not yet able to see all things in one perfect and complete perspective.

But prophecy gives us eyes to see the glorious works of God in operation from beginning to end. As we listen to the words of Him who IS the beginning of the works of God, and who is also the ending of those great operations, the One in whom all began and all must terminate, we begin to see unfolding to us in new and glorious colours, the redemptive plan of God in all history, and the supreme part reserved therein for Him for whom creation was made, who is Himself the glory of creation, the Secret of God the Father, the sacrificial Lamb whose blood sanctifies all, our Emmanuel, God With Us.

He stands now and ever in the midst of His people proclaiming, "I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last". (Rev. 22:13)

We could not know this except by prophecy, and it is precisely for this reason that the Book of Revelation was given to us - given direct by the Living Lord, the Head of the Church, the Risen Lord and Saviour, who received it from the Eternal Father in whose bosom He always lay and who eternally inherits from the Father as of eternal filial right as the Only Begotten, all that the Father is - His glory, power, dominion, Name and Nature.

God has never left mankind without prophetic light to guide him. When man left the presence of God because of his shameful disobedience and fall, he went forth from Eden illuminated by that prophetic word which assured him that one would arise, of the seed of the woman, who would reverse the verdict of Eden, and would remove the curse by enduring it Himself. “It shall bruise thy head, O Serpent, and thou shalt bruise his heel”. (Genesis 3:15)

When all the world relapsed into darkness and ignorance, unceasingly the prophetic word was being verified in the history of Abraham, the family of Isaac and Jacob, the mission of Moses, the establishment of the Old Testament covenant (preparatory to the New), the establishment of the kingdom in David (that most prophetic of all the prophets), in the long succession of the prophets from Samuel till John the Baptist who actually pointed to the promised Seed of the Woman, and said, “Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.”

Then was it fully revealed that the Seed was none other than God Incarnate, taking human nature in the womb of the Virgin, and in the weakness of human flesh bearing all sin and shame on the Cross. Of this great moment the Incarnate Son of God and Man was fully cognisant as He prayed in the hearing of the Eleven in the Upper Room, “Father, the hour is come” (John 17:1) That hour was the hour for which all things were made, for the mystery of the Incarnation, without which there could have been no atonement, is the reason why God created heaven and earth, angels and men.

This is the clue without which the historian wanders in vain amongst his confusion of facts and events trying to make history give some reason for itself and show what, if anything it is working out. Only the prophetic word can answer his question or solve his problem. The meaning of history lies in the manger at Bethlehem, and is consummated in the Crucifixion three and thirty years later, and in the resurrection on the third day, and the ascension to eternal glory and omnipotent reign on the 40th day thereafter.

What then? Nigh 2,000 years have passed, and darkness and suffering, pain and loss, trial, death, cruelty, vileness, sin and shame are perpetuated. The Church founded by the Crucified and Risen Lord, has not conquered the world. She struggles on against error and counterfeit. She is like the prey in the jaws of the lion. What does HER history mean? What shall be the course and the end of it? The Book of Revelation is the answer. We have here again the sure word of prophecy, whereto we do well to take heed as to a light shining in a dark place. There is no meaning to the course of the Church’s history during the last 2,000

years unless we find it in the Book of Revelation.

But do we in fact find it there? Is it not well known that many in these late times have with great boldness told us that the Book has naught to do with the history of the Church during 2,000 years past? Our evangelical shelves are indeed weighed down under the burden of countless books written with the intention of proving this Book has no relevance to the Church and her suffering. Many famous and respected names are found on their covers. Is this then the only age in which God left His people without that light which shines in a dark place? Is this Age of the Church -the most glorious of all the ages since the foundations of the world were laid - this age of the perpetuated sufferings of Christ in His Body the Church; is this the one age left without a chart, without the guiding light of prophecy, without a clear word which will show to the Church how her Lord is guiding her unerringly through the hostile ages till she reaches at last her consummation in Him? We shall see. And in the seeing may God grant unto us new vistas of the glory of Christ, fresh cause for rejoicing in Him, and a new note in our response to the gracious word of comfort coming direct from our Lord, "Behold, I come quickly"... "Amen, even so come, Lord Jesus."

LINES OF INTERPRETATION

There have been three, or rather four, main lines of interpretation applied in the course of time to the prophetic word given to John on that never-to-be-forgotten morning which broke over the troubled soul of the aged apostle long ago on the isle of Patmos.

1. The Preterist.

This theory which naturally had a peculiar appeal to the people of God in the early centuries of the Church's history, holds that the events of the Book are descriptive of the sufferings of the Church in the days of the Roman Caesars and most of the great prophecy was consummated in the downfall of the Roman Empire and the subsequent, establishment of the Christian Church, as the one enduring feature on the page of history.

