

Homiletics and to help restore great preaching in the Restoration Movement. He graciously consented to prepare this following brief challenge to all preachers of the Word—You Can Preach intelligently from the great themes of *The Revelation*. Some of the great themes listed below come from the seminar on *The Revelation* mentioned above; but the rest of this special study is his generous contribution to this study commentary. May it challenge every preacher to give serious study to the relevant N.T. book of our ages of crises.

A SERIES WITH THE SEER: PREACHING
VALUES IN THE REVELATION

by Wayne Shaw

In the opening lines of his book, *As Seeing the Invisible*, D. T. Niles gives an apologetic for studying Revelation, which, at the same time, states its demand to be preached: "The book of Revelation is part of Scripture, so that an adequate understanding of it is essential for a right appreciation of the biblical message as a whole. This is all the more true during times such as these when the sin of men and of nations is yielding such rich harvest, and the common man is asking what the meaning of life's tragedy may be."¹ Quite apart from his liberal attitude toward the Bible, Dr. Niles reminds us that we dare not ignore the ministry of the Word of God in Revelation for two reasons: it is a part of Scripture, and it has a vital message for us in our twentieth century.

For various reasons most preachers slight the Writing of the Revelator in their pulpits today. To some the message is too difficult to decipher and too mystical to proclaim with certainty. To others it is simply not worth the effort to explain the apocalyptic imagery and attempt a vigorous application to present-day man. To still others it seems a winding path far removed from the thoroughfare of first principles recorded in the book of Acts. The Lord's messengers are not so much guilty of adding to or taking away from the words of its prophecy as obscuring its important message by neglect.

Even the brave who plunge in have too often blunted the Revelator's cutting edge by becoming so preoccupied with intricate details that they entangle themselves in an exhausting yoke of bondage. Instead of the book's penetrating relevancy, they

lose themselves in points that can never be settled for certain; but worse, they lose the book's vision of Christ centered in the dramatic description of His church and His creation. "Lord, deliver Thy church from both its de-emphasis and its wrong emphasis of the book of Revelation that has stifled preaching from its pages."

The purpose here is not to provide sermon outlines but to suggest homiletical sources, preaching approaches, and sermon themes from the Revelation; in other words, to help the preacher translate the matter of the commentary into the method of the pulpit.

Homiletical Sources for Preaching from the Revelation

Recent books that offer helpful suggestions include:

1. Clovis Chappell, *Sermons from Revelation* (Abingdon, \$2.00).

2. C. H. Spurgeon, Volume XX of the new series of his sermons published by Zondervan at \$2.95. (Helmet Thielicke, the German theologian, has sparked renewed interest in Spurgeon with his *Encounter with Spurgeon*, Fortress, \$4.75.)

3. R. C. McCan, *A Vision of Victory* (Broadman, \$3.00), combines both exposition and application by first presenting the meaning for the original readers in their day and then probing the problems of today.

4. D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible*, (Harper, \$3.50), has a section on "Theological Meditations" in which he works the apocalyptic language of Revelation into brief meditations on relevant doctrinal themes for our time.

5. William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, (Abingdon, \$2.00), provides resource material for a series of sermons on the seven churches of Asia. Devoting two chapters to each locality, he first describes the situation in each of the seven cities and then explains each letter verse-by-verse.

6. Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Eerdmans, \$3.50), treats Revelation from a permillenarian and moderate futurist standpoint; he attempts to state all views fairly and offers a variety of perspectives for approaching the book homiletically. Not the least of his contributions is his chapter on "The Christology of Revelation," which emphasizes the centrality of Christ in the four visions.

7. Although he takes a liberal approach to some passages, Dwight E. Stevenson, *Preaching on the Books of the New Testament*, opens up an important area for exposition when he explores the possibility of preaching entire Bible books. His chapter on Revelation, entitled "Fire on the Earth," gives the background of the book and suggests five different approaches to a book sermon. He does not intend the volume to replace New Testament study; but rather to serve as a homiletical manual for those who have done their Bible homework.

In no wise do these seven books signify bibliographical completeness; they do illustrate how others have struggled to preach powerfully and relevantly Revelation's message to the church.

Illustrated Approaches for Preaching from Revelation

For several months this writer has studied with special interest the preaching of James S. Stewart, Professor of New Testament, New College, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. This outstanding Scottish preacher has used a variety of approaches to the Scripture texts from Revelation that he treats in his two volumes of sermons, *The Gates of New Life*² and *The Strong Name*.³ A glance at these will show homiletical possibilities for other passages in the book.

