

The Apocalyptic Method - a Challenge to Christian

by T. Austin-Sparks

The book of Revelation presents a positive standard of Christ, who represents the fullness and character of God, and is essential for dealing with the details of the situations that are wrong.

Scripture: Ezekiel 43:10, John 19:23, Revelation 1:1, Revelation 3:19

Topics: "Revelation", "Spiritual Decline"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the Book of Revelation as a symbolic unveiling of Jesus Christ, intended to guide and challenge Christians amidst persecution and spiritual decline. He highlights the necessity of interpreting the text through spiritual principles rather than literal interpretations, as the early church faced severe opposition and needed discernment to understand the messages. Sparks points out that the decline of the churches in Asia serves as a warning that having a strong beginning does not guarantee lasting faithfulness. The sermon stresses that God's ultimate standard is the full presentation of Christ, which serves as a benchmark for believers to measure their spiritual condition. Ultimately, the message calls for a fresh unveiling of Christ to restore the church to its intended glory and purpose.

Transcript

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to shew unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass; and He sent and signified it by His angel unto His servant John" (Rev. 1:1).

Yes, we are in the Book of the Revelation, the most controversial book in the Bible. This book has set up more schools of interpretation than any other. It would not be profitable even to name these schools. Of them all, no two are in agreement, and each one is uncertain of the rightness of the others. The only safe and profitable way is to find what is certain. This is the Bible's way of solving and answering its problems and questions. That is, interpretation and application by spiritual principles. In passing, we do point this out as a really valuable and satisfying method of approach. Apply it to the first chapters of Genesis and there will be a very great deal of rest from the weariness of mental wrestling with questions and problems there. The same is even more true with 'Revelation'. This is what we shall do in this message. We begin with reference to

The Apocalyptic Method

It is essential to accept the fact that, whatever actuality and literalness there is behind the record here (and of course there is such; it is not a book of myths) it is all presented to us in symbols, figures, resemblances, similitudes, and representations, and not in real and actual things. Dragons, and Beasts, and Bowls, and A Lamb, etc., are not actually such. We ask: why this method?

Well, at least part of the answer relates to the time and condition of the writing. It was a time of terrible and fierce persecution of the Christian Church. The focal point of that persecution was the Christian testimony to the Lordship of Jesus Christ; what the book calls "The testimony of Jesus". That testimony came into direct and immediate collision with Roman Emperor-worship. Caesar took the title of God, and claimed worship as such. The Christians both refused to acknowledge this, and preached Jesus Christ as Lord.

This set up a situation in which it was dangerous to speak in plain terms, names, and definitions. So, in writing to the Church and Christians for their instruction, counsel, comfort, correction, and warning, their spiritual discernment and perception was called into use, and they had to - as we say - 'read between the lines'. No Caesar's name is mentioned, but a representation of him is there. No system is named explicitly, but its character is delineated; and so on.

But the method applies to much more than the immediate historic background, or the prophetic horizon: it is applied to almost everything in the book. That has to do with the NATURE of the book. Now we proceed to the question - Why the book? In another place we are occupied with the last chapters of this book. Here it is with the first chapters, and mainly with chapter one. In this part we are met with

A Challenge to Christians

Asia is the venue of the vari-sided message, or - if you like - the seven messages. Asia was representative of first century Christianity: that is, Asia had received all the primary and essential apostolic teaching. Paul called it "the whole counsel of God". But some thirty or more years had passed since Paul wrote his great circular letter to Asia and so soon after completed his ministry. In that period - only about thirty years - serious decline had set in in the majority of the churches. The character had changed. Divergence had taken place. The standard had lowered. Measure had been forfeited. The churches were living on a past. The fine gold had become dim. Form had taken the place of life, and works went on without the primary love. It is painful to have to accept the fact that, in even the fullness of the apostolic times, such a change could take place in a comparatively short time. It surely says that, to have had so much is no guarantee of final consistency. This is an age-long peril; the peril besetting the path of anything which had a great and wonderful beginning under the hand of God! It is not difficult to find all over the world the dead shells of what once was a mighty testimony to the sovereign movement of God; a "candlestick of pure gold". We do not dwell on this aspect for the moment, but move on with the positive method of the Lord to meet it.

So we are brought back to the introduction: "THE UNVEILING OF JESUS CHRIST, which God gave Him to shew unto His servants" (1:1). While the whole statement as to the 'shewing' is immediately related to "the things which must shortly come to pass", it is essential to note that this WHOLE unveiling is based upon, and issues from, an unveiling and presentation of the Person of God's Son, Jesus Christ. All that follows in the whole book is intimately connected with the personal presentation. The phrase: "to show unto His servants" comes to relate - at least in the first place - to the churches in Asia, and, of course, to John. This full-length presentation of Jesus Christ will occupy us in this present consideration. Note carefully that the Person - in His full and meticulous delineation - is so closely linked with the churches as to 'hold them in His right hand' (1:16,20), and also "walketh in the midst..." (2:1).

The point here is

The Intimate Association of Christ with Conditions

It is not a contradiction or confusion to see Christ in Heaven and at the right hand of God, as Paul and Stephen speak of Him, and then to hear John say that He is imminent and immediate in the churches on earth. And this is shown to be so even when the churches - the true churches - are in a poor and bad condition. It may come to be that because of certain conditions, as in the case of Laodicea, where Christ is represented as on the outside of the door; nevertheless, He has not deserted and abandoned. We shall see that the real force of this first section is the deep and pained concern for His Church in her state of declension.

