

AVOIDING SPIRITUAL PITFALLS

LESSONS FROM THE SEVEN LETTERS IN REVELATION

“All your dissatisfactions with the Church seem to me to come from an incomplete understanding of sin...What you seem to demand is that the Church put the kingdom of heaven on earth right now and here –that the Holy Spirit be translated at once into all flesh. The Holy Spirit rarely shows himself on the surface of anything. To have the Church be what you want it to be would require the continuous miraculous meddling of God in human affairs, whereas it is to retain our dignity that God has chosen to operate in another manner. We can’t reject that without rejecting life...Christianity makes a difference, but it cannot kill the age.” Flannery O’Connor

A. Introduction

Eschatology – “Eschatos” means “farthest” or “last”; thus is the Word (*Logos*) putting together the Study of the Last Things - Concerning what is ultimate or last. What is final in the program of God?

Today, speculations about the end of the world are rife.

‘Armageddon’ is usually associated with a string of eschatological events e.g. the rapture, tribulation, the antichrist, the mark of the beast, the millennium.

“Revelation” (Greek: *apokalypsis*) means the “uncovering” or revealing of something. It is used in different ways in Scripture, particularly with reference to the second coming of Jesus Christ. According to some Christian prophetic writers like Tim LaHaye, the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 has been touted as the “super sign of the time” of Christ’s soon return. Mt 24:32-34 is cited as support, where Israel is equated to the ‘fig tree.’

Many Christians have always looked forward to Christ’s return, which will spell the end of the world (Tit 2:13; Rev 21; 2 Pet 3:10-13). Even though we have clear teachings that we do not know when Christ’s second coming will be (1 Thess 5:1-2; 2 Pet 3:10; Ac 1:7), some are still trying to predict the end of history.

Some of these Christian leaders are Hal Lindsey, Jack Van Impe and even Nostradamus is considered as a “serious Bible student”.

B. Perspectives About Apocalypse

1. Increased apocalyptic speculations happen during times of uncertainty and fear

Historically, widespread fixation on apocalyptic events rises when people are experiencing inescapable crisis and intense uncertainty.

2. Desire to interpret these apocalyptic anxieties to the Bible.
Although, it is good to see the relevance of Scripture in these events, there is also a profound error in not taking the biblical texts in its hermeneutical contexts. We also want to see Christ’s return in our lifetime.
3. Tendency to depend on so-called prophetic teachers

We tend to abdicate our personal investigation of Scripture to put our implicit trust in so-called prophetic teachers. In addition, we are more concerned with the unknown and uncertainty than the clear teachings of Scriptures.

4. These are the common themes in apocalyptic writings.

a. Two Opposing Supernatural Powers

History is the stage for the unfolding of a cosmic drama involving a titanic contest between God and Satan. The Apocalyptic postulates that there are two opposing supernatural powers and two distinct ages.

b. Imminent and catastrophic end

The end of the world comes in a grand cosmic and dramatic fashion.

c. Victory is assured in God

Victory is assured because God will assert his sovereign control, even though the outcome may seem distant.

d. Angels and demons involved in cosmic battle

The players in the final cosmic battle involve not only humans but also angels and demons. There is a mediator figure that will function as God's agent in accomplishing the final redemption and judgment.

e. There is an ethical dimension

The coming of God's judgment and salvation means a dividing line will be drawn between the righteous and the wicked. In the Christian apocalypse, the difference is that Jesus Christ makes us righteous not by our own works. This new era has already begun because of the coming of Christ.

f. There is a note of urgency

C. Revelation as Pastoral Letter, Apocalypse, and Prophecy

To understand the Book of Revelations, we have to appreciate the purpose of John. He is a pastor, theologian and poet rolled into one. As such, there is no one genre of literature that adequately identifies with the book.

Baukham is correct when he writes that taken together, the book of Revelation seems to be "an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia." It is the only prophetic book in the NT.

1. Revelation as Pastoral Letter

John is commanded to write to the Seven Churches (1: 11). The letters to the 7 churches in Rev 2, 3 should thus be seen as prophetic messages to each church. The entire book itself is a letter to the 7 churches.

The book is set in the context of the first-century and warns against the view that this book can only be understood by later generations. Further, John's audience is wider than a specific

locale because it is a circular letter. The entire book may be seen as addressed to Christian churches throughout the Roman Empire towards the end of first century AD.