2. The Historical.

Akin to the Preterist, but in the light of after events extended to embrace the whole of the Church's history, so that the numbers in Revelation may be actually related to a long succession of historic events which have affected the Church in century after century, leading up to the end of the world.

3. The Futurist.

This is the most popular theory found amongst evangelical people today, and has been dignified with such authority that in some regions a man who does not hold with it is regarded if not as a heretic, at least as a disturber of the peace. The Futurist theory is in its nature historic (like the foregoing) with the important difference that Futurism holds that the Book deals almost entirely with history which has not yet begun, which may be reckoned as being about due to begin in our time, and when it does begin it will have no relevance to the Church at all; by that time the Church will have ceased to exist on the earth, having been removed to the eternal world, this lower earth having been given over to terrible and horrifying judgments chiefly affecting the Jewish people who once again move into the centre of the prophetic picture after a lapse of 2,000 years. It is of interest to note that variations of the Futurist theory have largely been responsible for the founding of the prophetic 'cults' which have sprung up in the Western World, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventism, Christadelphianism and numerous smaller bodies. In a lesser degree, Mormonism takes its rise from a very much modified form of Futurism.

4. The Spiritual Interpretation.

This theory holds to the view that the Book is for the people of God in all ages, that the 'history' in the Book is subordinate to the overruling consideration that the Book can never be confined in any of its parts to the exclusive use of any age or people, but its message is to all who read, who hear the words of the prophecy, and who keep the sayings written in the Book for the time is always at hand. (Rev.1.3)

It may be said for the Preterists (of whom there is only a slender survival in modern times) that at least they had the advantage of believing that all the Book was for them in the earliest ages of the Church. Though they read into contemporary history more from the Book of Revelation than could be found there, at least they perceived where their consolation lay, and they are to be excused for supposing that their age was to usher in the golden age of Millennial triumph seeing that almost everyone else today is saying the same about THIS age in which we now live.

The Historicist has certainly laid the whole Church under debt for his vast and competent researches into the history of the Church, telling us much that is true. If the great historicists of the last century (indefatigable labourers like Dr. Harry Grattan Guinness), have largely failed in their attempt to interpret Revelation, it is because they have allowed the fascination of historic events to obscure the real object of the Book.

Their mistake lies in their too facile date-fixing, and the elasticity of their calculations which can be made to fit almost any significant date in history. They have compiled a most elaborate system of starting points in ancient times before Christ and also a network of similar starting points in the Christian era, and from these they have worked out a historic programme leading up to the Second Advent of Christ. They have produced this result by an artificial tabulation of time on a twofold or even threefold scale, in which 'year-days' are calculated in solar or lunar terms, with starting and finishing dates so ingeniously worked out as to bring into range a whole series of historic dates some of which cannot fail (on account of this close-meshed fishing in the pool of history) to coincide with some significant event capable of throwing an aura of credibility upon the whole exercise.

A prime example of this was the supposed forecast by Robert Fleming (a Scots divine of the 18th century) of the French Revolution of 1793. This success fired the enthusiasm of many others who tried their skill at forecasting other events likely to be fulfilled in their lifetime. No-one seemed to realise that the date of the French Revolution had about as much relevance to Bible prophecy as many another famous revolution. One might just as well have forecast the American Revolution, especially seeing the revolt of the American colonies actually precipitated the French Revolution through the prominent part played therein by General Washington's French allies. The American Revolution certainly conferred a greater benefit on humanity at large than the French affair.

There is really no limit now to the exciting speculations being made to make prophecy fit contemporary events. Convinced that antichrist is a literal person there are many who indulge in the pastime of trying to identify him with personalities now passing through history. This is a much more exciting exercise (and one more likely to attract a large crowd or a wide readership) than patiently to show from history that the gentleman has probably been with us for the last 1500 years and shown himself capable of many historic renewals.

The pastime is really fairly long dated. Count Tolstoy ("War and Peace") records how Napoleon Bonaparte qualified for the honour at the beginning of the last century, and was proved to be the very antichrist not only by his insufferable behaviour, but because elaborate mathematical researches proved his name to be of the numerical value of 666 - the Number of the Beast (Rev.13). In addition there was also the very sound of his formidable name - Napoleon. Was it not equivalent to Appolyon, King of the Bottomless Pit (Rev.9;11) requiring only the initial letter 'N' to make the identity complete? Alas he died a few years later, a ruined man, a prisoner of the British on St. Helena. Nothing daunted, the experts in this form of

prophetism soon found another candidate in Bonaparte's nephew who became emperor of the French as Napoleon III. Mr. Baxter, fine Christian journalist and keen prophetic student, around that time asserted that Napoleon III was in fact the antichrist - and proved it by similar manipulation of his name with the addition of the initial 'N', so turning Appolyon into Napoleon (as others had done with the earlier Napoleon).

