

What Christ Expects of His Church

I Introduction and Context

Revelation 1:1-20

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Almost everyone has certain expectations of the church --- what the church should be and what it should do. You have your expectations; I have mine. Those inside and outside the church have clear expectations. Those on the left and right of the political spectrum expect certain things of those who claim to be Christians. The young and the old, the rich and the poor, the preachers and parishioners have their preferred and often passionate perspectives.

This past year we spent a lot of time and energy preparing a Mission Study in preparation for the calling of a new pastor. By and large this excellent study reflects what our members think this church should be and do and consequently how we will expect our new pastor to offer leadership and support to bring our expectation to reality.

While none of these expectations are unimportant and while they need to be heard and considered, surely we realize that the expectations of Jesus Christ for his followers, his expectations for that community of faith which bears his name into all the world trumps all other expectations of individuals or entities. Yes, we all have our own expectations with respect to what the church ought to be and do, yet our expectations pale into insignificance when presented with Jesus' expectations of his followers.

One of the things this current pandemic has brought into bold relief for those of us on the staff of churches is simply how many varied and intense expectations there are as to what the church, its staff, its officers and members ought and ought not to be doing in terms of worship, safety protocols, campus activities, technology, office hours, budget restraints, etc., etc. And then add to that the recent slaying of George Floyd and the varying responses and lack of response and you quickly hear what our people expect and do not expect from our leaders.

Indeed, ever since last September our staff has been debating and discussing what our expectations of members ought to be in terms of attendance, participation and support of the church and its ministries. Do we expect too much or too little?

To be sure, each of us as individuals is invited to know, to love, to follow, to obey, and to serve Jesus, but when we do that as a community what ought it to look like according to the One whom we say is the Head of the church. Ultimately only Christ has the right, the authority, the wisdom and love to direct those who are his followers.

Well, preacher, you may be thinking, how can we really and truly know what Christ wants, desires, and even requires of his church. Obviously, not all Christians are agreed as to what the nature and work of the church should be.... right?

What is more: Jesus didn't write a book. He left no instruction manual. No, instead he left a community of disciples and he sent to them his own Spirit so that his followers could recall and interpret the significance of Jesus words and deeds. His followers then and now have not always agreed on how to interpret or apply his words and deeds, but for good or ill, by design or default, that is what we have been given for deciphering and discerning the will of Jesus Christ for his followers. So, we have the Gospels and we have a brief record of what the first disciples remembered and cherished in his life and ministry. We even have some obscure, lesser known and occasionally controversial Gospels that didn't make it into the canon of Scripture and are evaluated in light of the better known and traditionally accepted Gospels. These other gospels like the Gospel of Peter or the Gospel of Thomas are not authoritative, but they are often intriguing.

Also, let us not forget that the Holy Spirit speaks for the risen Christ as his servants gather in prayer and study to discern what Christ is still saying to his church. Just recall that passage we mentioned on Pentecost, John 16:12-15, when Jesus tells his disciples before his death:

I still have many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason, I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

However, there remains yet another source of information that may help us to discern the will of Christ for his church and that is what I wish to explore with you today and in weeks to come. It is not a record of the life of Jesus. It is not an account of his parables or his miracles. It is rather the record of a vision of Jesus by John which is recorded in the strange and often disturbing book we call Revelation. And in this vision granted to John, Jesus gives instruction, warning, and encouragement to seven specific churches.

Ordinarily, of course, we shy away from the book of Revelation, or at least I do, with its bizarre imagery and its seemingly incomprehensible symbolism. I've preached on the book of Revelation only a handful of times in over fifty years of regular preaching. Many devout followers of Christ, like Martin Luther even questioned why the book was even included in the canon of Scripture, which was a decision not easily or quickly made. It does seem that nearly every religious fanatic and nearly every religious sect turns to this strange book and bends the interpretation of John's words to serve their personal agenda and their frequently perverse interests. And yet... here is the book of Revelation in the Holy Bible and as difficult as it may be, we must make some attempt to understand and apply it.

If Jesus is speaking to the church then and now, will we believe him? Do you believe in Jesus? Ever man, do you believe Jesus?