His approach in "Clouds and Darkness and the Morning Star"⁴ is to contrast man's doubt of the final purpose of God — "which means to doubt the rationality of the universe, and the significance of human experience, and the worth of moral values —"⁵ with the certainty revealed in Christ. He dramatizes this doubt with the words of Isaiah 5:30, "If one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof"; and then sets Revelation 22:16 over against it, "I am the bright and morning star," stressing the power of Christ's light to scatter the darkness of doubt.

His sermon from Revelation 19:6, entitled "The Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth,"⁶ amplifies three consequences of the topic-text: the liberation of life, the doom of sin, and the comfort of sorrow.

In "The Final Doxology" he offers Revelation 1:5,6 as the one single sentence that summarizes all that religion means to him. His treatment is clearly textual, and he is careful to restate his points as he goes: "Unto Him that loved us"; "Unto Him that loved us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood";

"Unto Him that made us Kings unto God"; "Loved us—loosed us—made us Kings—and made us priests to God"; and "Unto Him who has done all that—loved us and loosed us and made us Kings and Priests—unto Him be glory and dominion for ever."

When he preached on Jerusalem as "The Mother of Us All,"⁷ he chose three texts from the Psalms to capture the meaning of Jerusalem for the Jew; it symbolized his history, his religion, and his home. For his application he used Revelation 21:2, "I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God, out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband," to tie together symbolically three deep elements of our nature—the hunger for God, the craving for the fellowship of a beloved community, and the instinct of immortality.

The text for his sermon, "The Cry of the Martyrs," comes from Revelation 6:9,10, and raises the problem of evil in the world. The passage means, says Stewart, "that the tragic element in life, as represented by their sufferings, cries out insistently to be interpreted, lays on God Himself the terrible onus of vindicating and justifying the way in which His world is run."⁸ He then offers the divine answer in three words—the patience of Christ, the victory of God, and the communion of saints.

Stewart admirably illustrated the relevance of Revelation in a message entitled "What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches" when he gave the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in April, 1962, on the general theme, "Preaching to This Generation." This writer attended the lecture curious to discover Stewart's theological view of the seven churches and his method of applying this section of Scripture to contemporary needs. As he finished, at least one person in the audience had the feeling, not that he had attended a lecture on Bible history and exegesis, but that the Word of God had been speaking through the preacher to his heart and to his involvement in Christ's Church today. Taking only one point from each of the seven churches, asserting it in the present tense, and making careful transitions between Asia in the first century and America in the twentieth, he led the congregation in Princeton Chapel to participate in the message as they listened. There was no need to tack on an application. Relevance had been there throughout. It had been woven into the fabric. The preacher who can do this with the rest of Revelation will grip his hearers and will bless them as they listen.

Themes for Preaching from Revelation

The plan here is to offer three series of sermon themes from Revelation as connected preaching units around which one can build a course of sermons or Bible study lessons. But employ caution here. Be selective. Better to have several series at spaced intervals than to run on indefinitely. Here, as elsewhere in preaching, length seems to attract boredom. Dr. Andrew W. Blackwood suggests three months as the duration for a course of teaching sermons from a Bible book. Thirteen sermons, then, are maximum; sometimes ten or less make a better unit. The idea is to select carefully from the suggested themes as they speak to your heart and the needs of your congregation.

The first group of themes utilizes the material in the appendix on major doctrines in Revelation. With the topic restated attractively and in the present tense, the preacher can take advantage of the usual curiosity about the contents of Revelation to proclaim the great doctrinal teachings of the book. With his Bible and this commentary before him, the earnest preacher should be able to plan three months of worthwhile preaching from the following topics:

1. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about God"
2. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about Angels"
3. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about Heaven"
4. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Devil"
5. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about Hell (Perdition)"
6. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Earth and Mankind"
7. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about Christ"
8. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Holy Spirit"
9. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Gospel"
10. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Christian Life"
11. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about Christendom"
12. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Antichrist"
13. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Last Time"

14. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Call to the World to Repent"
15. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Consolation of the Christian"
16. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Future of Israel"
17. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the World in Wickedness"
18. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the End of the World"
19. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Coming of the Lord"
20. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Resurrection of Believers"
21. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Judgment"
22. "What the Book of Revelation tells us about the Final State"

The second series of themes comes from D. T. Nile's *Theological Meditations*.¹² The subjects, Scriptures, and topics are included to make the list as helpful as possible; however, the reader should consult Dr. Nile's book to profit from his brief, Scripture-packed, devotional treatment.