At this point we should sit back and allow ourselves to register the forceful impact of a serious fact. Taking not one whit from the Lord's command and commission to evangelize the whole world, it was after the world that then was had been evangelized that practically the entire New Testament was written to Christians who had responded. After 'Acts' there is not one book of the subsequent twenty-six comprising the New Testament which was written to the unevangelized and unsaved. This surely is forceful enough (apart from the contents of the books) to convince us that the Lord is - at least - as much concerned with the 'follow-up', the saved, as He is to evangelize! The law of God, both in nature and in grace, is "full growth", and anything less than that is either abortion or stultification; it is subnormal, or un-normal, and it speaks of defeat and frustration of purpose and design. God is not like that, and Himself suffers in any such condition. We shall come on this again later, but it MUST be from THIS consciousness that we begin. If that has impressed us sufficiently, and only if so, we can proceed, and in doing so we shall at once be confronted with

God's Ultimate Standard

This is set before the Church, the churches, and individual believers ("HE that overcometh", "Unto HIM will I give..." etc.) in the full stature and characterization of Christ. John says, inclusively, "One like unto the Son of Man" (verse 13). The title, used some eighty-two times of Christ in the New Testament, has a double significance. (a) It means representation; and (b) it means identification. Not to be too detailed and ponderous, we do not include a study of these two aspects, but those who are following closely will at once see how true they are in this final presentation. Here, "Jesus Christ" represents Man as God intends him to be, and as he will be through grace, in Christ. And here "Son of Man" means the most intimate organic identification with His redeemed, so that He stands to lose something of Himself if they fail.

When the Ultimate Standard has been presented, we are very soon led on to see that THE LORD IS NOT WILLING TO ACCEPT COMPARATIVE STANDARDS. In the majority of the messages to the churches the comparative is noted. Good things are tabulated, such as 'works', 'labours', sincerity, zeal, hatred of falsehood and hypocrisy, orthodoxy, etc., but when all this is allowed for, warning, rebuke, severity, and entreaty are administered. The "garment down to the foot" (1:13), is not sleeveless, half-length, or even three-quarter length. It is full length, and all-covering. It is the "seamless robe" of John 19:23. It is of one piece and complete. Garments in the Bible speak of the measure and the character of the wearer. But here it is the garment of authority, the Judge. By it standards are judged, and criteria are fixed.

With God in Christ there are no substitutes for Divine fullness and no alternatives to the Person. This comes so clear in the confrontation of the churches. When all is taken into account the judgment is gathered into one word: "But".

This could be very disconcerting, discouraging, disheartening, but we must remember that the Lord puts His finger upon causes and reasons, and shows what can be done to make good the defects. Among the multitude of 'overcomers' doubtless there are many who were in the poorest state described in these Messages.

Let us go on, for about this 'seamless robe', the perfect wholeness, there is a girdle of gold about the breasts. It is oriental symbolism, but it is eloquent. The breasts speak of the affections; here, the affections of Christ. Gold is ever the Divine nature. And the girdle, the symbol of strength and action. To His Church, His people, in their weakness, their decline, their failure, even in their apostasy, He comes in the energy, the strength, the activity of Divine love and affection to recover, to restore, to be faithful, to lift up. It is in love that He rebukes: "As many as I love, I rebuke" (3:19). This Divine love is not mere sentimentalism. It is very faithful love. It is parental love which for the child's GOOD may slap, but in so doing feels the regret as much as the child. "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it."

I think that perhaps we have something here to learn and to which to adjust. We criticize and harshly judge the Church. We take a very adverse attitude to what we deem to be the faults, weakness, deflections, and even evils in the Church. We must search our hearts to see why we do so. Is it really our suffering love and sorrow for the Lord that motivates our spirit and demeanour? Is it REDEEMING love?

Now, seeing that this is not a whole book, we must sum up thus far. What comes out as governing this contemplation is this: whichever school of interpretation may be ours - historicist, futurist, literalist, spiritual, or none of them - one thing governs the whole section (chapters one to three). It is that, whenever things have departed from the pristine glory, fullness, and power, and a decline to a lesser and lower spiritual measure and level has taken place, the Divine method of recovery is a fresh presentation and unveiling of Christ in His fullness and true character. Before there can be any hopeful dealing with the details of the situations which are wrong; that is, before taking a negative course of condemnation, judgment, warning, etc., the Lord presents, or re-presents the positive standard of His Son. This has always been the principle on which God has acted, as we could show from many instances. Unless we have a POSITIVE BETTER to present, we have no ground for being negative in judgment, criticism, or attitude. There must be a Divine criterion by which all things are measured. People will only see the wrong and be ashamed if the right is set before them. "Show the house to the house of Israel that they may be ashamed" was the command of God to Ezekiel. The Lord would, in our time, have His prophets who can - like John - bring the fullness and significance of Christ before His people. So the whole book of the "Revelation" is governed by the initial unveiling and presenting of Jesus Christ in full stature and detailed character.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/the-apocalyptic-method-a-challenge-to-christian/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net