In fact Napoleon III by propping up the Papal throne on French bayonets, was expected to outrival the sitting occupant of the Chair of St. Peter and supplant the historic Roman antichrist by a brand-new French one, but after the example of his more distinguished uncle he was pulled down, and ended his days in England, an exile and a disappointed man.

Undeterred, those who labour indefatigably in those speculative regions have found a constant succession of candidates. The Kaiser was groomed for the office in 1914. He having ended his days as an exile in Holland, sawing wood, the next champion was Mussolini, the Italian Dictator whose plan to restore the Roman Empire was all the proof needed to show his real identity as the antichrist. When Mussolini was riding high just prior to the outbreak of war in 1939 a well-known and truly respected American missionary who had laboured long and faithfully in Belgium, sought an interview with the Italian Dictator and informed him that he was the man of destiny who would according to prophecy revive the Roman Empire. One hesitates to think what mischief this unhappy audience with the Italian dictator might have wrought, but in the providence of God, the Sawdust Caesar (as he came to be known) soon came to an ignominious end and was supplanted even before fate overtook him, by perhaps the most sinister figure in modern times - Adolf Hitler. This appalling man carried all before him, conquered and subdued the whole of Europe, massacred the Jews, and threatened to dominate the world. Yet in a few short years he ended his days a heap of rags and bones in a Berlin bunker - a suicide.

Nothing daunted, the speculators still work with the greatest enthusiasm, and their latest candidate, incredibly, was none other than Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, whose peripatetic diplomacy for a short season was the wonder of the world. At the time of writing, Dr. Kissinger has conceded failure. No doubt there will never be a shortage of candidates to take his place, and no record of failure will ever deter those who are obsessed with the appearance of a Man of Sin to fit the specification of prophecy.

Let these considerations suffice at least to show the need for A VALID PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION BEFORE ANY SHOULD VENTURE UPON THE HAZARDOUS TASK OF SEEKING TO UNFOLD THE MYSTERIES OF THIS BOOK.

THE KEY IS THE CHURCH

The key to all the mysteries of the Book of Revelation is found as we ought to expect) in the first chapter, where the occasion of the writing of the Book, by whom dictated, and for whom intended is made crystal clear. The theory so widely held today that the Book has no relevance to the Church apart from the first three chapters, is so utterly at variance with the opening address that the wonder is that it has ever obtained credence. Against this extraordinary conclusion we plead the following:

1. The blessing pronounced upon all who read this Book, who hear its words and who keep its sayings (verse 3).
2. The events of the Book were imminent at the time of writing; “The things which must shortly come to pass” – “The time is at hand” (verses 1 and 3).

The Book as a whole, and not in part, is dedicated to ‘the even churches which are in Asia’ - which we hope to show can only mean the sevenfold or complete Church of our Lord then existing and to exist to the end of time (verse 4).

The special relationship which John the apostle bore to the universal Church as her brother and companion in tribulation (v.9).

5. The vision of Christ as the guardian, guide and avenger of the Church in all her conflicts and tribulation in the world (v.12-20).

We shall elaborate on these five proofs.

1. THE BOOK IS FOR ALL WHO READ, HEAR AND KEEP ITS WORDS

Writers who reserve the contents of this Book for a fragment of time, said to last only seven years, falling at the end of the “Church Age” when there will (they say) no longer be a Church on the earth, had better look for another Book of Revelation, for the edition we have is timeless in its application, pronouncing its blessings on all who receive it and keep its sayings.

The reading and hearing of the Book implies that the people of God must give themselves with diligence to mastering and understanding its contents. To keep its sayings indicates (as Hengstenberg points out) the practical nature of the contents as being applicable to the daily life of the Christian. No-one can 'keep' sayings which have no relevance to one's day and age, and this rules out not only the futurist theory but also the strict historical view, which makes the whole Book of no practical value except as to those parts at which the individual reader may have arrived in the course of historic time.

We like the comment of Bengel: "According to the diversity of the things which are written in it, to the keeping belong repentance, faith, patience, obedience, prayer, watching, and steadfastness."

It must be evident that whatever special relevance to some historic event any portion of the prophecy may be adjudged to belong, there must be an overall value of every word and every text, to Christians at all times, and it is the duty of reader and expositor to consider and to elucidate what this may be.

2. THE EVENTS OF THE BOOK WERE IMMINENT (THAT IS, ABOUT TO TAKE PLACE) AT THE TIME JOHN RECEIVED THE BOOK FROM THE LORD.

What John records in the first chapter is repeated in the last chapter, namely, that 'the time is at hand' and the Book consists of 'things which must shortly be done' (chapter 22.6-10).

"Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this Book for the time is at hand," declares the angel in chapter 22. In the light of this statement it must surely appear a serious error that so many modern commentators have not only sealed these prophecies against any relevance to the Church from the beginning to the present day, but continue to do so, in pursuance of their design to exclude the Church from almost every word in the Book after the third chapter.

There is a relevance therefore of all the parts of the Book to all the parts of the Church's history. There is a unity in divine history - a conspectus of its characteristics in all ages - which creates a timeless opposition and conflict in which the whole Church is wholly engaged in every age.

3. THE BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE CHURCH AND TO NO-ONE ELSE

John is instructed to write, not just the first three chapters, but “the Book”, that is, the Book as a whole, and to send it to all the Church for her use in every age (for such is the purport of the description, “The Seven Churches which are in Asia,” verses 4 and 11). It will be our business to prove that these Seven Churches which actually existed by name at the time, are symbolic of the universal church, for by no stretch of the imagination can it be considered that it was ever intended that so important a Book should be the limited property of seven ancient churches in Asia Minor which have perished from the earth in the long, long ago, leaving only ruins to mark where once a great city flourished. As well might one suppose that Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians was intended only for the church then alive in Ephesus, as to suppose that John’s message to the same church much later on was intended for the exclusive use of the community then existing in Ephesus. (See chapter 2:1-7)

But if the Seven Churches represent the universal Church in all ages, then the Book of Revelation was written just as much for the universal Church which lives on the earth today, as for that which flourished in the days of John. Moreover, if all the events of the Book of Revelation were dedicated to the Church of John’s day, then they are as applicable to the Church today as they were at any past time - or any future time for that matter.

It must be noted that the same formula of blessing found in chapter 1, is also repeated in the last chapter (22.v.10) with the added caution – “Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this Book, for the time is at hand.” It is surely not seriously suggested that this caution is exclusive of all that lies between the first chapter and the last.

4. JOHN’S SUFFERING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHURCH REQUIRES THAT THE BOOK BE INTERPRETED AS THE BOOK OF THE CHURCH’S SUFFERINGS, CONFLICTS, AND TRIUMPHS IN THIS WORLD.

This relationship of John the apostle to the Church is of transcendent significance.

The ‘action’ of the Book really commences with verse 9 where we find John in exile on the isle of Patmos (in the Aegean sea) where he suffered under the oppression of the Emperor Domitian, about AD 95 (as most of the ancient writers agree). We hope to prove this more particularly when we come to chapter 2. The persecution of the Church in the reign of Domitian was the first great universal persecution of the Lord’s people. That persecution, when the whole power of this

world was raised against the Kingdom of Christ to overthrow and destroy it, was a fitting starting point to this Book the object of which was to prepare the Church in advance for her age-long conflict against the power of this world organised by Satan.

No doubt John was preserved to that hour, long after all the other apostles of the Lamb had gone to their reward (most if not all, by violent death). In accordance with John's special position as described in his Gospel (John 21:21-23) he, the last of them all, was preserved alive till his life almost spanned the entire century, in order that when the foreseen time came, Christ might come down in vision to His afflicted servant and place in his hands that chart of the Church's warfare and final triumph (the Book of Revelation), which was to be her guide across the stormy seas of time. If this be the case, then we see also to what extent they injure the Church who rend this Book from her grasp and hand over its comforts and promises to a reconstituted Israel waiting in the wings of history for the signal to re-enter.

John, however, was not the prophet of Israel, but of Christ's persecuted Church. To the tortured and afflicted Church then oppressed by the power of Rome's beastly empire, John was both 'brother and companion in tribulation.' He was held captive on the isle of Patmos, where Rome's convicts were sent to sweat out their lives in the ore mines. At his great age, separated from his beloved Churches on the Asiatic mainland, he suffered all the pangs of a spiritual martyrdom, and knew that he suffered for the Church as much as for himself. He was the only remaining channel of prophetic communication of the Word of God left on the earth, and after him there would be no other. Spanning that gulf of 2,000 years which stretched out before the Church, he saw the promises and undertakings of Christ, His omnipotent interventions throughout history for the deliverance of His people, His overthrow of empires, His crushing of the serpent power of the devil, His glorious and total triumph over all His foes and hers, for whom He died, and for whom He ever lives to guide, guard, deliver and intercede.

So was the aged apostle "our brother and companion in tribulation," and what he saw that Lord's Day on the isle of Patmos, out-dazzled the sun in its splendour, and threw upon all history a divine light which the Church in her long and arduous pilgrimage has seen ever since. Her martyrs have loved not their lives unto the death for the sake and for the Name of that same glorious Lord whom John saw as the resurrection and the life on that eventful day at Patmos.

