

THE CHRIST OF THE CANDLESTICKS

Revelation 1:10-20

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, September 23, 2012

“As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (Rev. 1:20).

If someone asked for the meaning of Revelation, a good place to show them is the opening vision found in chapter 1. The apostle John was exiled on the Isle of Patmos and was patiently enduring in faith. In John’s affliction, the Lord provided for his greatest need, which was to see Jesus in his divine glory and saving power. Hearing a mighty voice speaking, John turned and saw Jesus as the divine Son of Man, dressed in his robes as the exalted high priest. Just as Christ appeared to strengthen John in his affliction, the book of Revelation declares the victory of Christ to encourage Christians to endure patiently in their faith.

In addition to prompting Christian perseverance, Revelation stresses our witness to Christ and his gospel. This message, too, is seen in this opening vision. John saw Jesus in the midst of “seven golden lampstands” (Rev. 1:12). This vision conveys an important message about the relationship between Christ and his church. Jesus came to give John a message to his churches, and Revelation summons believers today to carry his message to the world. Christ is reigning in our midst, ministering to his people so that our lamp will not go out but will shine the light of Christ until he returns.

SEVEN LAMPSTANDS AND SEVEN STARS

It is obvious that the lampstands in John's vision signify the churches that belong to Jesus. We see this in that the number of the churches mentioned in verse 11 corresponds to the number of lampstands in verse 12: "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." The number seven also has the meaning of completion, so these lampstands represent not only the seven churches named to John but also the entirety of the church in all ages.

Christ's appearance with his lampstands shows that the church "is at the center of everything that God is letting happen on the world scene."¹ Whereas the world thinks its affairs in the material realm are the really important things, God asserts that the spiritual work of Christ's kingdom in and through the church is always the most significant factor. This principle was illustrated by the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. The spark was lit when the members of a Hungarian Reformed church in Timisoara, Romania refused to allow their faithful minister, Laszlo Tokes, to be arrested. John's vision presents the church as lampstands, and in line with this the Christians surrounded their church with candles in their hands. Their defiance of evil sparked a city-wide protest that spread and ultimately swept aside Communist regimes in country after country. American Rear-Admiral Marmaduke Bayne stated that US intelligence officers were surprised by these events "because of their blindness to the importance of God and religion."² Likewise, in America today, the most significant institution is not the government or the political action groups that dominate the news but the church of Jesus Christ. If the church is silent or foolishly accommodates the world, its light will burn dimly so that unbelief spreads. But if the church stands courageously as a light for God's truth, even in the face of persecution, its bright flame is the only true hope for true reform.

The lampstands that John saw remind us of the golden candelabra that Moses placed in the tabernacle to symbolize the light of the Lord. John's vision also corresponds closely to the vision of a golden

¹ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 25.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

lampstand given in Zechariah chapter 4. The prophet saw a vision of two olive trees from which pipes carried oil to a seven-bowled lamp. Zechariah was told that the olive trees represented the kingship and the priesthood, both of which pointed forward to Christ. The oil flowing from the trees signified the Holy Spirit. On that occasion, the angelic interpreter told Zechariah that the temple, which had been destroyed, would be rebuilt by the Spirit's power (Zech. 4:1-14). Zechariah's vision, given five hundred years before Christ, was now being fulfilled in the vision given to John. The true dwelling of God is not a temple building but his people as a church; just as Zechariah's vision urged the rebuilding of the temple, John's vision of Christ standing among the lampstands shows "that God will accomplish his purpose in the building of the Church."³

John saw the church represented not only by the seven lampstands but also by the seven stars held in Jesus' hand (Rev. 1:16). Verse 20 explains: "As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand..., the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches."

There has been considerable debate about the identity of these "angels", with two views being most likely. The first is that the angels are the pastors who serve and lead the seven churches. There are two reasons for this view. First, the Greek word for angel (*aggelos*) means "messenger," so John could be taken as writing, "the seven stars are the *messengers* of the seven churches," that is, the pastors who deliver God's Word (see examples of *aggelos* as human messengers in Mk. 1:2 and Mt. 11:10). Second, this view notes that the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3 are addressed to the "angels" of the respective churches. For instance, Revelation 2:1 says, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus." Since these letters contain rebukes for sin, it does not make sense that actual angels are being addressed but rather pastors, who do sin and fall short of their duty to Christ. Scholars who take this view urge that the title "angel" helpfully reminds us that faithful pastors are God's servants and messengers (see Eph. 4:11).

