

***Speak, O Lord***  
**Revelation 1:9-20**

Revelation begins and ends like a letter. So it is *a propos* to note that the introductory section of a formal first-century letter served three functions: (1) to set the tone for the letter, (2) to motivate the readers to accept the message in the letter, and (3) to anticipate the content and themes of the letter. On all three counts, the apostle John has a steep hill to climb. The churches of Revelation are already suffering under harsh persecution. The message of the book is that the persecution will grow more severe, and yet, they must stand firm in their faith. These believers are caught in a dilemma: stand firm in faith and risk torturous death; compromise faith to survive, and risk hell. Given this content, no matter how sympathetic John may actually feel toward his readers, the content of his message will be unpalatable, and his tone will seem strident.

We face a similar issue today, though much less severe. Compared to earlier ages, and to much of the rest of the world in our own time, we face unprecedented ease and luxury. Nonetheless, we are never inclined to hear a strong word from God (though he certainly offers many in Scripture). As John helps his readers accept God's hard word in midst of their struggles, his approach may also help us accept any of God's hard words to us in the midst of our relative comforts.

**Day 1: Revelation 1:9-19 Listening to the right voices, for the right reasons**

Last week we saw that in 1:1-3, John establishes the authority of his message: his exhortation comes directly from God (1:1-3). In 1:9-19, he continues to establish the authority of his letter, though this time, less the authority of its *message*, and more the authority of its *messenger* and its *source*. This issue is no less relevant to us than to the original readers. The question is essential, though perhaps seldom pondered: Who has legitimate spiritual authority? Generally, in contemporary American culture, leadership is initially personality-driven (the 'X' factor). As success breeds more success, the sphere of influence expands, and personality-driven leadership transforms into celebrity-driven leadership.

This cultural value carries over into Christian circles. As a result, compelling personalities gain widespread attention, which becomes self-perpetuating when it reaches celebrity status. So as John establishes his own authority, and the authority of his source, we can usefully learn from him which characteristics legitimately establish authority still today, and what traits we should seek in those we follow before offering them our

attention or allegiance.

### **Day 2: Revelation 1:9a Listening to the humble**

The apostle John, who knew Jesus during the incarnate years, and who was appointed by Jesus to be apostle over the Church, begins not with assertions of authority, but with expressions of collegiality. He describes himself not as 'one of the Twelve' or as 'apostle' but as 'your brother and companion'. Not as your authority, but as your peer. Of course, John was an apostle, and he did have authority from God to direct the church, and to demand their obedience. But that is not his first instinct. Instead, he comes to them as family-member and as friend.

Let us also look for such humility in those who seek to lead us, in those whom we offer to follow. Let us also demonstrate such humility when we seek to lead. Authority has a proper place in God's Church, especially in the face of heresy or sin. Certainly, God assigns some more authority in the church than others. But relative to Christ's sovereign authority over his church, any human rank pales in significance. Besides, as with John, assertion of authority should never be a Christian leader's first instinct.

### **Day 3: Revelation 1:9b Listening to attested character**

The original readers should listen to John not simply because he treats them with respect, but also because he has demonstrated his character under adverse circumstances. However hard the word he delivers to them in their challenges, he has first lived it out himself in his own struggles. John is their companion 'in suffering, in the kingdom, and in patient endurance' that are the lot of all Christians of that day. He has suffered in the cause of Christ. Despite suffering, he has persevered in his commitment to Christ. And despite the contrary evidence provided by that suffering, he nonetheless affirms that Christ reigns: he sees himself not as helpless victim of a capricious emperor, but as under the lordship of Christ. John exemplifies the character to which he calls his readers: suffering for Christ, confidence in the reign of Christ even while suffering, and perseverance despite suffering.

Where persecution persists today, this continues to be an essential criterion for those who would exercise spiritual authority. Dynamic personality, emotive stories, and deep philosophizing count for little. What counts is that any purported leader first demonstrates his or her character through suffering, through confidence in the reign of Christ, and through perseverance. Where persecution does not exist today, we can still look for two similar qualities in leaders: first, consistency between lifestyle and

teaching; and, secondly, a commitment to Christ that has cost him/her in some concrete way.