The very name of that isle is significant. Cruden tells us it means “Mortal” and comes from a root which means to be crushed or squeezed. Such was to be the history of the people of God, and to the Book of Revelation they would always look to find the explanation of their afflictions and what the end would be. And this is the Book dear reader, which men who have come to its study without the equipment of reverent insight into its meaning, have torn from the grasp of God’s people in our day, to deprive us of its consolation and its grace. Let the situation of John at Patmos speak eloquently of his last apostolic message to the Church, and let the glory of Christ, with which his vision opens, speak to us constantly of that dedication of our Redeemer, throughout all history, to the comfort of His Church and to her final glorification as His Bride for whom He has waited so long and endured so much.

The redemption of the Church is the great end of all history, and she will never be removed, displaced or transcended by any other order or institution so long as time runs its course.

At this point we take the liberty of incorporating an earlier introductory study of John’s writings which we made as preliminary to an exposition of the Gospel of John. Many of our present readers will not have had opportunity of reading that study, and others will no doubt profit by reading it again.

It is only in the Revelation that John breaks the incognito observed in his other writings. In the Gospel he speaks of himself as “that other disciple,” or “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” In the epistles he speaks of himself as ‘the Elder’. Only in Revelation does he depart from this practice and formally announce himself (as in the verse now before us), “I John ... your brother and companion in tribulation.” Only by the device of an incognito could John suitably refer to himself as ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’. This mysterious designation does not and cannot mean that the Saviour had a greater degree of love for John than for others, any more than his peculiar love for Lazarus and the family of Bethany denotes variation in that eternal love He bears for all His redeemed.

In the pointed reference John makes to himself in the words quoted above – “I John ...” there is a clear reference to the similar words of Daniel – “I Daniel ...” (see Dan. 7:15; 9:2; 10:2,7; 12:1) As Daniel was the apocalyptic prophet to the Old Testament church, so is John to the New Testament church, to do as Daniel did, namely to measure the distance the Church must travel until the time of her deliverance should come.

Christ's Love For John

Christ's peculiar love for John was a prophetic love which had to do with John's special relation to the Church. John was peculiarly designated "our brother and companion in tribulation" because of the special message he was raised up to give to the church in the five writings which came from his pen - the Gospel, the three epistles, and the Revelation.

His (John's) was the last voice to echo across the abyss of 2,000 years to the present day. There is a special sense in which the beloved apostle is with us still. He never dies. "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" (John 21:22) A saying arose in consequence of these mysterious words that John would not die. But John teaches us that the meaning of Christ's words is, otherwise. "Jesus said not, He shall not die, but...."

History elucidates the meaning. John is with the Church in a prophetic sense in all her tribulations. On her behalf he was a prisoner in the isle of Patmos. On her behalf he received the Revelation which is the chart of the Church's journey through time. On her behalf he weeps in chapter five of Revelation, till the answer to the Church's sufferings is made clear. On her behalf he "ate the little book" of divine testimony (sweet in the mouth but bitter in the bowels) denoting an immense period of time to elapse from his day, during which the Church would testify of Christ and suffer the bitterness of the world's opposition and hatred. (Rev.10:10-11)

His days were prolonged till the time came for his special mission to be accomplished in his five writings. This task could not be undertaken till the situation arose which required a light not previously given concerning the length of the journey to be made by the people of God through blood and travail till Christ should come.

Only under the shelter of that same incognito could John modestly refer to himself as the one who lay on Jesus' bosom at the Last Supper. It was the Church as represented in John, whose head lay (and always lies) in the comfort and love of that bosom where beats the heart of the Eternal, filled with compassion, mercy and truth. Only once, mark you - only once, did John lay his head in the bosom of Christ. This he did not habitually, but once only- at the Last Supper. And why? Because there the symbols of the Eternal Covenant of Grace lay on the table, and Christ consecrated Himself in the presence of His disciples to the sacrifice He was about to make in the terms of that Covenant for the redemption of His people, the

Church.

John does not describe the ordinance of the bread and wine in his gospel - the only gospel to omit that part of the record (Hear, O ye wise - for he had already recorded in his sixth chapter what is omitted from all the other gospels, namely the great discourse on the Bread of Life, and the words which gave so great offence to the Jewish literalists: "My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood dwelleth in me and I in him.")

We pause not to expose the contrary error of that Church which confuses substance and spirit together and turns one into the other by the magic of priestcraft. It is enough that we have spiritual understanding of the gospel mystery, and know what Christ meant when He said, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profited nothing. The words that I speak unto you they are spirit, and they are life". (John 6:63)

By omitting the record of the Last Ordinance John draws attention to the entirely spiritual nature of salvation in accordance with the discourse of Our Lord after the breaking of the loaves among the five thousand (John 6).

John laid his head in the bosom of Christ during that Supper because he was destined to be the beloved representative throughout all time, of that Church, that Bride of Christ, which lay in covenant promise in that Eternal Bosom, close to that Eternal Heart, from all eternity. He was in this, as in so many ways, our brother and companion in tribulation and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ.