1. Title (1:1-2) "The Subject of Revelation"
2. Address (1:3) "The Nature of Time"
3. Greeting (1:4-6) "The Situation of the Christian"
4. Preface (1:7-9) "The Being of God"
5. Contents (1:10,11,19) "The Necessity of Decision"
6. The Opening Vision (1:12-18) "The Object of Faith"
7. The Letters of the Churches (2:1-3:22) "The Verdict of Love"
8. The Throne in Heaven (4:1-5:14) "The Ruler of the Universe"
9. The Four Horsemen (6:1-8) "The Dissolution of History"
10. The Cry of the Martyrs (6:9-17) "The Wrath of the Lamb"
11. The Sealed Multitude (7:1-17) "The Tribulation of Life"
12. The Unsealed Scroll (8:1) "The Redemption of Sons"
13. The Altar in Heaven (8:2-5) "The Hope of the Gospel"
14. The Four Trumpets (8:6-12) "The Fall of Nature"

15. The Shout of the Eagle (8:13-9:21) "The Wages of Sin"
16. The Gospel of Redemption (10:1-11:11) "The Mystery of Mercy"
17. The Last Trumpet (11:12-19) "The Reversal of Man"
18. The Dragon Against the Child (12:1-17) "The Motherhood of Grace"
19. The Four Monsters (13:1-10; 17:1-18) "The Manifolness of Evil"
20. The Mark of the Beast and of the Lamb (13:11-14:5) "The Assurance of Heaven"
21. Four Harvest Cries (14: -13) "The Certainty of Judgment"
22. The Harvest Is Reaped (14:14-20) "The Fulfillment of the End"
23. The Bowls of Wrath and Song of Deliverance (15:1-8) "The Persistence of Pity"
24. The Four Plagues (16:1-9) "The Death of the Soul"
25. The End of Evil (16:10-21) "The Suicide of Wrong"
26. The Judgment of Rome (18:1-8, 21-24) "The Punishment of Power"
27. Lamentation (18:9-20; 19:1-4) "The Waste of Wealth"
28. The Great Hallelujah (19:5-16) "The Consolation of the Saints"
29. The Four Powers (19:17-20:6) "The Foretaste of the Kingdom"
30. Gog and Magog (20:7-10) "The Close of the Ages"
31. The Opening of the Books (20:11-31:1, 5-8) "The Promise of the New"
32. The Eternal City (21:2-4, 9-22:5) "The Coming of the Lord"
33. Seven Last Words (22:6-21) "The Seven Beatitudes"

The third series of themes is more general. It contains random comments on vital contemporary issues without reference to specific Scriptures which may kindle sermonic fires that burn to the depths of human need. The suggested topics are set off by quotation marks followed by the comments.

1. "The Christian View of Tragedy"—suffering, persecution, and our Christian commitment.
2. "Temptation: Individual and Corporate"—the temptation for the individual or the church to compromise in times of trouble.

3. "The Reality of A God Who Cares"—The transcendence of our Creator God and the emmanence of our Redeemer God. God really cares about our needs.

4. "The Lordship of Christ"—in the church, in the Christian life, and in the world.

5. "The Recovery of the Church"—suffering churches in need of repentance are not hopeless, but their recovery depends on their willingness to repent.

6. "Christ's Concern for a Pure Church"—His message to the seven churches.

7. "The Christian View of Progress"—never dependent upon evolution but on God. There is a difference between change and progress. Man is depersonalized in our age of technological advancement.

8. "The Spiritual Struggle Beyond Our Vision"—Satan and the World Powers: there is more to our world situation than meets the eye!

9. "The Victory Which Only God Can Give"—victory comes through God's power, not man's. Our salvation is available only in Christ because of the blood of the Lamb.

10. "Being the Church in Times of Crisis"—Revelation was written against the backdrop of crisis. We are to live *in* but not *of* the world. (The opportunity and the danger.)

11. "The Purpose of God in History"—God's ultimate goal for the world as He makes even the wrath of men to praise Him. What does all that goes on in the world mean to the committed Christian in light of God's power?

