

Christ's Message to the Seven Churches

Christ's Greeting to His Churches

Revelation 1:4-8

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Scripture

Last week I started a new series of messages that I have titled, "Christ's Message to the Seven Churches." It is based on the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

These chapters deal with Christ's message to seven churches that were located in Asia (which is in modern western Turkey). These churches existed in a time of growing cultural opposition, religious intolerance, and doctrinal error. And each church received a message from Christ to remain steadfast and faithful. And while the original messages were directed to the seven churches, Christ's priorities for his Church apply to all churches in all times.

Last week we looked at the prologue of Christ's revelation. Today I would like to examine Christ's greeting to his churches.

Let's read Christ's greeting to his churches in Revelation 1:4-8:

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

⁸"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

(Revelation 1:4-8)

Introduction

This past week my wife Eileen forwarded an email to me. She had received an email from a well-known and reputable company saying that her service with them had been cancelled. The email was addressed to her, the body of the letter was well-written, it was sent by the Senior Vice President of the company, and everything seemed to be in order. The only problem was that she had never had any business dealings with that company. The email was of course fraudulent and a scam.

One of the challenges that we have today is determining the authenticity of ancient documents. One way we are able to determine the authenticity of a document, such as the Revelation of Jesus Christ, has to do with its reception. The seven churches of Asia received it as the Revelation of Jesus Christ, as it was given to his servant John the Apostle. But another way we are able to determine the authenticity of a document has to do with its theme.

Lesson

In today's lesson, the analysis of the greeting as set forth in Revelation 1:4-8 shows us that Christ is its grand and glorious theme.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Writer of the Greeting (1:4a)
2. The Recipients of the Greeting (1:4b)
3. The Message of the Greeting (1:4c)
4. The Authors of the Greeting (1:4d-5a)
5. The Theme of the Greeting (1:5b-8)

I. The Writer of the Greeting (1:4a)

First, let's look at the writer of the greeting.

Last time I said that the Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic book, a prophetic book, and an epistolary book. That is, the Book of Revelation is also a letter.

The ancient letter-writing format consisted of first giving the writer's name, then the recipient, then a greeting, followed by the body of the letter, and a closing. The Book of Revelation follows that ancient custom, although with some slight variations.

Verse 4 begins with the word, **"John"** (1:4a). Earlier in verse 1, **John** identified himself as Christ's "servant John." He never does identify himself as "the Apostle John." Although some scholars think that someone other than the Apostle John was the writer of the Revelation, most do believe, as I do, that the writer of the Revelation was in fact the Apostle John.

However, one commentator's note on this is helpful:

If we are unable to achieve certainty in this matter, it remains that in no other book in the Bible is the identity of the author of so little importance. The book is not "the revelation of *John*," but "the revelation of *Jesus Christ*, which *God* gave him [John]" (1:1), and its content is further described as "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2). The authenticity of that claim is settled not by the name of the person who wrote it, but by the nature of his work, which in the providence of God completes the Scriptures as its crown.¹

II. The Recipients of the Greeting (1:4b)

Second, notice the recipients of the greeting.

Following the ancient letter-writing format, John then stated the recipient. The Revelation of Jesus Christ was written **"to the seven churches that are in Asia"** (1:4b). The **Asia** that is

¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, "Revelation," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1423.

mentioned here is not modern Asia, but Asia Minor.

At this point in the letter John did not name the churches, but he did name them in verse 11, where Jesus said to him, "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." All of these churches were located in modern western Turkey.

We shall say more about these churches in future lessons. Suffice it to say here that these churches were located on what was a postal route so that the person carrying the letter to the seven churches would have travelled a natural, sequential route to each of the seven churches.

Commentators wonder why Christ sent messages to seven churches. Why not eight churches? Or five churches? And why *these* particular seven churches?

Many different answers are given. It seems to me that the number seven is significant. In Scripture, and particularly in the Book of Revelation, the number seven has to do with completeness. And so in sending messages to seven churches Christ was emphasizing that while there was a particular message for each church, it was also intended as a complete message for his visible, universal Church. In other words, the messages sent to each individual church must also be taken as a message that Christ wanted every church in every place and every age to hear and obey as well.