JOHN AND MARY

John was the only one of the twelve (now the eleven) who was actually at the Cross, at the side of the Saviour in His last sufferings and saw and heard all, from whom the other disciples received the certain word of what took place there.

He records the third Word from the Cross - that Word which intimately concerned himself and his future identification with the Church's future well-being: "Woman, behold thy son!" "Behold thy mother". Thus was Mary committed into John's loving care, and from that hour "that disciple took her into his own home". (John 9:26-27). Who can doubt that there was far more in the Saviour's Commission to John than just provision for a poor widow's temporal welfare? There was that in it, of course, but more - far more - beside. For in this commission the Lord indicated how the Church was committed to apostolic care - and in

particular, into the prophetic care of John through the long ages of her journey through the wilderness of her trial and privation.

That spurious religion should have falsified the status of the Virgin Mother is no reason why a true devotional exegesis should fear to put the record straight. Let antichrist declare falsely that Mary is “the Mother of the Church” and we will expose the lie and show that Mary’s part in the history of Christ’s birth and growth to manhood is now ended. She ceased to have any significance as His mother. He tenderly discharges her from any further part in the story by appointing John to be her son, to whom henceforth she must look for shelter and provision. On the contrary, John is that apostle into whose prophetic charge the Church is specially committed, in her helplessness and her affliction, as Mary was now so committed into his temporal care.

It is John who tells us he saw the lance pierce the sacred side of the Redeemer, and the double flow of water and blood which leaped from the veins as the sharp blade withdrew:

“And he who saw it bore record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe”. (John 19:34-37)

It is John who discerns at once the significance of Zechariah’s words, “They shall look on him whom they pierced” (Zech 12:10), and so settles for all time the question of prophetic interpretation, by giving to us, the Church, the word of Zechariah, which the Jewish rabbis, followed slavishly by many evangelical expositors and theorists, doggedly assert is not for the Church at all. For John is the apostle of the Church, not of the Jew.

How strange, O Lord, that for so long thy Church should have been misled by prophetic theorising into believing that almost the whole of thy great Book of the Revelation should relate only to a mere seven years of history at the very end of the ages, while there should be silence in heaven, not just for the half hour mentioned in that very Book (Chap.8:1) but for two thousand years during which thy Church should be harried, slain and tormented by the active hate of this world How strange, that the Irvingite fanaticism of 150 years ago, with its fantasy of Secret Raptures and great tribulations, arising from the frenzies of its false claims to inspiration, should have conditioned thought in the evangelical body so as to destroy in large measure the meaning of the prophetic Word. How strange, blessed Saviour, that it should now flourish in a variety of deviations mutually exclusive of each

other, their only unanimity being that thy servant John did not write these things for the Church (though he says he does) but for a fragment of time irrelevant to the history of the Church?

It is time, O Lord for thee to work, for men have made void thy Law. Arise O Lord! Pluck thy hand, even thy right hand from thy bosom, and stretch it out for the deliverance of thy people; let the Word of God return to its strength and the bride of Christ once more appear, TERRIBLE AS AN ARMY WITH BANNERS. (Song of Songs, 6:10)

JOHN'S TWOFOLD TASK AT PATMOS

All the writings of John are a unity and must be considered together if we would make good work of our expository task. The starting point of all John's writings is the first general persecution of the Church which arose in the reign of the Emperor Domitian. It was about that time too that worldly wisdom (the adulterous spouse of worldly power) arose to poison the springs of pure doctrine in the Church.

The Book of the Revelation was the answer to the one:
the Gospel and the Epistles were the answer to the other.

To both errors John opposes the same remedy of truth - namely, the Supremacy, the Sovereignty, the Eternal Nature and the Uncreated Wisdom of Christ, the Word (LOGOS) of the Father, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

Let this be said, and thundered along with the lightnings of our great brother Boanerges, in such a time as this into which the church of Christ is surely entering. Only the presentation of Christ in all His glory, grace and truth, will be sufficient defence against that persecuting power which threatens to crush, and against that pernicious and blasphemous error which aims to poison from within, the people and the Church of the Lamb.

For such times as these the writings of John were never more relevant.

THE MAN WHO SAT FOR THE PICTURE OF THE BEAST

The Emperor, Domitian, who died in the year 96 A. D., assumed to himself divine honours and eventually proclaimed himself "Dominus et Deus" (Lord and God). He proceeded to punish, as those guilty of high treason, all who refused to pay him

divine honours. The refusal of Christians to accord to him this supreme blasphemy led directly to the **FIRST GENERAL PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH.**

It was in the course of this persecution that the aged John was arrested in Asia Minor (where he exercised the pastoral care over the “Seven Churches of Asia” and cast into the isle of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor. There, he saw in one glorious day those visions which comprise the Book of the Revelation - the Book of the Church’s consolation in the face of all worldly and antichristian power.