The messages to the 7 churches serve as an introduction to the rest of the book, providing 7 different introductions as it were to the book. In every church, there is a call to “overcome”, an overarching victory that is worked out in the specific situations represented by the different churches. This is part of the overall promise of eschatological salvation in the book. Issues specific to each local context are to be understood in the light of God’s cosmic battle against evil.

The number ‘seven’ is indicative of completeness and it represents all churches. The message is, therefore, for all churches. Significantly, the seven cities mentioned were centers of civic administration. Because of this, it was easy for copies of the letters to be dispatched to churches in other cities of the province.

John writes in the context of people who ‘dare to live by the great invisibles of grace, who accept forgiveness, who believe promises, who pray. These are the people who daily and dangerously decide to live by faith and not by works, in hope and not in despair, by love and not by hate.’ⁱ

He is writing to people ‘who live in the middle.’ God is the ‘Alpha and the Omega’, ‘the beginning and the end.’ The beginning was good (“God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good” and the conclusion was good (“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth”). Between the two, John recognizes that he is writing to those who are living in between the beginning and the end.

Eugene Petersen writes that as a pastor, John specializes in accompanying persons of faith “in the middle” to face the ugly details, the meaningless routines, the mocking wickedness and all the unlovely middle....Luther’s acid test of the Christian pastor was, “Does he know of death and the Devil? Or is it all sweetness and light?”ⁱⁱ

“He does not speculate or theorize...He is with them in their experiences of worship and apostasy, martyrdom and witness, love and vengeance, and develops the connections that maintain coherence between the beginning and the end.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The congregation, served by such a pastor, will acquire confidence that they are included in God’s way and are able to persevere meaningfully even when they cannot see the meaning.

2. Revelation as Prophetic Apocalypse

While situated in concrete historical situations, the book of Revelation is prophetic in that it communicates a transcendent perspective on this world. The book calls itself a prophecy at least 5 times (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), and possibly 6 times (19:10 // 1:2).

In his prophetic apocalypse, John speaks as “a theologian whose entire mind is saturated with the thoughts about God and of God. His whole being is staggered by a vision of God. The world-making, salvation-shaping word of God is heard and pondered and expressed. He is God-intoxicated, God-possessed, God-articulate.”

He communicates the truth of God in such a way that ‘He is not reduced, packaged, or banalized but known, contemplated and adored, with the consequence that our lives are not cramped into what we can explain but exalted by what we worship.’^{iv}

The task of John is “to demonstrate a gospel order in the chaos of evil, and arrange the elements of experience and reason that they are perceived proportionately and coherently: sin, defeat, discouragement, prayer, suffering, persecution, praise, and politics are placed in relation the realities of God and Christ, holiness and healing, heaven and hell, victory and judgment, beginning and ending. Their achievement is that the community of persons who live by faith in Christ continue to live with a reasonable hope and in intelligent love.”^v

Another important aspect of Revelation is that it is steeped in the OT and sees its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The different strands of eschatological hope in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the subsequent transformation of God’s people. Revelation reads the OT in the light of Jesus and the church.

It is estimated that 65% of verses in Revelations have Old Testament allusions, yet it is hard to find a single explicit quotation from the Old Testament. There are inter-textual references and literary allusions to Old Testament texts and events, which permeate the book of Revelation.

The book brings its readers to discern God’s Word, His purpose and plan in their contexts so that they may stand firm and keep faithful in the most challenging situations.

Their response will then be consistent with that communicated purpose John uses the prophetic genre to assure his audience and bring to them.

1. John uses the genre of Jewish apocalypses in 2 broad ways:
 - a. Use of symbols and apocalyptic motifs
John is transported through a series of visions into the throne of God to look at the world from His vantage point. It is as though John draws back the curtains into the back stage of life to see what is really going on behind the events of space and time.

It also involves seeing the final future of the world from that perspective to appreciate God’s ultimate purpose in human history. The effect of the visions is to open our world to divine transcendence. The extensive use of symbolism and common apocalyptic motifs in Revelation justifies its categorization as an apocalyptic book.