Further, what is also interesting is that this one Book of Revelation was written to seven churches, unlike, say, Paul's letters that were written to individual churches. So, one commentator says:

The letter includes one brief section specifically aimed at each congregation, so that in effect John is allowing – even compelling – the seven churches of Asia to read each other's mail! Unlike form letters today, which look personal but are not, this

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form letter will turn out to be far more personal than its introductory greeting promises – uncomfortably so, in fact! Years ago there was a *Peanuts* cartoon in which Lucy asked Charlie Brown what he was reading. He said he was reading the Bible, the letters of Paul, and Lucy replied that she made it a habit never to read other people's mail. If these seven ancient churches were in some sense reading each other's mail in chapters 2–3, are we not reading someone else's mail throughout the entire book? Do these extraordinary prophecies really have anything to do with us?²

The recipients of the greeting were the **seven churches that are in Asia**. However, the message was not only for them; it is for every church of Jesus Christ in every place and in every age.

III. The Message of the Greeting (1:4c)

Third, let's observe the message of the greeting.

Having stated himself as the writer, and noted the recipients, John then prayed a blessing for the seven churches. He prayed, **“Grace to you and peace”** (1:4c). This was a standard greeting in New Testament letters (cf. Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; Philemon 3).

One commentator said of the message, “It is a prayer for *grace and peace*; the former is the characteristic blessing of the new era, the latter of the old covenant; the two together comprise the salvation of the kingdom of God.”³

IV. The Authors of the Greeting (1:4d-5a)

Fourth, notice the authors of the greeting.

The message of grace and peace comes from each person of

² J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, vol. 20, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Re 1:4.

³ George R. Beasley-Murray, “Revelation,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 1425.

the Trinity.

A. The Father (1:4d)

The first author is the Father.

John said that grace and peace came **“from him who is and who was and who is to come”** (1:4d). This description of God the Father is found only in the Book of Revelation. It comes from Exodus 3:14-15 where God is called “I AM WHO I AM.” This description of God views him in three time dimensions (past, present, and future), indicating that he is in fact eternal.

And so grace and peace, the source of all the blessings of salvation, comes from God the Father.

B. The Holy Spirit (1:4e)

The second author is the Holy Spirit.

John also said that grace and peace came **“from the seven spirits who are before his throne”** (1:4e). Scholars debate what this actually means. John MacArthur summarizes what many conservative commentators say, “Obviously, there is only one Holy Spirit; the number seven depicts him in his fullness (cf. 5:6; Isaiah 11:2; Zechariah 4:1–10).”⁴

Grace and peace therefore also come from the Holy Spirit.

C. The Son (1:5a)

And the third author is the Son.

John said that grace and peace came **“from Jesus Christ”** (1:5a). In theology we refer to the Son as the Second Person of the Trinity. And so the placement of the Son here seems out of order.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 24–25.

However, John was about to elaborate on Jesus Christ as the central theme of the redemptive work that brings grace and peace into the lives of God's people.

V. The Theme of the Greeting (1:5b-8)

And finally, let's look at the theme of the greeting.

Jesus Christ is the grand and glorious theme of this greeting, and indeed, of the entire Revelation, in two ways.

A. *The Person of Christ (1:5b-d; 1:8a-b)*

First, let's see how the person of Christ is the theme of the greeting.

This passage highlights six attributes about the person of Christ.

1. He Is Truthful (1:5b)

First, he is truthful.

John described Christ as **“the faithful witness”** (1:5b). Throughout his life and ministry Christ faithfully presented God's truth to people, even when they resisted. In fact, Christ persevered in presenting God's truth to people in the face of persecution.

And so, as my former New Testament professor, Grant Osborne, wrote, “Jesus is the archetype and paradigm for the believer, who also must stand against evil and idolatry even when it may mean one's life.”⁵

2. He Is Preeminent (1:5c)

⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 62.

Second, he is preeminent.

John said that Christ is **“the firstborn of the dead”** (1:5c). This does not mean that Christ was the first one to be raised back to life again. There were resurrections in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17:17-23; 2 Kings 4:32-36; 13:20-21), and Christ himself raised people back to life (Matthew 9:23-25; Luke 7:11-15; John 11:30-44). However, as John MacArthur notes, the Greek word for **firstborn** “does not mean **firstborn** in time sequence, but rather first in preeminence. Of all who have ever been or ever will be resurrected, he is the premier one.”⁶

3. He Is Sovereign (1:5d)

Third, he is sovereign.

John said that Christ is **“the ruler of kings on earth”** (1:5d). Because of the successful accomplishment of his mission to seek and to save the lost, Jesus has been granted sovereign authority over the entire world. There are no elections to see if someone might beat out and take over as the sovereign ruler of kings on earth. There is no doubt as to the sovereign authority of Christ, who is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

4. He Is Omniscient (1:8a)

Fourth, he is omniscient.