To Patmos, therefore, my brethren, if we would understand John and his writings!

Hengstenberg writes:

“The Revelation was written in the midst of persecutions, during which not only executions, but also banishments took place. This is clear from ch.13:10, ‘He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity; he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and faith of the saints.’

“Domitian, above almost every other, was a fit representative of the terrible bloody beast, full of the names of blasphemy, and of the horrible woman drunk with the blood of saints and of the witnesses of Jesus - comp. chs.13 and 17. What Pliny says of Domitian not infrequently reminds one of the Revelation, and suggests the thought, that

TO THE AUTHOR OF THE REVELATION, DOMITIAN SAT FOR THE PICTURE OF THE BEAST.

“He (Pliny) describes him as the ‘most savage monster’ that sometimes gulped the blood of relatives, sometimes employed himself in slaughtering the most distinguished citizens, before whose gates fear and terror watched. He was himself of frightful aspect, pride on his forehead, fury in his eye, constantly seeking darkness and secrecy, and never coming out of his solitude except to make solitude.... He was a man of great bodily strength, and despised the pleasures which music yields, and which tend to soften the mind; he found his enjoyment in the pains and lamentations of others.”

* * * * *

The saints were learning to cry, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10)

This cry was to be heard only too frequently throughout the history of the Church: to John it was given to bestow the supreme consolation. Truly he could say in the opening of the Revelation, “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand”. (ch.1:3)

THE KINGDOM OF PATIENCE

The understanding of verse 9 of Rev. 1 is crucial to the understanding of all the writings of John because it discloses the peculiar status of John, prophetically, in relation to the Church of all ages.

I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

John’s position in Patmos symbolised the outward state of the Church, oppressed and suffering, at the mercy (as touching the body) of the worldly, heathen power. The Kingdom of Christ is shown to be a Kingdom of Patience. The people of God endure the oppression and hatred of Satan and of the world for one reason only - because they have the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. They are not promised deliverance from conflict in their life, but they wait in patience and faith for the return of their Lord.

“We wait”, says Paul, “for the adoption to wit the redemption of our body ... in this (body) we groan, not for that we would be unclothed but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life” (Romans 8:23; 2 Cor.5:4)

They who look for deliverance from the oppression of the world in some future millennium evidently do not know their Paul, or their John.

In all his writings, therefore, John is the Church’s brother and companion in tribulation. Because of us he moves incognito through his Gospel and his epistles, refusing to identify himself (though we know well who he is) and only coming out into the open in Revelation because there his identity so merged in his sufferings and ours that it is fitting he should disclose his name, to give us a tangible and historic basis for our consolation.

For us he wept in that great fifth chapter till he saw coming forth that Blessed One bearing still the marks of our redemption in His glorious body - coming forth to

receive the Book of our consolation and victory over the world, from the hand of Omnipotence.

“Weep not, behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah the root of David hath prevailed to open the Book and to break the seven seals thereof.”

For us too, he ate the blessed Book of the Church’s testimony (Rev.10) after having foreseen the disasters which would ruin the earlier phases of the kingdom of Satan. Sweet is that book to the taste, for it is the testimony of Christ, but bitter in the bowels, because it brings the people of Christ into trouble through the hatred of the world against which they testify. The downfall of one tyranny would not mean the end of the Church's story - it never does.

“Thou must prophesy again before many peoples and nations, and tongues and kings.” (Rev.10:11)

Yet there are those who maintain with the utmost vehemence that John’s prophetic book is not for the Church at all but principally for a revived Judaism at the end of time. But John was commanded to write his book for the Sevenfold Church of Christ in all ages.

Satan must indeed have a peculiar dread of the writings of John that he should endeavour thus to take them away from the consolation of the people of God throughout the long ages of their suffering, and allege that they belong to a generation yet to come and the events of the great last book of the Bible will be over and done with in 1260 DAYS. What strange delusion is this, which has for too long clouded the vision of evangelical teachers and destroyed the Book of Revelation just as surely by making it irrelevant and meaningless, as the destructive Bible criticism does to many another part by denying its inspiration!

We understand our Book of Revelation as we understand our Gospel of John - both are for us and for our spiritual consolation and must be spiritually received.

As our brother and companion John was sitting there in his seagirt prison, meditating upon the appalling evils rushing upon the Church and threatening to carry everything away in one great hurricane of Satanic power and spite, he suddenly found himself “in the spirit” - that is, in a state of prophetic ecstasy, lifted up above and beyond (as Ezekiel of old) the events of time, to behold history from the inside, and to see, for the Church’s consolation, the Divine strategy for the overcoming of the devil and all his works.