#### **Day 4: Revelation 1:10-11 Listening to the word of Christ**

Now we get to weightier reasons why the original readers must embrace this message from John, even though it may be painful. These two verses provide two reasons: (a) because the message is from Christ; and, (b) because Christ has specifically designated the message for them.

While worshipping, John hears a voice tell him, "Write on a scroll." This message is not John's, carrying only his authority; it is Jesus' message and carries his authority. Not only is the content of the message authoritative, so is its list of recipients: the heavenly voice identifies which particular churches are to receive the letters. In short, this message comes word-for-word from Christ to these particular recipients.

The doctrine of inspiration does not require that a biblical book result from word-for-word dictation. In most cases, the doctrine of inspiration asserts that God used human channels to communicate his message, and that he worked through their phrasing, personalities, and culture. That is the norm. But it still allows for cases such as Revelation, or the Ten Commandments, when God dictates his directives to the prophets, and through them, to the people.

Secondly, while Jesus intended these messages for these specific churches individually and collectively, they are still relevant for us. God still speaks to us in them. But he speaks through intermediaries. To hear what God is saying to *us*, we listen to what he said to them, and then compare and contrast our situation with theirs, and adapt the message accordingly. It is a delicate process, with a degree of subjectivity. Still, an authoritative word from Christ addresses us in Revelation, and calls for our response.

#### **Day 5: Revelation 1:12-20 Lampstands: a privilege and an obligation**

John briefly mentions seven golden lampstands in verse 12, and then in verse 20 indicates that they are symbolic representations of the seven churches of Asia, but that is all we learn. They come in suddenly, reappear unexpectedly, and then disappear abruptly. Given the lack of explanation, something is obviously going on here that the author and his readers share, but passes right over our heads. What just happened?

The reference to lampstands originates in Zechariah 4, and the fact that John can allude to it without explanation shows that both he and his readers know the Bible (Old Testament) far better than you or I. Zechariah has a vision of a single golden lampstand, with seven lights floating atop

seven bowls of oil. The lampstand represents the temple of God. The Jews have just returned from exile, and are rebuilding the temple, so that God can dwell in their midst.

John takes this imagery from Zechariah and applies it to the seven churches to which he is writing. His point is both positive and cautionary. The positive: just as the temple was the dwelling place of God in the Old Testament, so is each church today. This highlights the significance of the local church: CBCGB is the dwelling place of God, just as the singular temple was in Old Testament times. The cautionary: this role is not guaranteed, anymore than the Old Testament temple stood in perpetuity. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, John warns, "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rev 2:5). So the allusion speaks both to our loftiness, and to our obligations: we are the dwelling place of God; yet, we must be faithful to him, or lose our position.

#### **Day 6: Revelation 1:12-20 The Son of Man and the Ancient of Days**

Cults such as Jehovah's Witness prey upon our ignorance of Scripture. In denying the divinity of Christ, JW doctrine overlooks this text, and others like it, which make a clear claim to the deity of Christ. They can get away with it because we generally do not know the Old Testament origins of New Testament imagery. In Daniel 7, we find two separate figures: 'the Son of Man' and 'the Ancient of Days'. The Ancient of Days is described thus: "His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool" (Dan 7:9). The Son of Man approached him and was granted "authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away" (Dan 7:14). So here, John describes the Son of Man in the same terms that Daniel described the Ancient of Days: Jesus is as every much divine as the Father is. John continues, quoting Jesus: "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Rev 1:17).

What does this contribute to the thematic development of Revelation 1:9-20? It offers another reason for the churches to receive the message that John delivers to them, no matter how painful. They should receive this word: (a) because the messenger John is humble not overbearing, and has demonstrated his commitment to Christ through suffering; (b) because his message is verbatim the word of Christ; (c) because their standing before God is at stake; and, (d) because it comes from the divine and glorious Christ, equal with the Father, risen from the dead, alive forever, holding the keys not only of life and death, but also of heaven and hell.