- b. Use of question: Where is God in the midst of evil?
This is the primary question that occupied OT apocalyptic literature: Where is God in the midst of the evil that seems to triumph in our world?
Apocalypse literature points out that despite the seeming triumph of evil, God is still sovereign in this world. John’s visionary work stands in continuity with the Jewish apocalyptic tradition.
2. However, John differs from Jewish apocalypses in these ways:
 - a. Addresses present context
The fact remain that it is a pastoral letter, John considers his work as God’s Word intended for the local faith-communities in the present. It is a message for the now. This has implications for the way we interpret the book. This contrasts with 1 Enoch, which states that what the prophet saw was “not for this generation, but for a remote one which is to come.”
 - b. Greater proportion of visual imagery

There is more visionary imagery than other Jewish apocalypses. Also, in Jewish apocalypses, an angel usually interprets the visionary segments. John's visions are simply narrated, leaving the reader to interpret their meaning. There is a general theme. The profusion and consistency of the symbols serve a theological purpose.

c. It is not pseudepigraphal

Unlike other Jewish apocalypses, Revelation is not pseudepigraphal, i.e., John did not write in other names, such as Ezra, Enoch, Abraham, to give the impression that their apocalypses are set in a different historical time.

John writes in his own name and explicitly emphasizes his identification with the readers of his time (1:4, 9; 22:8). Just like John the Baptist, 'He must keep on increasing but I must keep on decreasing', John effaces himself and focuses his message on Jesus Christ. It is the apocalypse of Jesus Christ, not John.

d. It is more optimistic

Revelation is more optimistic than other apocalypses that tended to have a more pessimistic view of history and the world. Apocalypticists regard the present age as thoroughly evil and it is but a passing phase to the final age. The starting point and the final triumph of Revelation is the redemptive activity of God in history.

D. Why Study the Book of Revelation?

1. Christ-Centered in Life

The book is called the "revelation of *Jesus Christ*." The central person is Christ. The proclamation is 'The Lamb will be on The Throne'. We want to study it because it gives us fuller insights into the person of our Lord. Our study must result in praise and worship of Jesus. Our adoration of Christ is in anticipation of our praise of the Lamb with all the saints in heaven.

2. God's Perspective of Life

Revelation offers us God's view of the world. It unmask the pretensions of the world and unveils for us that the true meaning of life can only be found in God.

According to Bauckham, the other function of Revelation is "to purge and to refurbish the Christian imagination." Our myopic view, notwithstanding a narrow Christian's view, needs to be widened and stretched. We are challenged to a greater and higher perspective of life that extends beyond the immediate and the material. This is accomplished through the experience of worship and witness.

Bauckham: "To resist idolatry in the world by faithful witness to the truth, the church must continuously purify its own perception of truth by the vision of the utterly Holy One, the sovereign Creator, who shares his throne with the slaughtered Lamb." [162-3]

One of the dominant prophetic concerns of the book of Revelation is to expose the truth of things – both in the church and in the world. It does so by revealing what the Truth is, and thus furnishes a basis by which we may judge all things.

3. Theological Truths about the Last Things

It offers great theological insights about the great eschatological events both in the now and the future. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have decisive significance for history and eternity.

4. Deeper consciousness of evil and spiritual warfare

It sensitizes us to the power of evil and the reality of the spiritual warfare. Like the Gospels, Revelation unveils the power of evil at work in our world behind the sinful schemes of men and women. Evil that is systemic as well as personal.

We will gain a greater appreciation of the clash between the forces of darkness and the forces of light. Yet the triumph of the Lamb of God is declared in no uncertain terms in Revelation.

5. Active engagement and witness to Final Triumph

We know the end of the story. The certainty of our triumph should evoke a response of active engagement and conscientious witness in our world.

It offers a clear picture of where human destiny ends but without giving us a prophetic time-chart. There is a clarion call for Christians to actively engage our world and to pour ourselves into proclaiming the good news of the Lamb.

6. Encouraging hope and comfort

We shall overcome. Revelation rings out clearly the message of hope. It offers encouragement and comfort for those who are victimized by the ungodly powers of the world.

This message seeks to strengthen the faith of Christ's embattled followers. It calls for faithful living, spurring believers to be steadfast and to bear witness to the truth, even to the point of death.