12. "The All-Inclusive Judgment"—individual, nation, and international; no individual or nation is exempt.

13. "Living in Two Worlds"—this one and the next; it takes both of them to make sense in light of the Bible's teaching on the healing of the nations.

14. "The Victory of Faith"—faith in God and the victory of the righteous. The nature of the Christian victory compared with non-Christian concepts of victory: barbaric victory via brute force contrasted with victory via the righteousness of Christ.

15. "The Humiliation of Man"—the hopelessness of unaided man, the failure of humanism, naturalism, and rationalism. The tension between the pessimism of God's judgment and the Christian optimism based on the ultimate victory of Christ.

16. "Jerusalem the Golden" (title of a hymn written by Bernard of Cluny in the twelfth century)—Jerusalem in history

and symbol; Jerusalem of the Jews and the New Jerusalem, the Mother of us all.

17. "The Dark Line in God's Face"—the wrath of God demonstrated by pouring out the seven bowls of wrath. How does a righteous God treat man with both justice and mercy?

18. "The Happiest Moment in Heaven"—the marriage of the Lamb as the church realizes its eternal destiny.

19. "You Cannot Hide From God"—there is no hiding place; God's judgment is complete.

20. "The Promise of Christ's Return"—looking, longing, living. Christ's coming: sudden, serious, certain. ("I come quickly" is used three times in chapter 22).

Homiletical Hints for Preaching from Revelation

Andrew W. Blackwood has given abiding counsel on how to preach teaching sermons on Bible books. Clarity, mingled with simple beauty, is not the least among his homiletical virtues. He has packed so much practical advice into one sentence that it could almost be called Blackwood's preaching theory in a nutshell: "In making ready for a sermon with 'teaching—preaching,' the practical aim guides in choosing a text both relevant and clear, in phrasing a topic both appealing and clear, in collecting materials both Biblical and current, in making a plan both sturdy and clear, in selecting a few examples both luminous and clear, and last of all, before the actual writing, in deciding on a way of introduction both interesting and clear, as well as brief and terse."¹³

With its dramatic style, the book of Revelation has always gripped the church's heart and imagination more than her understanding; a course of sermons ought to clarify and make relevant the message without milking it of its grandeur and majesty. The following homiletical hints are offered to guard against dull and boring sermons from a Bible book packed with breathless excitement.

1. Preach, do not lecture. Whenever possible, without doing violence to the text, preach in the present tense to men in need of a word from the Lord today. Far too many messages leave application out entirely or tack it on to the end. It is much better to choose a relevant topic and text, and treat them in a way that builds application into the structure of the sermon. But if the Lord's messenger declares the whole counsel of God, he cannot

always do this, for ancient imagery sometimes obscures the Scripture's timeless relevance—that "principle of penetration" which makes Bible-based preaching possible and vital. However, the three series suggested above help to clear this homiletical hurdle in two ways: first, enough topics are suggested in each series to allow the preacher to select only those that cause an echoing response in his soul or that speak vitally to the specific needs of his congregation; second, they are worded in such a way that their relevance is apparent, and one can then unveil the hidden light that a difficult passage throws on the topic.

2. Vary the structure and treatment within the series from sermon to sermon. Basic, but often ignored, is the homiletical rule of iron that the headings (points) flow naturally out of the topic as important and related parts of a unit; however, from that starting place, a sermon may vary in many ways. You might begin the introduction with an illustration, start another time with a question that goes to the heart of the theme, an interesting narrative, or a life-situation with which the hearers can identify. Vary the sermon structure by merely changing the number of points. Three headings do not guarantee either holiness or success. F. W. Robertson was a master of the two-point sermon. As a working principle, two to five are best; over five, except in rare cases with memorable material, are dangerous, if not impossible, for the congregation. Or preach with a telescope one Sunday and with a microscope the next; use a longer passage, than a shorter one. Partition a text that captures the topic imaginatively; or begin with a major problem confronting the human situation and proceed to the Biblical answer. A notebook kept on the different types of sermon outlines used by able preachers will supply an endless source of tested outline plans.

3. State the headings in complete, parallel sentences, as memorably as possible. One-word-pegs are excellent memory aids, but they should be expanded to complete sentences in order to avoid ambiguity. Rhetorical devices (such as alliterations, analogies, and epigrams) should be used with caution lest they appear clever, strained, or trite; however, used with taste and not too often, they aid the memory and lend clarity and force.