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that Christ was referring to human messengers here, for the simple reason that in Revelation the word "angel" always describes a supernatural messenger and heavenly servant of God. It is probably best, then, to see Jesus as referring to

³ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 46.

guardian angels assigned to the churches they represent. This fits the pattern of Daniel's visions, to which John repeatedly has referred, where an angel spoke of his combat with enemy spiritual powers and referred to the angel Michael as "your prince" (Dan. 10:21). The Bible teaches that individual believers have guardian angels. In Matthew 18:10, Jesus said of children that "their angels always see the face of my Father in heaven." This idea of heavenly counterparts for God's earthly people seems to be reflected in the seven stars in Christ's hand. Lampstands on earth and stars in heaven both shine their light, and it seems that the angels of the churches are so closely identified with the churches that the two can be spoken of as one.

LORD OF THE LAMPSTANDS

Wonderful as angels are, our focus should be on the God who sends them. In John's vision, the stars in Christ's hand revealed Jesus as the Lord of the church. Christ's present lordship is an essential point for Christians to grasp, despite his physical absence from the earth. The book of Revelation will have much to say about Christ's return, but here at the beginning it emphasizes Christ's presence with us now as a living and reigning Lord. This truth was especially important to the seven churches named in this vision. David DeSilva notes that these particular churches may have been selected because of the prominence of Caesar's imperial cult in their cities. "All but Thyatira had temples dedicated to the emperors, and all but Philadelphia and Laodicea had imperial priests and altars."⁴ Domitian may be lord of the pagan Roman cult, but Jesus Christ alone is Lord of his churches even in a hostile world.

While showing Christ as Lord, this vision makes five key points about the relationship between Christ and his church: the church is under Christ's rule, receives Christ's care, is subject to Christ's judgment, relies on Christ's power, and has unity in Christ's presence.

First, John's vision shows *Christ rule over his church*. The church is not under the authority of any emperor, king, president, or supreme court. This means that Christian churches must derive their teaching and practice only from God's Word, through which Christ reigns. This is a vital matter today, when evangelical churches are under

⁴ Cited from Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 85.

pressure to conform to secular demands regarding issues like sexuality, marriage, gender, and evolution. But if Christ is Lord, then his Word must rule in these and all other matters. In the first days of the church, Peter and John were willing to disobey civil rulers when they demanded that the apostles cease preaching the gospel (Acts 4:19-20). The rule of Christ is a vital matter for the church, and like the apostles Christians today must accept worldly scorn rather than compromise God's Word.

One Christian who understood the necessity of Christ ruling through his Word was a teenage English princess named Lady Jane Grey. The cousin of the godly King Edward VI, Lady Jane was thrust into prominence when the king died, leaving his Roman Catholic sister Mary next in line for the throne. Jane became a pawn of worldly lords whose opposition to Mary was primarily secular and who briefly made Jane Queen of England. Before long Mary's right to the throne prevailed and Lady Jane became a prisoner in the Tower of London.

Mary and Jane had not gotten along, primarily because of Jane's militant refusal to accept the papal idolatries demanded by Mary. Now, with Jane her prisoner, Queen Mary sent her priest confessor, Cardinal Feckenham, to demand Jane's capitulation under threat of death. The famous interview was recorded word-for-word. Feckenham first sought for Lady Jane to deny salvation by faith alone. Jane refused, saying, "we are unprofitable servants, and faith only in Christ's blood saves us." Next, the cardinal sought for Jane to accept the doctrine of transubstantiation, which says that in the mass Christ's literal body and blood are presented and eaten for salvation. This Mary utterly rejected. When Feckenham insisted that Mary must yield to the pope's authority, she responded: "No, I ground my faith upon God's word, and not upon the church; for if the church be a good church, the faith of the church must be tried by God's word, and not God's word by the church... And I say, that it is an evil church, and not the spouse of Christ, but the spouse of the devil, that alters the Lord's Supper... Shall I believe this church? God forbid!"

