

**From Visions to Video:  
Revelation as a Case Study for a New Paradigm for Biblical Study**

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In this talk I want to think with you about the Church's mission of interpretation of the Word of God in contemporary culture. Specifically, I want to focus on the Revelation to John as a case study for a new paradigm of mission and ministry in post- literate electronic culture.

The Methodist Church is in ongoing crisis because of declines in its membership. Last year, there was a slowing of the decline but the West Ohio Conference led the Church in declines in membership, a decline of over 5,000 members. There are a range of diagnoses and solutions being proposed: a revival of evangelism, implementation of marketing and church growth strategies, recovery of the tradition of the class meeting. Many of these strategies are in effect conservative policies of going back to the 19th century and reclaiming the tried and true strategies of Methodism in its hay day. The proposal here is that we look at the Church's situation from the perspective of the New Testament community and specifically, the Revelation to John.

Listen: Revelation 1.

The congregations to which John was writing were struggling with fear, radical injustice, and the terror of persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. In this introduction he gives them courage and good cheer. God is in control of the future as well as the present and the past and reveals it to Jesus so that Jesus can show it to the Church. Jesus Christ has been established as ruler of the kings of the earth and all the earth will see him. And he blesses them: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear and keep what is written in it." The Revelation to John is the culmination of a process evident throughout the Bible: the appropriation of the communication system of reading and writing within the religion of Israel and the emergence of a way in which the religion can survive in the midst of the Hellenistic culture of literacy. The essential recognition is that there is an inextricable link between communication systems and cultural formation.

The author of the book of Revelation is then transforming the understanding of the role of the communications system of literacy in an explicit and self-conscious manner. Over against the power of Rome which was using writing as a means of oppression, the author uses writing as a means for the empowerment of the churches in their resistance to the power of the Empire. The whole structure of the book, the framework of its conscious reflection on writing, and the implementation of its recommendations is related to using the power of the communications system over against the way in which the system is being used by the economic and political powers of this world. They were using writing to glorify the Emperor and to carry out the effective implementation of an oppressive political system. They were using writing to empower an economic system that was rapacious in its impact on the world, resulting in widespread starvation and impoverishment of the people. In the writing of the book, John is then transforming in a systematic way the understanding of the role of the communications system of literacy in history. From beginning to end, the book

articulates a theology of the significance and role of writing that stands over against the community.

The book begins with the blessing of those who read the book aloud and who hear it (1 :3). There is then an explicit description of the public reading of the manuscript as the event in which the book will be experienced. This was the most advanced and powerful communications event of antiquity. And it is associated with divine blessing. (365) It is reminiscent of the reading of the Deuteronomy scroll (II Kings 22:8-23:3) and the reading of the Torah by Ezra as the central action of covenant renewal (Nehemiah 8). These great public readings of the Scriptures were pivotal events in the history of Israel. (Also Jeremiah 36:5-10; the reading of the Jeremiah scroll in the Temple and to the King).

Then the Son of Man, speaking in a loud voice, like a trumpet, explicitly commands John in a vision on the Sabbath to write in a book what he sees and to send it to the churches (1:10-11; 19). This is the vision statement of commissioning in the manner of the call of Isaiah (the vision of the throne room of the Lord) and Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 30, he is commanded by God: "Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you." (Jer. 30:2) The two chapters that follow are words of hope and promise to the exiles. And in Jeremiah 36, this command: "Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today." (Jer. 36:2) (Also Jer. 51 :5964: a scroll of oracles against Babylon that Seraiah takes down from Jeremiah and then throws the scroll into the middle of the Euphrates as a sign against Babylon). In John, the call narrative itself is explicitly focused on the commandment to write. That is all that he is commanded to do in contrast to the prophets who are commanded to speak. This may be the first commissioning of a writer by God in a call narrative in the biblical tradition.

The letters to the seven churches are the explicit action of establishment of the book and its impact and the opening of the seven seals of the scroll. They continue the tradition of the letters to the exiles by Jeremiah (Jer. 29, 30) The first ten chapters of the book are structured around the writing and reading of the letters and the opening of the great scroll (5:1). The climax is the eating of the little scroll which he is to seal up. He does the sealing of the scroll by eating it. This is a continuation of Ezekiel's action. (Ez. 2:8-3:3 ("In my mouth it was as sweet as honey. ") It is the commandment that he prophesy again. In 14: 13 there is another command to write. Those who are saved are those whose names are written in a book while those who are not written will be destroyed (17:8). Another commandment to write (19:9-10) occurs in the blessing of those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. In chapter 20, the judgment of the living and the dead in 20 is associated with the opening of the books in which are written the names of those who are to be saved. (See Daniel 12: 1; keep book sealed (12:4,9). Only after this is the vision of the new Jerusalem. 22:4 his name will be on their foreheads, a sign of being marked for deliverance from the avenging angels who will destroy all things. This book is not to be sealed but is to be read aloud (22: 1 0)

It ends with the warning not to add anything to the words of the book (22: 18-19) nor to take any words away. This warning is an explicit prohibition of editing and of the

process of tradition formation. It is probably the first explicit copyright declaration. Is there evidence of similar prohibitions in other ancient literature?