In verse 8a we read, **“ ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God.”** Although some believe that this is God the Father speaking, it is more likely that it is Christ himself who says these words. **Alpha** is the first letter of Greek alphabet, and **Omega** is the last letter of the alphabet. This expression was an indication that Christ knows everything, from the beginning to the end. And so it is an affirmation of Christ’s omniscience.

⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 25.

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Christ wanted those who were struggling to know that he was aware of the struggles or difficulties that were being endured. There is nothing that is beyond his knowledge.

5. He Is Eternal (1:8b)

Fifth, he is eternal.

Christ also said of himself in verse 8b, **“Who is and who was and who is to come.”** This is, of course, the same description as his Father. However, it was appropriate for Christ to use it because, like the Father, he is also eternal.

6. He Is Omnipotent (1:8c)

And sixth, he is omnipotent.

Christ referred to himself in verse 8c as **“the Almighty.”** Christ wanted his people to know, as John MacArthur said, that “since he is all powerful, nothing can hinder him from carrying out his sovereign will.”⁷

B. *The Work of Christ (1:5e-7)*

And second, let's see how the work of Christ is the theme of the greeting.

1. He Loves Us (1:5e)

First, he is loves us.

John said that grace and peace come from **“him who loves us”** (1:5e). It is interesting to note that John stated Christ's love in the present tense. Osborne says that Christ's love “is an all-embracing concept that probably summarizes Christ's past love

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 35.

leading to his sacrificial death (see Romans 8:37; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:2, 25; Revelation 5:6, 9, 12; 7:14; 12:11; 13:8), his present love (here), and his future love seen in his defeat of the forces of evil on our behalf.”⁸

2. He Has Freed Us from Our Sins by His Blood (1:5f)

Second, he has freed us from our sins by his blood.

John said that Christ **“has freed us from our sins by his blood”** (1:5f). Christ demonstrated his love for his people by his atoning **blood** that has **freed us from our sins**.

Do you know how significant it is that Christ **“has freed us from our sins by his blood”**? My seminary advisor and New Testament professor, D. A. Carson, wrote this about the significance of Christ’s shed blood:

Do you ever have a day that runs something like this? You get up in the morning. . . [and] you stub your toe on that nail sticking out of the wall that you knew you should have fixed about three years ago. . . . You go out to the car, put your key in the ignition, and it will not start. . . . You get to work late, and. . . your boss says, “Have you finished that report yet? You’re staying late tonight if you haven’t.” The whole day unfolds in one endless set of mini-irritants. . . . Eventually you return home, and your [spouse] has cooked this disgusting stew that your children like and that you detest. . . . The kids that night are really not behaving particularly well. . . .

Finally, it is time for bed at the end of this long day, and your prayer runs something like this: “Dear God, this has been a rotten day. I’m not very proud of myself; I’m frankly ashamed. But I really don’t have anything to say. I’m sorry I have not done better. Forgive my sin. Bless everybody in the world. Your will be done. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

But then a few days later you wake up. . . [and] the sun is

⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 63–64.

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shining, the windows are open, the fresh air is wafting through the screen, and you hear the birds singing. Then you have a wonderful quiet time with your spouse. You eat a hearty breakfast and then go out to your car, put the key in the ignition, and VROOM! – the car starts right up and takes off. You get to work early. . . . Your boss says, “Wonderful to see you today! Did I tell you that you are going to get a raise?”. . . . Then you arrive home, and there is a joyous family dinner. The kids are behaving, and you have intimate conversation with your [spouse] while the two of you clean up the kitchen.

Finally, at the end of that day you get down to pray, and your prayer goes something like this: “Eternal and matchless God. . . we bless you that in your infinite mercies and great grace you have poured favor upon us”. . . . And then you pray for missionaries and their children and first cousins twice removed. . . . and then you meditate on all the names of Christ that you can think of in Scripture. An hour goes by, and you go to bed and instantly fall asleep. Indeed, you go to sleep – justified.

On which of these two occasions have you fallen into the dreadful trap of paganism? God help us, . . . both approaches to God are abominations. . . . Do you not understand that we overcome the accuser on the ground of the blood of Christ? . . . This is the only ground of our acceptance before God. That is why we can never get very far from the cross. . . . We overcome the accuser of our brothers and sisters, we overcome our consciences, we overcome our bad tempers, we overcome our defeats, we overcome our lusts, we overcome our fears, we overcome our pettiness on the basis of the blood of the Lamb.⁹

3. He Has Made Us a Kingdom (1:6a)

Third, he has made us a kingdom.