E. General Interpretive Principles

a. Text in Context

First, seek the meaning of the text in its original historical context and setting. The historical-grammatical approach should guide us back to the past before making the journey to the present. Seek first "What it meant?" before asking, "What it means?"

b. Text in Light of Old Testament

Be alert to the influence and impact of the Old Testament and Jewish language convention (particularly the apocalyptic literary form adopted) on John's work. He wrote out of a faith rooted in the Old Testament. Allusions to the Old Testament e.g. Daniel, Ezekiel, & Zechariah abound in Revelation (Rev 1:12-16 with Dan 7:10, 13-14.) John expressed the visions he received by borrowing phrases from OT.

c. Text as Poetry

If Revelation is not read as a poem, it is simply incomprehensible. The inability to deal with John as poet is responsible for most of the misreading, misinterpretation, and misuse of the book.

It is appropriate that Revelation is written as poem because by the time we get to the last book, all have been revealed of God before us. So, John takes the familiar words and arranged them in unexpected rhythms.^{vi}

As Eugene Petersen puts it, "He uses words to intensify our relationship with God. He is not trying to get us to think more accurately or to train us into better behavior, but to get us to believe more recklessly, behave more playfully – the faith-recklessness and hope-playfulness

of children entering into the kingdom of God. He will jar us out of our lethargy, get us to live on the alert, open our eyes to the burning bush and fiery chariots, open our ears to the hard steel promises and commands of Christ, banish boredom from the gospel, lift up our heads, enlarge our hearts.”^{vii}

Petersen concludes, “John sings his songs, represents his visions, arranges the sounds and meanings of his words rhythmically and artistically. He juxtaposes images unexpectedly, and we see and hear what was there all the time if we had only really listened, really looked.”^{viii} He wants put a dance to our faith, wake up our minds, rouse our feelings, and involve our senses. In John’s Revelation,

- i. We do not have more objective explanation but the language of imagination.”^{ix}
- ii. We do not have more information but we have more experience.
- iii. We do not have ‘an examination of what happens but an immersion in what happens’
- iv. We do not have an almanac of things that are going to occur, or a chronicle of what has occurred but a description of what happened.

d. Text in Big Picture

Don’t miss the forest for the trees. Sometimes, the details may be intriguing and sometimes confusing. But seek the bigger picture of the text.

The overall impression is clear even though the details may be intriguing and sometimes confusing. The book is more like an impressionistic painting or the equivalent of the montage of images in a music video, rather than a photographically precise picture.

Give due prominence to what the text emphasizes. Beware of imposing our own ideas of what’s important into the text. For example, the concept of Armageddon is only mentioned once (16:16), and that in an almost passing manner; it is not a major theme.

e. Text as Christ-centered/Gospel

The Book of Revelation is Gospel. We need to interpret Revelation in the context of the already completed work of Christ as well as an expanded treatment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news is that believers in Christ will triumph and will reign with the Lamb.

F. Dealing with Symbolism

1. Why the use of apocalyptic symbols?

The subject matter of Revelation makes it appropriate to use symbols.

- Avoidance of treason through indirect reference via the use of symbolic language, to the Roman empire
- Prosaic language is inadequate to express the transition from history to eternity
- More effective communication device: images stay longer in our consciousness.

2. Types of Symbols

a. Deciphered or decoded symbols

Sometimes, John states the meaning of his symbolic language e.g. the great dragon is Satan (12:9); the prostitute of Rev 17 is “the great city”, Rome. Other examples of stated meaning include:

1:20 Stars and lamp stands denoting angels and churches

11:8 Sodom and Egypt

17:5 Babylon the great mother of harlots

17:9 Seven hills on which the woman is seated. Rome is famous for its 7 hills

b. Conventional symbols

These are universal or quasi-universal interpretations. In the prophetic writings, we have symbols drawn from everyday life e.g. “dew from the Lord”, “a lion among the beasts of the forest”.

The ordinary can be used in a graphically powerful way: e.g. Ps 46:1 – the mountains fall into the heart of the sea; or Jer 4:23-24 – “I looked at the mountains and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying.”

c. Apocalyptic Old Testament symbols

Some of the symbols are rooted in the Old Testament e.g. the Son of Man in Rev 1 reminds of Daniel’s image.

Others have affinity with stock imageries in Jewish apocalyptic.

d. John’s symbols

There are some symbols that are uniquely John’s. These are sufficiently schematized that one can detect their usage and meanings.