Disappointed, the priest took his leave, saying he was sorry since he was sure they would never meet again. This was an unveiled threat of her impending execution. The teenage princess replied, "True it is that we shall never meet again, except God turn your heart; for I am assured, unless you repent, and turn to God, you are in an evil case;

and I pray God, in the bowels of his mercy, to send you his Holy Spirit... to open the eyes of your heart.”⁵ With little delay, Lady Jane Grey was put to death by beheading, having willingly offered her life for the sovereign rule of Christ over his church, through his Word.

Second, John’s vision emphasizes *Christ’s care for the church*. What a comfort it must have been for John, concerned as he would have been for the beloved churches from which he was separated, to see their stars held securely and lovingly in Christ’s hand – the same hand that created the heavens and then was pierced to save his people. Just as the priests in the tabernacle tended the lights of the golden lampstand – trimming the wicks, refilling the oil, and relighting any which had gone out – so Christ the true priest “tends the [church] lampstands by commending, correcting, exhorting, and warning (see chs. 2-3) in order to secure the churches’ fitness for service as lightbearers in a dark world.”⁶ Steve Wilmschurst writes: “Think what that vision would have meant to the persecuted churches to whom John was writing. Think of the comfort of knowing that they were held in his right hand! But then think what it means to us now... he holds us in his right hand, the best and safest place we could possibly be.”⁷

Third, the vision shows *Christ’s judgment of his church*. This reality is emphasized by the sharp double-edged sword that comes out of his mouth and which thus is designed both to save and to judge. While Christians are set free from the judgment of condemnation for our sins, we are nonetheless subject to the chastising judgment of our sovereign Lord, who is determined to root out sin from his people. This judgment will be prominent in the seven letters to the churches. For instance, Christ warned Sardis about its false teachers: “Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:16). Christ’s judgment reminds us that while Jesus is a loving, compassionate Savior, he is also an unyielding Lord who demands faithfulness from his people. How many of the woes experienced by worldly churches and unmotivated Christians today may be attributed to Christ’s sovereign judgment, which calls all believers to a faith that repents and obeys God’s Word.

⁵ Paul F.M. Zahl, *Five Women of the English Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 110-113.

⁶ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 208-9.

⁷ Steve Wilmschurst, *The Final Word: The Book of Revelation Simply Explained* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 31.

Fourth, the connection between John's vision and the earlier vision in Zechariah 4 points out *Christ's power for his church*. Zechariah saw the two olive trees that symbolized Christ as king and as priest, and from the trees he saw pipes conveying oil to enable the lamps continually to burn. Likewise, Christian churches will give a mighty witness to the world only as we are energized by the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends. The spiritual power of a church relies not on finances, dynamic personalities, entertaining worship services, or clever marketing, but rather on the mighty presence of the Holy Spirit as Christ provides for his faithful church. We remember that while John was in affliction on Patmos, he was taken up "in the Spirit" (Rev. 1:10) and thus was empowered to give an undying testimony to Christ and his gospel.

I mentioned earlier the heroic fidelity of Lade Jane Grey to the rule of Jesus over his church. What happened after her death shows how faithful Christians who honor Christ's rule also experience Christ's power. When Protestant King Edward VI died, the Roman Catholic Queen Mary took the throne and immediately imposed papal teaching in the churches of England. She gained the title of Bloody Mary for her violent persecution of the faithful Protestant preachers. But these bishops and pastors had been inspired by Lady Jane Grey's martyrdom, and they too were willing to suffer death for Christ's truth. The valor of these servants of Christ kept the light of the gospel burning during Mary's bloody reign.

A famous example was the martyrdom of Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, two famous preachers who were threatened with death by burning if they would not yield to unbiblical papal doctrines. This was a vital turning point: would those who had so boldly preached God's Word in the safety of their pulpits continue to do so when tied to a stake? The aged Latimer gave the answer when he and Ridley were tied and the flames were lit, with a priest taunting them with one last chance to betray their Lord. Latimer refused and called to his friend: "Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out!"⁸

⁸ Cited from Sir Marcus Loane, *Masters of the English Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 165.

What power can enable Christians to hold fast to their faith, dying with song of joy on their lips, even while being burned alive at the stake? The answer is the power of the Holy Spirit, which in answer to prayer will enable you not only to die for Jesus but to live for his sake and give the blazing testimony our generation so desperately needs.