A great voice breaks in upon his soliloquy:

“I am Alpha and Omega,
the first and the last”. (Rev.1:11)

That voice was the voice of Christ. All the time, in the invisibility of His eternal and omnipotent reign Christ was there with His servant and with His suffering Church.

The inspired John was in the Spirit that day that he might see and hear on behalf of the people of God and be for them eyes and ears and understanding, to interpret to them the glorious fact that the only ruler of the ages is Christ, the first and the last. Who then is Domitian, and what is Rome, and what shall the end be of all who oppose the Son of God?

We were there, brethren, in the person of our beloved apostle and that consoling, invigorating, reassuring Word is with us now in all our distresses and afflictions, our cares and near-despairs, holding before us that same all-glorious Lord who appeared then to John, clothed with a garment down to the foot (all His work ended, girt about with a golden girdle, His eyes as a flame of fire, His voice like the sound of many waters, His countenance as the sun shining in its strength.

2,000 YEARS OF HISTORY

The apocalyptic unveiling which follows in this glorious Book sets down the inner history (as distinct from mere outward events) of the Church’s warfare for the next 2,000 years, beginning at Patmos with Domitian’s persecution. That first great collision with the power of this world contained within itself the germ of all other conflicts through which the Church must pass.

Two thousand years of the Church’s story have since been etched in suffering and written in blood, and unless God has shed some light upon the mystery of it all, something would have been missing from the testimony of Christ’s grace. The Book of Revelation was written that the Church might have her marching orders, be raised above the temporal nature of her sufferings, and given a view of history behind history, the providential machinery of the divine sovereignty in God’s preservation of His Word and work. Evil would be tolerated, the bodies of God’s servants given over at times to the will of Satan, colossal powers would be loosed upon the flock of God, evils more subtle and more dangerous than any outward persecution would arise in the form of deceptions, frauds, imitations, false doctrines, to beguile the unwary. Through it all the Church would be preserved and

the all-wise strategy of God for the containing and final destruction of evil would be worked out and the mystery of faith brought into the fullest exercise. Christ's witnesses would love not their lives unto the death for the sake of His thrice-blessed Name. The Kingdom of God would remain. Satan's Kingdom would destroy itself in the hour of its fancied triumph.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is the prelude to the Book of Revelation. It deals with the mystery of the Church's sufferings in the Old Testament and affords help to faith as it discloses the inner meaning of tribulation.

The writings of the apostle John are peculiarly designed for the comfort of the Church in her long and bitter conflict with the powers of evil. In himself first, the Beloved Apostle experienced the world's oppressive power that in the consolation granted to him, might be shown where the Church's strength and comfort lie.

How completely God seems to surrender His people into the hands of the wicked with no human hope of deliverance! It was while bearing his heavy cross of tribulation (not for himself only but for the comfort of all who should thereafter suffer the trial of their faith) that John received the glorious visions of the Book of Revelation.

The New Testament Church was there with him - our timeless John, our brother and companion in tribulation and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ; our John who was expected not to die and yet who died, but lives on by the words and the vision which Christ gave unto him; lives to minister to his beloved Seven Churches the same comfort wherewith he was comforted by Christ.

The strength and comfort which it is the design of John's writings to confer upon the Church in the long ages of her travail, in "the Kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ", lie in the full disclosure there made of Christ in the glory and majesty of His Person, His absolute deity, His right and prerogative to confer all the blessings of heaven upon His people, His ability to preserve and deliver them in all tribulation and bring them at the last to those mansions of bliss which He has gone to prepare for them.

Hence He is revealed supremely in the writings of John as the Only Begotten Son, the Eternal Word and Wisdom by which all things were made and FOR WHOM all creatures have their being. He is shown to be the sovereign Lord of death and life, the arbiter of all time, the master of all circumstance, the fulfillment of all expectation, the hope of the human race, the fountain of all grace and truth, the

Word which was already there at the beginning, which dwelt with God before the beginning, and was in fact God.

He is the only and true light which comes into the world; He is the life without which there is no life.

If the disciple whom Jesus loved, to whom was imparted an intimacy with the Saviour beyond the common measure - if one so privileged was struck down as though dead when he saw only a symbolic vision of the Risen Lord, what must it be to be there and to behold, not just that outward symbolic majesty of the Eternal Son (which was all John saw) but that Glorious Person Himself in all the splendour of beauty and grace which belongs to Him as the chosen one of the Father and the Darling of heaven?

Let the wild beasts of hell and of history roar. Let earth's proudest and strongest rage and blaspheme. What can they do against Him who holds all Creation in the hollow of His hand, and to whom His saints are as the apple of His eye.

This is John's message; this is that John who survived the first century until the time came when under the weight and oppression of this world's power it was given to him to see on our behalf and to hear and feel and know, that by the Word of grace through him, he might be our brother and companion.