3. Guidelines for interpreting symbolism

a. Approach symbolism with humility

Because of the highly figurative nature of the book, we should avoid taking a simply literal approach. Also, we should be warned against an overly dogmatic precision with symbolic interpretations.

b. Recognize the primacy of imagination over reason

The key to unlocking the meaning of Revelation is not logical analysis but rather the use of empathetic imagination. Do not treat it like Paul’s letter to the Romans. This is not to say there is no need for logical analytical observation of the text. We must let the symbolism of the text first wash over us; we must see what’s there first.

c. Focus on main point and translate symbols into ideas

Take in the visions as wholes and do not allegorically press each one for details. Recognize that some of the details are added to set the stage and to create a landscape.

One must not get sidetrack by zeroing in on specific symbols. For example, the reference to the sun turning black like sackcloth (Rev 9) and the stars falling like late figs are details added to create an apocalyptic realism. ‘Sackcloth’ or ‘Late figs’ do not ‘mean’ anything specific.

The approach is to translate the symbols into ideas and not try to picture them visually in our minds.

- d. Discern using Old Testament precedents as well as John's distinctive use of symbols.

Follow the general principle of hermeneutic: Interpret scripture with scripture. Seek the meaning of the unclear by comparing with what is clear elsewhere in Scripture.

Even after we discern John's indebtedness to imageries from the Old Testament, e.g. from Daniel or Ezekiel, one need to ask how John is using these in his own distinctive ways.

For example, in Rev 13, the beast coming out of the sea is a clear allusion to the last empire in Daniel's vision. But John combines elements from the other empires in Daniel in describing this beast from the sea. Furthermore, he introduces another beast, one that causes people to worship the first beast, something absent from Daniel.

If John interprets his symbols for us, then his interpretations must serve as starting point and control for our own understanding.

- e. Understand John's pastoral concerns

In Rev 13:9-10, "He who has an ear let him hear. If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints."

John is encouraging his readers to endure faithfully in the face of impending death

Symbols are deeply rooted in particular culture. Beware of transposing something into universal context.

G. Letters to Seven Churches

"The Gospel is never for individuals but always for a people. Sin fragments us, separates us, and sentences us to solitary confinement. Gospel restores us, unites us, and sets us in community. The life of faith revealed and nurtured in the biblical narratives is highly personal but never merely individual; always there is a family, a tribe, a nation –church. God's love and salvation are revealed and experienced in the congregation of the people." Eugene Peterson^x

Pitfall of Lost Love – Church In Ephesus

Pitfall of Superficial Veneer – Church In Smyrna

Pitfall of Compromising Pleasures/Worldliness – Church in Pergamum

Pitfall of Sinister/Internal Deviation – Church in Thyatira

Pitfall of False Life – Church in Sardis

Pitfall of Nothing Wrong - Church In Philadelphia

OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION

1. Gospel is always personal but never individualistic

Revelation is written for the community of believers. It is assumed that the book is to be read and heard in the church circuit. The Gospel pulls us into community. It is a believing community that is the context for the life of faith.^{xi}

2. Sin is always relational not just individualistic

Sin is never just personal but is also corporate. It is separation from God as well as separation from people. The same salvation that restores our relation with God reinstates us into the community of believers. Our every tendency to privatism and individualism distorts and falsifies the Gospel.^{xii}

3. Love, grace and hope are relational not just individualistic

Love cannot exist in isolation. If it does, love bloats into pride. Grace cannot be received privately. If we cut off from others, love will become greed. Hope cannot develop in solitude. If separated from the community, it goes to seed in the form of fantasies. No gift, no virtue can develop and remain healthy apart from the community of faith.^{xiii}

4. The Church is a community of ordinary people and sinners

The church is not a spiritual aristocracy but a community of geographically located, culturally defined assembly of ordinary believers. They are selected not for their heroism but simply by their locations: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea. They are stretched along a Roman postal circuit (in present day Turkey).

Each congregation is one part of a whole. Each church is defined by only one piece of the vision. No single congregation exhibits the wholeness of Christ. It is not possible to look at any church and find an entire presentation of Christ.

