

THOSE 7 CHURCHES

AND OURS: WHAT HELP FOR US?

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"That was then, now is now" is an appropriate saying when we need to unload the past (as Bunyan's pilgrim's heavy burden fell from his shoulders at the foot of the Cross) & get on with life. If the 19th century's burden was nationalism & the 20th's ideology, the 21st's is--already is, as we are witnessing in Palestine & former Yugoslavia & India & where-not--ethnism. "Forgiveness" is the interpersonal term for this unloading, the parallel mental state being forgetting (*pos.*, as when God "by the blood of the Lamb" [as the Revelation of Jn. puts it] "remembers no more" our sin if [as the Lord's Prayer has it] we "forgive those who sin/trespass against us," "our debtors").

But there are *neg.* forms of forgetting: (1) We may forget our commitments & appointments (worst, says the OT, is spiritual amnesia, "forgetting the LORD your God"). (2) We may forget the past, "Let bygones be bygones" not in the positive sense, viz. forgiveness, but negatively: we're ignorant of the past (including the Bible) because we're overinvested in the present. (3) We may forget to use the past as resource for the present & future. We might archaize, go slumming or touring in the past, have only a dilettante interest in learning about yesterday, about the Book of Revelation, without asking the responsible question in this Thinksheet's title, without imaginative-prayerful connection-making between then & now.

Responsive, reponsible, Bible-study: "That was now, now is then."

Your final assignment in this "Revelation" course was in #2813.5: "Which of these 7 communities (Rev.2.1.-3.22) is like ours?" How? "And what help do we find for our community," South Congregational Church UCC, Centerville, Mass.? Below are some possible helps as you/we work on the assignment.

1 "I feel your pain"--the simplest statement of empathy--has become a stock joke of comedians. Jn.'s letters show that he feels those churches' pain, but he's asking them to feel his--&, centrally, Jesus the Lamb's, whose martyrial blood (1) is salvific & (2) models for those churchmembers' courage to face their unfriendly neighbors & even the possibility of their own martyrdom for refusal to affirm their loyalty to Caesar by offering a pinch of incense to his "genius" (i.e., spirit, person). Is our church suffering any pain because of its Christian witness? Are we?

2 What are the power factors in the letters? Where do the 8 churches (including ours) believe the control-power over us resides? Jn. writes to relativize all power--especially Caesar's--except God's. Nine times Jn. titles God "the Pantocrator" (Gk. for "Almighty," "All-Powerful," "Omnipotent"--in LXX, tr. for YHWH Elohe Sebaoth ["LORD God of Hosts"]). This ultimate-intimate power works preferably by persuasion ("the blood of the Lamb"), ultimately by force where love fails (Jesus as "King of kings and Lord of lords" violently defeats the recalcitrant [19.11-21]). The event, the end of the struggle, is not in doubt: that's the conviction with which Jn. seeks to ennerve the troops, the churches/members. Is our church, are we, living this joyful confidence, this nonviolent triumphalism of trust in the Pantocrator?....The Pantocrator is a favorite ikon & bookcover: (1) A 6th-c. "Christ Pantocrator" is on the cover of Jaroslav Pelikan's excellent JESUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES: His Place in the History of Culture (H&R/85); (2) A contemporary "Jesus Christ Pantocrator" is ironically on the cover of Marcus J. Borg's JESUS A NEW VISION: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship (HarperCollins/91)--ironically, I say: p.2 denies this classical, Borg says "popular," "image of Jesus as a divine or semidivine figure, whose purpose was to die for the sins of the world, and whose life and death open up the possibility of eternal life....Centuries of Christians have taken it for granted that this image depicts what he was like as a historical figure." Untrue! Borg here commits a prolepsis: Those "centuries of Christians" did not impose on themselves the modern game of trying to peel off the layers down to the core, the fancied "historical Jesus." Borg arrogantly assumes he's up to the game. ..Maybe you'd like to see the contexts of "Pantocrator" in Rev.: 1.8; 4.8; 11.17; 15.3; 16.7,14; 19.6,15; 21.22.