From the perspective of contemporary communications research, the book is incredible in its degree of explicit description and reflection about writing: the process of authorship, the relationship of God to the author, the making of manuscripts, their delivery and handling, the explicit instructions about how they are to be read and heard, and the disposition of manuscripts to be sealed and not sealed, changed and rewritten or not. It is by far the most extensive description of and reflection on the medium of writing in the biblical tradition, and possibly in all ancient literature.

The underlying action of the book, what the book does, is to subject the power of writing to the will and purpose of God. What is revealed is that God will use the power of writing for the purposes of the salvation of the world. This is clearly addressed to the way in which writing has been used by Rome and the empires of the world for oppression, for the subjection of peoples and destruction of human life. This is probably reflected in the opening of the scrolls and the delivery of letters. My hunch is that the opening of the scrolls is a reflection of the way by which the decrees of the Emperors were implemented. The power of the Emperor's word, the presence of the Emperor was projected by the delivery, opening, and reading of scrolls. The custom of restriction on the one who had authority to break and seal and open the scrolls was a part of this imperial process. Once the scroll was opened and read aloud, the decrees of the scroll were in force. This process is reflected in taxation decree in Luke 2.

The author of the book of Revelation is then transforming the understanding of the role of the communications system of literacy in an explicit and self-conscious manner. Over against the power of Rome which was using writing as a means of oppression, the author uses writing as a means for the empowerment of the churches in their resistance to the power of the Empire. The whole structure of the book, the framework of its conscious reflection on writing, and the implementation of its recommendations is related to using the power of the communications system over against the way in which the system is being used by the economic and political powers of this world. They were using writing to glorify the Emperor and to carry out the effective implementation of an oppressive political system. They were using writing to empower an economic system that was rapacious in its impact on the world, resulting in widespread starvation and impoverishment of the people.

In the writing of the book, John is then transforming the understanding of the role of the communications system of literacy in history. From beginning to end, the book articulates a theology of the significance and role of writing that stands over against the theological policies that were being implemented in the world of his day. Writing is used here for the empowerment and encouragement of the poor and the oppressed, of the saints of the Church who stand against the divinization of the emperor. The symbols of the Roman communications system--composition under imperial command, the sealing of the scroll, the delivery and opening of the seals, the implementation of the commands written in the scroll through the public reading of the scrolls, the actions of destruction and punishment--are all taken over and transformed into symbols of divine redemption. The book is an outline of an alternative way in which the communications system of

literacy could be implemented in the service of God rather than the economic and political powers of the age. It is an explicit description of the way in which writing was being used as a means of resistance and empowerment in the early Christian church by progressive Jews who believed in Jesus Christ.

The book also embodies a clear strategy. Rather than trying to transform the structures of the economic and political systems of Rome in their uses of literacy, he transforms the role of reading and writing in the seven churches. Both in what it models and in what it recommends, the book blesses those who appropriate the new communication system of literacy for the religion of Israel and the formation of faithful communities. They do not have to be determined by the powers of this age. They can appropriate the power of writing right now in their own communities.

This proved to be a decisive strategy in the formation of the Church and in the eventual conversion of the Roman Empire from paganism to Christianity. The Church formed a communication system of reading and writing that transformed Hellenistic literate culture. In the end the Church's communication system was more powerful than that of the government and the economy.

The book is also, therefore, a structural description of a strategy for the Church's response to the development and utilization of electronic communications systems. It is clear that the systems are owned by and are being used for the extension of the economic and political powers of this age. This is most evident in the ownership and use of radio and television and increasingly the computer industry. Even as control of communication systems is being concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer corporations, vertical integration is also increasing the control over writing and production. The creation of cultural idols in the entertainment, sports and political arenas has become a normal practice in the industry. The glorification of sex and violence is virtually a cliché in the description of the normal daily fare of television. In the computer industry, the biggest sellers in the world of multimedia are sex and war games. More subtle is the way in which the power of electronic communications is being used in the interest of the multinational corporations and the maintenance of the military machines of the dominant governments of the West. The forms of Christianity that are allowed to be in the media system are those that explicitly support the ideologies of business and, therefore, of conservative politics. The wedding of the electronic church and the ideology of multinational capitalist economics is virtually complete. As a result, the orthodox Christian churches which continue to criticize the increasing gap between rich and poor and the dismantling of environmental and antitrust regulatory systems are being shut out with no access to mass communication.

Revelation shows the way forward. Of course, the Church will never be given access to the communication systems of the powers of this age. It will have to find new ways to appropriate the technology and generate its own system. The place to start is in the local community. Just as John and the early Christians integrated the technology of literacy into the worship and educational life of local communities, so also we can integrate the technology of audio, video and computers into the worship and educational life of local church communities.

In preparation for this talk I looked up my lecture from 1981, fourteen years ago, when I last spoke to the School of Ministry. I was younger then; so were many of you. There were two major themes to my talk: the need to rediscover biblical storytelling and to move aggressively into television and electronic communication. As a Church our use of electronic communication technology and our ministries to the electronic culture, which has become the dominant cultural environment in the world, has if anything been weakened. With the exception of a few local churches, we have made virtually no progress in the development of a new synthesis of the Christian tradition and electronic communication. The need is more acute than ever.