“The sacrifice of a selfish privacy which is daily demanded of us is daily repaid a hundred fold in the true growth of personality which the life of the body encourages. Those who are members of one another become as diverse as the eye and the ear.”^{xiv}

5. Jesus is in the midst of the fractured churches

a. Church cannot exist apart from Christ

It is not possible to have the church apart from Christ. The first thing John saw was seven gold lamp stands, which were the ‘seven churches’ to which he was pastor. Then, in their midst, he saw Jesus Christ, one ‘like a Son of Man.’

b. Jesus is in messy rooms not show rooms

Jesus is not in a perfect or holy church. But He lives and breathes in these fractured churches. But, humans like to have Christ, apart from the contradictions and distractions of the people who believe in him. We want a Christ, who lives in pure goodness, beauty and truth.

As Peterson writes, “We prefer to worship him under the caress of a stunning sunset, or with the inspiring tonalities of a soaring symphony or by means of a penetrating poetry.”^{xv}

John does not complain or glorify his churches. He states their conditions as they are. He reveals them not as 'Victorian parlors where everything is always picked up and ready for guests.' Instead, they are messy family rooms. Things are out of order. It is the same as churches throughout history. Churches are not show rooms but messy rooms.

c. Jesus' method of calling sinners, not the righteous, has not changed

Jesus insists on calling sinners and not the righteous to repentance. His policy has not changed. Sinful churches are always going to be an embarrassment to the fastidious and an affront to the upright.

He summons them to God and challenges them to be God's means for calling people together so that they can realize who God is, who they are and develop relationships that are consistent with their identities.

d. Churches are not the Light, Christ Is.

John sees them as lamp stands: They are places, locations, where the light of Christ is shown. They are not themselves the light. There is nothing particularly glamorous about churches, or on the other hand, there is nothing particularly shameful about them. They simply are.

The church is to the Gospel what the body is to the person. Just as the body can be abused or maimed, the body can be a means for work and love.

A corrupt church still functions as the church. Dirty lamp stands do not extinguish Christ's light. Despite itself, a petrified church still functions as a church. Polished gold does not outshine Christ's light. It is better that it simply be there, unselfconsciously and inconspicuously receiving and sharing the light of Christ.

Much anger towards the church and most disappointments in the church are because of failed expectations.

The church can only be a true church when the community is filled with the Holy Spirit. The church continues to be the church God meant it to be when we submit ourselves to the Spirit's affirmation, reformation, and motivation.

There must be no idealization of the church. Lamentation ought to be restrained. Both eulogy and anguish are alike misplaced.

e. Churches are defined theologically as well as geographically

While the churches are located geographically, they are also defined theologically. Each church has its particular culture, politics, commerce, and piety or lack thereof. It is a church defined by the living Christ as seen in the different references of Christ attached to the different churches in Rev 2 and 3.

Elements from the Christ vision in Revelation 1 define the church communities in Rev 2 and 3. The church is formed by Christ's word and sustained by his being. Every church gets its identity from Christ and what he does. Churches exist only in derivation from Christ.

Ephesus: 'Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold lamp stands'

Smyrna: "the first and the last, who was dead and lives"

Pergamum: "him who hold the sharp, two-edged sword"

Thyatira: “him who has eyes like flames of fire, and whose feet are like bronze”

Sardis: “has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars”

Philadelphia: “the holy and the true, who has the key of David and who opens and no one can shut, who shuts and none can open”

Laodicea: “The Amen, the faithful, and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation”

6. Every church needs to listen constantly

‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

This phrase is repeated in all the seven churches. Whatever differences the churches have, two things are constant: The Spirit speaks and the people listen^{xvi}.

- a. Listening is a spiritual activity. Churches are to be listening posts. Expensive acoustical equipments help in making hearing possible but do not improve our personal listening.
- b. Without listening, there is no church. The personal word is central and therefore the personal act of listening is essential. Mouths speak in order that ears may hear.
- c. Listening must evoke a spiritual response. The hearing that begins as a physical function becomes a spiritual response. When it does not, the problem is diagnosed as ‘heavy ears’.

When the Messiah comes, the ears of the deaf would hear (Isa 35:5).