So then, how much credence and authority are we to attach to John's vision of Jesus and his reported instructions to seven churches in the opening chapters? It seems to me that we first must acknowledge that occasionally God speaks his word to his servants through a vision or a dream. Isaiah had a vision while in the temple as recorded in Isaiah 6 and he responds to God's call to be a prophet. In Acts 16 we read of Paul's vision in which a man from Macedonia is pleading for him to come and help the people there. Paul sees God's word in this vision and immediately he sets sail the next day for Macedonia believing this to be a call and commission from God. Many of us have dreams and visions from time to time in which we sense that perhaps God is communicating something important for us to consider. There is not time to relate it here but some of you know how now the course of my ministry changed because of a dream of a member of my church.

Of course, the primary means of communicating the will and word of God is the event of Jesus the Christ, which John Leith called "the intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible." Jesus is thus the lens through which we view any perceived word from God. The book of Hebrews opens with the writer saying: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son." So here is yet another reason for focusing on the following Jesus. We interpret all lesser truths in light of this greater truth, the words and actions of Jesus Christ, the living word.

At any rate, the book of Revelation opens with John's majestic and mysterious vision of Jesus in which the risen and reigning Lord directs him to write a message to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, present day Turkey. These letters deal with specific challenges in those churches and yet they contain timeless truths that can be applied to the followers of Jesus in any age. And they enable us, I will argue, to better understand Jesus' expectations of his

followers today. His words will judge us and warn us and comfort us and encourage us but we are obligated, I believe, to listen and consider them, or as John puts it time and again in Revelation: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Before getting into the particular messages to each of the seven churches starting next week with the letter to the church in Ephesus, let me share by way of introduction a few observations, comments and convictions that will shape my own interpretation and application of John's vision and Christ's message to the church.

The man who has this vision and records it is named John and while centuries of tradition had assumed this to be the apostle John, the "Beloved disciple" as he is sometimes called, the writer never claims to be an apostle or one of the disciples of the historical Jesus. In fact, he seems to distinguish himself from them (21:14). However, if the early church had seriously doubted the apostolic authorship of this book it would probably never have made it into the Bible. And frankly it almost didn't. Scholars have long debated this matter of authorship back and forth. There are differences of style and vocabulary from the Gospel of John and this Revelation of John. The writer calls himself a brother to those to whom he is writing, a fellow servant and sufferer. Some believe that he was a Palestinian Christian who had immigrated to Asia. Others think he may have been a disciple of either John the Baptist or the Apostle John. Some have referred to him as John the Elder. The bottom line is that we cannot be absolutely certain who this John was, and it may be best simply to call him, as some have, John of Patmos. Some of you, no doubt, have been to Patmos and remember it as a small island 60 miles southwest of Asia Minor where the writer had been exiled because of his faith.

One certainly about this letter is that it was written in the midst of religious persecution and great suffering on the part of Christ's followers. Of course, apocalyptic literature, a genre of which this is a prime example, ordinarily emerges in times of persecution and threat. It is the literature of oppressed and suffering people. Through symbolism and imagery, the members of the community may discern the message and the meaning of what is being communicated while the authorities and the persecutors are clueless its meaning. It is a kind of code language for those living under threat. It is clear that the Roman Emperor is seeing to squelch or eliminate the Christian faith which refused to endorse the worship of the Emperor. But which period of persecution and which Emperor is reigning at the time of the writing of this book? Was it as early as Nero (54-68 A.D.)? Was it as late as Domitian (81-96 A.D.) or Trajan (98-117 A.D.)? We are not told, and we cannot know for certain. All of these periods and all of these Emperors proved to be problematic for the followers of Christ. But regardless, the message is the same no matter who the writer is or who the Emperor was.

Revelation has been interpreted in various ways throughout the ages. Some see it as the means for predicting and interpreting the future. I do not. Some see it only as an historical record of what was going on earlier in the life of the church with little contemporary relevance. I do not agree with that either. Others, including yours truly, see the book of Revelation as a message of both warning and encouragement to a church struggling to be faithful in times of threat and change, but also as a word from God that speaks to all followers of Christ in all ages and especially so when the decision to follow Jesus Christ puts one at odds with ones nation, with ones culture, even with ones colleagues and kinfolk, And this is what we will explore together in coming weeks.

And it is my prayer that we will experience and claim this promise which we find in verse 3: *“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophesy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it.”*