3 In the letters & visions, heaven is/is to be on-&-beyond earth. When you look up, is sky all you see? The small child in Bill Keane's cartoon "The Family Circle" (8 Sept 96) looks up at the stars & says "God has all his lights turned on so we'll know he's home."

4 Where in the letters does the threat of judgment appear? And where in our church's witness/planning/work? This note is rising in serious publishing today--e.g., Edward Tenner's WHY THINGS BITE BACK: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences (Knopf/96). But this from Mary McGrory (9 Sept 96): "[Dick] Morris painted himself as a victim....In the old days, a man caught flatfooted with a prostitute crept off to a leper colony to make atonement. Morris went to lunch with Random House and signed a book contract." In our laid-back society, are we afraid to be "judgmental"? Is our church a victim, a victor, a survivor, a sinner? The preface to KJV (1611) sets the tone for living under judgment & grace: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, but a blessed thing it is, and will bring us to everlasting blessedness in the end, when God speaketh unto us, to hearken; when he setteth his word before us, to read it; when he stretches out his hand and calleth to answer, Here am I, here we are to do thy will, O God. The Lord work a care and conscience in us to know him, and serve him, that we may be acknowledged of him at the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with the Holy Ghost be all praise and thanksgiving." And in his intro, Moffatt expresses, for his translating, a motive fitting also for Jn. the Revelator: "to stir and sustain present faith in a living God who spoke and speaks."

5 What is the evidence that our church has a lively sense of the divine presence? Study the letters for words/phrases/sentences on the Presence. It's so important there, that this makes a good outline of the book: (1) The living Christ (1-3); (2) The long war against evil (4-20); (3) The final triumph (21-22). Much great poetry to help us here--e.g., Geo. Herbert (d.1633), "Elixir": "Teach me, my God and King, / In all things thee to see, / And what I do in anything / To do it all for thee....A man that looks on [window]glass, / On it may stay his eye; / Or, if he pleaseth, through it pass, / And then the heaven espy." God-Christ is present, but we need the poetic sanctified imagination to "see through" our church's life, our life, the world.

6 Where, in these letters/Rev. & our church, do we see hope? When we "see through" to God (as Rev. is good practice in doing), we see hope, which (said Augustine) has two daughters: Anger (at the way things are) & Courage (to change the way things are). This you can see/feel in Adolphe Adam's solo "The Holy City."

7 "If we make adequate allowance for vast technological change, the times John lived in were astonishingly like our own, perhaps more like than any of the intervening centuries" (the beginning of G.B.Caird's reverent/scholarly/readable A COMMENTARY ON THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE (H&R/66)). Does your looking at the 7 churches, & ours, confirm this observation? Jn. knew those churches intimately; how well do we know ours?

8 Does the general structure of the letters give us clues for our church? First, a statement of the relevant qualities of Christ; then, praise & censure for the particular church (though no praise for Laodicea, & no blame for Smyrna & Philadelphia); finally, promises (4 churches, a general promise; all 7, a promise to "the conqueror" who resists the temptation, in a Roman court (as Jn. himself did), to be disloyal to the Lord Jesus out of fear of Lord Caesar).

9 What, if anything, should our church/we be angry about & hostile toward (because love, Love, demands it)? The stern emotions are God-given, natural, normal, as are those stern virtues Jn. emphasizes (viz., patience, endurance, constancy, loyalty). In the letters (& visions), what is Jn. (& God!) angry about & hostile toward? Rome's wrath is patent; is God's only latent? What in the 8 churches makes Jesus indignant?

10 The 7 churches were facing political persecution. What now threatens our faith, our church, us? Try writing to our church a warning letter. (Common to all 8: complacency about the supremacy of economic motivation in society, the idol of "growth.")

11 Rev. is primarily not about time but about worship: "the end is not an event but a person," Jesus the sacrificial-victorious Lamb-Lord (Caird.301). What does worship in those 7 churches say to worship in our 8th?