- d. The way we listen is significant. If the divine word is primary, then human hearing is essential: that we hear is required. How should we hear? In the parable of the sower, Jesus describes the four kinds of soil akin to four kinds of hearing^{xvii}.
 - i. Hard Ground: Are our ears thick with calluses, impenetrable like a heavily trafficked path?
 - ii. Rocky Soil: Are we only superficially attentive like rocky ground in which everything germinates but nothing takes root?
 - iii. Mixed Soil: Are our ears like an indiscriminate weed patch in which the noisy and repetitive take up all the space without regard for truth, quality, beauty, or fruitfulness?
 - iv. Good Soil: Are our ears good soil which readily receives God’s word, well-tilled to welcome deep roots, to discriminately choose God’s word and reject the lies of the world, to accept high responsibility for protecting and practicing the gift of hearing in silence, reverence, and attentiveness so that God’s word will be heard, understood and believed?

- e. The Church must be very place where God’s Word is heard.

In the final book of Revelation, the church is the very place where God’s word is heard. If the church is to be taken seriously, it must be the place where human needs are also taken seriously and then lives lived obediently. The church is the one place in the world where persons deliberately come together and uncover their ears so that the sounds of God’s word will be heard accurately and believably^{xviii}.

Marshal McLuhan, “God has not equipped humankind with ear lids.” But we compensate that with selective hearing. We are usually deaf to our pride, blind spots, lapses, wrongful pleasures, empty dreams, onerous tasks, and over-indulgent in our fantasies.

7. Every church has an individualized message

There is an individualized message for each of the seven churches. Each message is different in content but has a common outline that serves a common purpose: Provide spiritual direction to a people who are called to live by faith in Christ 'in but not of the world'^{xix}.

No one is all-wrong and we need affirmation. Every church and every Christian has his/her strengths, that must be recognized and developed. No one is all-right and we need correction. Our weaknesses are to be exposed and corrected. All of us de-motivate sometime and somewhere. We need God's promise.

There is a pattern outline in the message:

a. An affirmation

The first element is affirmation. The words "I know" can also be translated as "I discern." The message that follows demonstrates an accurate knowledge of everything that is going on in that particular congregation. The message for each church is developed in relation to what is going on in the city and church, economically, culturally, and politically.^{xx}

The historical situation outside and the religious situation inside are comprehended in the formulation of the message. His is not eternal knowledge but a precise one of what it means to live as God's people in a particular context.

Different churches are affirmed for different things:

Ephesus: Untiring, unflagging, and vigilant work

Smyrna: Brave suffering

Pergamum: Courageous witness

Thyatira: Growing and developing discipleship

Philadelphia: Brave steadfastness

In two of the churches (Sardis and Laodicea) the word of affirmation is omitted; in one (Smyrna), the course of discipline is absent.

b. A corrective discipline

The Church being human has sins. In addition to the sins that people bring into the community of faith, there are also sins that develop out of the life of faith itself.

Hence, correction is necessary: "I have this against you."

The unfortunate truth is that the church attracts to itself persons who like to live in the atmosphere of the holy but have little interest in being holy themselves.

"Christians are faithful in showing up at churches and are fortified by listening to moral instructions from their leaders. But they have no appetite for holiness, or joy, or love or transformation."^{xxi}

"The church is sought out as sanctuary for living in pious sloth. These people ignore anything to do with Christ that cannot be capsulated as a bromide. Therefore the church needs to be continuously in reformation: "I have this against you..."

Five of the seven churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia are the exceptions) require reformation.

Ephesus: Abandoning their first love

Pergamum: Being indifferent to heretical teaching

Thyatira: Being tolerant of immorality

Sardis: Being apathetic

Laodicea: Letting luxurious riches substitute for life in the Spirit

The church is confronted with the necessity of beginning all over again.

All of these churches last no more than 50 years and yet degeneration is already in progress.

They go through religious motions but without being spiritually infused.

c. A Promise

The third element of spiritual direction is promise. No affirmation can be sustained and no discipline is complete without the motivation of promise. The promise of eternal life, not as reward but as the destiny which completes life begun in faith. It is the adequate motivation for 'him who conquers.'^{xxii}

The motivating promise, the eternal life is the same for each church but is presented under a variety of images^{xxiii}:

Ephesus: Tree of life

Smyrna: Crown of life

Pergamum: White stone

Thyatira: Morning star

Sardis: White garments

Philadelphia: A Pillar in the temple

Laodicea: Eating and ruling with Christ.

8. We need the three-fold message to grow

No Christian community can do without any part of the message: We need affirmation, we need correction and we need motivation^{xxiv}.