4. Arrange the sermon headings climactically, heeding especially Dr. Blackwood's admonition to follow the Biblical order (evident in the Epistles) of putting doctrine first because it is the most important and duty second because it is the most interesting. This order is theologically sound because Christian

action flows out of Christian belief. In Revelation, John's vision is given by the living Christ to stabilize the faith of Christians who will be tempted to act in unchristian ways because of impending persecution.

5. Be sure to raise the relevancy of the topic in the sermon introduction. Dr. Blackwood warns that unless one puts God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit in the introduction or under the first heading, it becomes increasingly more difficult as the sermon proceeds.

6. Conclude your sermon by leaving the congregation aware that you have preached the Word of God to men in the twentieth century. Remember that the conclusion is your last opportunity to plant the sermon topic in your hearers' hearts. If the introduction and conclusion are relevant, it is easier to make relevant the Biblical truth treated under the sermon headings.

7. Plan to preach at least one book sermon on Revelation. Better still, plan a survey sermon on the message of the book to open the course and a summary sermon at the close to restate the major topics under one majestic theme. This writer utilized Dr. Merrill C. Tenney's excellent chapter on "The Christology of Revelation"¹⁴ to preach a book sermon emphasizing the Centrality of Christ in the drama. Tenney offers the following outline of Revelation: The Prologue: Christ Communicating (1:1-8), Vision I: Christ in the Church (1:9-3:22), Vision II: Christ in the Cosmos (4:1-16:21), Vision III: Christ in Conquest (17:1-21:8), Vision IV: Christ in Consummation (21:9-22:5), The Epilogue: Christ Challenging (22:6-21). For the sermon, the title was changed to "Pictures of Christ in Revelation." The introduction attempted to explain the nature of apocalyptic literature, the value of its hidden message in a time of persecution, and the theme of its dramatic form centering in the leading figure—Christ. The four visions present four pictures of Christ. Vision I: Christ is the Head of the Church, 1-3 (with a brief explanation of His seven descriptions to the churches of Asia). Vision II: Christ is the King of Nations, 4-16 (with a brief explanation of the imagery used in His three titles: Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Root of David, and the Lamb Slain). Vision III: Christ is the Conqueror of the World, 17-21:8 (with judgment as the key theme, His three names are: Faithful and True, Word of God, and King of Kings and Lord of Lords). Vision IV: Christ is the Center of the City of God, 21:9-22:7 (with the following pointing to Him: the Marriage Feast of the

Lamb, the Foundations are His Apostles, the Center of Worship is the New Temple, Christ is the Light of the City, the Citizens are Christ's Redeemed, their Occupation is to serve Christ). Conclusion: the entire message is set in the promise of the second coming of Christ (for the church as a whole, V. 7; for humanity, V. 12; for the individual Christian, V. 20). The sermon outline is offered not as a model for imitation but to illustrate that valid theological language and insight can be put into homiletical form that presents the living Christ as real today as in days long ago when He walked among men by Galilee's sea. Admittedly, there is too much here for one sermon, but at least it offers a perspective and opens doors for a sermon course.

James S. Stewart expressed eloquently the possibilities of Biblical preaching such as we have discussed when he closed a lecture entitled "Exposition and Encounter" with these words: "It is tremendous, this issue which is bound up with our Biblical exposition, this issue of encounter with that living Christ. It is not a moving thought that there may be some who will confess in after years that they owe their soul to some divine encounter during your expounding of the Word and will say, 'I met God there; it was there Christ led me captive?'"¹⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Pub., 1961), p. 15.
2. James S. Stewart, *The Gates of New Life* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937).
3. Stewart, *The Strong Name* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1940).
4. *The Gates of New Life*, pp. 1-10.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 11-20.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 241-251.
8. *The Strong Name*, pp. 179-186.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 218-228.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
11. *Planning A Year's Pulpit Work* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1942). Recently available in paperback.
12. *As Seeing the Invisible*, pp. 117-183.
13. From his introduction as editor of *Evangelical Sermons of Our Day* (New York: Channel Press, 1959), p. 28.
14. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 117-134.
15. Notes from taped lectures taken by the writer at Reigner Film and Tape Library, Union Theological Seminary of Virginia, Richmond, Va.