Finally, John's vision of the Lord and his candlesticks shows *Christ's presence as the only basis for unity in his church*. The lampstands in the vision remind us of the seven-stemmed *menorah* that blazed in Moses' tabernacle. On that lampstand, the seven lamps were joined by a golden stem of great beauty. John's lampstands are joined not by a golden stem but by the Lord who stands in their midst. Michael Wilcox writes: "Perhaps we are meant to see in them the church as she appears in the world, congregations located here and there, which can be isolated and indeed destroyed (2:5). But on the heavenly level, the church is united and indestructible, for she is centered on Christ."⁹ This reminds us that true church unity does not result from any institutional hierarchy, but only results from Christ as he rules and is present through prayer and his Word.

THE LIGHT AND THE LAMPS

Perhaps the most important thing for us to note about the church as a lampstand is that the light it shines comes not from itself but from Jesus Christ. The Greek word *luxnia* describes the church not as a light for the world but rather as a stand on which a lamp is set. William Barclay writes: "It is not the churches themselves which produce the light; the giver of light is Jesus Christ; and the churches are only the vessels within which the light shines. The light which Christians possess is always a borrowed light."¹⁰

Moreover, we should note that while the church is the stand, the lamps are the Christians themselves on which the light of Jesus shines and reflects to the world. In this way we see that a church is not intended to shine its own light, in the way that so many churches today seek to market their programs, their musical style, or their friendly community. Rather the church is where the Christian people receive Christ's light through his Word (Ps. 119:105), so that light is reflected

⁹ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 41-2.

¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 62.

from the lampstand of the church to the world. Jesus thus praised John the Baptist as “a burning and shining lamp” (Jn. 5:35). This is the calling of Christians as we are together set as lamps in the stand of the church to shine forth the light of Christ.

If our light is not our own but Christ’s, then our witness should also not be about ourselves but about Jesus. To be sure, it is important for us to lead lives that will commend the gospel, but our testimony is never based on what good people we are or what we ourselves have to offer non-Christians. We should be like John the Baptist who refused to draw attention to himself but pointed to Jesus, saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29).

It can be good for Christians to “give their testimony” in the sense of telling how we became Christians and what Christ has done for us. But the only witness that can save others is a biblical witness that declares the divine person and saving work of Christ. Our witness must therefore center not on our experience but on what Jesus has done to save everyone who believes.

An example of a lamp that shines the light of Christ was an English monk named “Little Bilney,” so-called because of his short stature. Bilney had come to believe the gospel through Martin Luther’s books and he therefore sought to advance the Protestant Reformation. He realized that he was not well-educated and or greatly gifted, but he had noticed a priest named Hugh Latimer who possessed great learning and ability – the same Hugh Latimer who would light a candle for Christ when he was later burned to death for the gospel.

Bilney began praying about how he might witness the gospel to Latimer, and came up with a strategy. Priests were required to hear confessions of sins. So one day, Bilney went to Latimer, tugged at his sleeve and asked him to hear his confession. After they entered the booth, Bilney confessed the gospel. He told Latimer how he was a sinner and knew his good works could not save him. He also confessed that Jesus had died for him and that the righteousness of Christ had been imputed to him through faith alone. Hearing this confession of the gospel, Latimer was converted and went on to lead many others to Christ through his faithful witness. It all began with

Little Bilney, who though short in stature and little known to history, was a bright and shining lamp who boldly reflected Christ's light.¹¹

This is what our world needs today – witnesses who shine with the light of truth and burn with a passion for souls and for the glory of Christ. Surely it is in large part due to the dim light and lukewarm commitment of so many worldly Christians and churches, that so few people pay attention to the gospel today. It has always been believers who shined and burned for Christ who gain the world's notice.

Have you offered yourself as a witness, to reflect the light of Christ to a dark and dying world? God sent John the Baptist to Israel, and he sent Lady Jane Grey and Hugh Latimer to England. Will you be the lamp of Christ who is needed in the place where you live and work? A faithful witness to Christ is the world's greatest need because the gospel is its only salvation. "Truly, truly, I say to you," Jesus said. "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).

¹¹ Cited from James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 316