These three steps of spiritual direction take place in the church. It is a place we find what we are doing right: A word of affirmation. It is also a place to find what we are doing wrong: A word of correction. It is also a place to be motivated, to find out where our destiny is: A word of promise.

This three-part spiritual direction is what the Greeks called *paidea*, the complex process whereby the community passes on its passion and its excellence. “Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten (*paidea*).” Rev 3: 19^{xxv}

The training takes place in seven areas. We are trained^{xxvi}:

Ephesus: To love

Smyrna: To suffer

Pergamum: To tell the truth

Thyatira: To be holy

Sardis: To be Authentic

Philadelphia: To be in Mission

Laodicea: To worship, using things to praise God, receiving gifts to serve God.

APPLICATION & DISCUSSION

1. Jesus invites us into a community of relationships. The Gospel is personal but never individualistic. Why is it difficult to live in community?
2. Jesus lives among sinners and wants to infuse us with His Light. What are the implications for us when we recognize that Jesus lives among an imperfect people/community?
3. Jesus wants to speak to us. Will we listen? How have we been listening?
4. Jesus has a tailor-made message for each one of us. What is God saying to us in our particular situations today?
5. Beware of going through religious motions but without being spiritually infused. Why is it easy for me to go through religious activities without being transformed in my character?

5. APPENDIX: SYMBOLISM OF COLORS, ANIMALS AND NUMBERS

THE SYMBOLISM OF COLORS^{xxvii}

Color	Symbolism	Examples
White	Divine world – resurrection – victory – dignity	The Son of man and his white head and hair (1:14) The white stone of the conqueror (2:17) The white garments of the faithful (3:4, 5, 18; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 14:14; 19:14) Twenty-four elders clothed in white (4:4) White horse (6:2; 19:11) The white horses of the heavenly armies (19:14) The white cloud of the Son of man (14:14) The white throne (20:11)
Black	Disaster – distress	The black horse (6:5) The black sun (6:12)
Red	Bloody power – violence	The bright red horse (6:4) The bright red breastplate of the angels who sow death (9:17) The red dragon (12:3)
Green	Death	The green horse (6:8)
Purple	Debauchery	The great harlot (17:4) The cargoes of the merchants of Babylon (18:12) The great city (Babylon 18:16)
Scarlet	Debauchery	The same figures (17:3-4; 18:12, 16)

THE SYMBOLISM OF ANIMALS

Beast	Satanic powers
Lamb	Lamb as animal of sacrifice, often with reference to Jesus as Lamb of God (Rev 5:6)
Lion	King
Eagles and Oxen	Superior animals of their kind
Horns	Power, with reference to rulers Multiple heads equal to multiple rulers

THE SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS

One - first	Exclusiveness, primacy, excellence: "I am the First and the Last", 1:17; 2:8; 22:13
Half – three and a half	Limited time, restricted period: silence of about half an hour, 8:1; a time and times and half a time (12:14); three days and a half (11:9, 11)
Four	Universality (the whole of the inhabited world): four winds...four corners of the earth
Six	Imperfection: 666 (13:18)
Seven	Fullness, totality, perfection: seven churches of Asia, seven spirits (1:4), seven golden lamp stands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven burning lamps (4:5), seven seals (5:1), etc.
Twelve	Representatives of the tribes of the chosen people; continuity of the new people with the old: twelve gates, twelve angels, twelve seated figures, twelve names, twelve apostles (21:12, 14, 20, 21)
A thousand	A large number, a multitude: thousands of thousands of angels (5:11); twelve thousand of each tribe The thousand years (20:2-7); an extended period, a long time.

Pitfall of Uncommitted Mediocrity – Church in Laodicea

ⁱ Eugene H. Peterson. Revised Thunder. The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination. Harper & Row, Publishers. San Francisco, USA.

ⁱⁱ Eugene H. Peterson. Revised Thunder. The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination. Harper & Row, Publishers. San Francisco, USA.

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- ^{xxvi} Eugene H. Peterson. Revised Thunder. The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination. Harper & Row, Publishers. San Francisco, USA.
- ^{xxvii} Jean-Pierre Prévost, *How to Read the Apocalypse*, Crossroad, New York, USA. 1993. Pp 28, 33.