In verse 6a John said that Christ has **“made us a kingdom.”** This refers to Christ’s kingdom into which believers enter at the time of salvation (cf. Colossians 1:13). Christ is the King in this

⁹ D. A. Carson, *Scandalous* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 101-103.

kingdom, and we who are believers submit with joy and gladness to his loving, gracious, and sovereign rule over us.

4. He Has Made Us Priests to His God and Father (1:6b)

Fourth, he has made us priests to his God and Father.

John said in verse 6b that Christ has made us **“priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”** Priests serve God, and in this context Christ is affirming that believers have a mediated access to God through him (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10).

5. He Is Coming with the Clouds (1:7)

And fifth, he is coming with the clouds.

Verse 7 has been called the motto of Revelation.¹⁰ John said, **“Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen”** (1:7). This verse is similar to Christ’s statement in Matthew 24:30, “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Both verses are an exposition of two Old Testament texts, Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10.

Verse 7 is an affirmation of the return of Jesus Christ. Christ wanted his people to know that while they may be suffering and struggling now, he will come one day and set all things straight.

John MacArthur says:

Jesus came the first time in humiliation; he will return in

¹⁰ George R. Beasley-Murray, “Revelation,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 1426.

exaltation. He came the first time to be killed; he will return to kill his enemies. He came the first time to serve; he will return to be served. He came the first time as the suffering servant; he will return as the conquering king. The challenge the book of Revelation makes to every person is to be ready for his return.¹¹

So, are you ready for his return?

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the greeting as set forth in Revelation 1:4-8, we should praise Christ for his person and work.

Christ's greeting to his churches gives us a magnificent glimpse of his person and work. There is a similarity with the story of Aragorn in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Return of the King*, the final book in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

The emotional power lies not only in the individual statements about the person and work of Christ, but in their cumulative effect. They are more than their sum. Spoken together – or sung, as in the “Oratorio” from Handel's *Messiah* – they convey a sense of majesty that cannot be captured by any individual aspect of Christ's person and work, no matter how grand.

There is a scene in Tolkien's *The Return of the King* that illustrates what I am talking about. Aragorn, the rightful king of the west, has labored long in obscurity, forgoing kingly comforts to serve his subjects and fight their battles, repeatedly risking his life for them. At last he prevails over the forces of the dark lord, and is poised to enter the city where he will rule at last.

When Aragorn enters the fortified city of Mina Tirith for the first time as king, the city's steward proclaims Aragorn's royal pedigree for all the citizens to hear: “Here is Aragorn son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dunedain of Arnor, Captain of the Host

¹¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 35.

of the West, bearer of the Star of the North, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the Elfstone, Elessar of the line of Valandil, Isildur's son, Elendil's son of Numenor. Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?"

There was another King who also labored in obscurity: unheralded, humbly serving the people over whom he had every right to reign, laying down his life for them. Today he claims the throne of our lives. Here is Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of kings on earth, the Alpha and the Omega, the one who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty, the one who loves us, the one who has freed us from our sins by his blood, the one who has made us a kingdom, the one who has made us priests to his God and Father, and the one who is coming with the clouds. Shall he enter our hearts – our church – and dwell there?¹²

Say “Yes!” to Jesus today!

“But,” someone might say, “how shall he enter my heart and dwell there?”

He will do so when you turn to him in faith and repentance.

Helen Howarth Lemmel (1864–1961) was a British-born daughter of a Methodist pastor who moved his family to the United States when Helen was a child. She became famous as a Christian singer and composer, and taught voice at the famous Moody Bible Institute of Chicago. In 1918, a friend gave her a pamphlet containing these words: “So then, turn your eyes upon him, look full into his face and you will find that the things of earth will acquire a strange new dimness.” Impressed with these words, Helen Lemmel wrote words and music for a wonderful gospel song, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus,” that catches the impact that the vision of Christ in Revelation 1 can have on our lives.¹³

¹² See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/february/1021808.html>.

¹³ Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation*, vol. 12, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 22.

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Let me encourage you today to turn your eyes upon Jesus and look full in his wonderful face. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons
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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for Christ's greeting to his churches.

Give us a fresh vision of Christ, who is the grand and glorious theme of Christ's greeting to his churches. Help us to understand the beauty and the glory and the magnificence of the person and work of Christ. And enable each one of us to turn our eyes upon Jesus and look full in his wonderful face, so that the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!