

## REVELATION INTRODUCTION HANDOUT

**The Book of Revelation** almost did not make it into the Biblical canon. Its inclusion was hotly debated. It is not a book about the end times and the final destruction of the earth. It is a book about the restoration of humanity, the earth, and its creatures to God's original intention in creation – the kingdom of heaven fully established in the earth. Revelation is primarily about the revealing of the Christ and not about spelling out details of the end of the world or the details of heaven and hell. It points to the presence of the risen Christ in the midst of a troubled and threatened community of faith; the Christ who stands with the community in the midst of trouble and sustains it in this life and the next. "Revelation is not a road map to the future. It's a model for how to live in the present...John isn't just revealing what will happen one day. He – or more accurately Jesus – is calling the people of God to live out God's kingdom on earth as in heaven now...The key to understanding Revelation isn't hidden in a secret code. It's found in love for our neighbors." *Unraptured* by Zack Hunt, pp. 188-189. John, the author of Revelation, offers a hope for the future that is not based on some hidden discovery of how or when the end will come, but on what is then and is now at the heart of the Christian faith: "that we need not fear the final outcome of history, for we have seen its face in Jesus Christ." *Revelation* by Justo Gonzalez, p. 10

**Dispensationalism** is NOT BIBLICAL It was invented in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Dispensationalism is an erroneous theological understanding that history is divided into 7 distinct predestined periods. It posits that we are in the period before the final dispensation, a dispensation of the rapture of the church and the final destruction of the earth.

**Biblical Prophecy** is NOT about predicting the future. Biblical prophecy is about truth telling. Biblical prophets were concerned with calling God's people to repentance and the doing of justice. To the extent that they dealt with future events, it is more in line with this scenario: "God says repent from your wicked ways and grant justice to the oppressed or there will be terrible consequences."

**Apocalyptic Literature** is a literary genre like science fiction is a literary genre. It is not intended to be taken literally. It is largely symbolic and designed to shock with vivid, exaggerated images. The word "apocalypse" does not mean "end times." It means "a revealing or unveiling." The book of Revelation is first and foremost about the revealing of the Christ. Revelation is not the only piece of apocalyptic literature in the Bible. The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke also contain what is referred to as "Little Apocalypses." Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 17. The Old Testament Book

of Daniel (7-12) also contains apocalyptic literature, as do the prophetic books of Zechariah (9-14), Joel (3), Ezekiel (37-39), and Isaiah (24-27). Other examples of apocalyptic references are found in 1 Corinthians 1, 15; portions of 1 and 2 Thessalonians; 2 Peter; and Jude.

**The Rapture** is NOT BIBLICAL. The rapture is a fictional event in which believers are snatched from the earth by Christ so that God can reign down terror on those who remain and destroy the earth, saving the believers because they have been raptured from the earth. It was invented by an English Pastor, John Darby, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He brought the false theology of the rapture, which is found nowhere in the Bible, to the U.S. during the days leading up to the Civil War and it quickly took hold. It was popularized even more in the 20th century by the Tim LaHaye fictional series “Left Behind” which is bad theology and, at least in the opinion of this English literature major, only mediocre fiction.

Rapture proponents rely on the misuse and misinterpretation of two passages of scripture to support their views.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 talks about believers, who are still alive when Christ returns, being caught up in the clouds together with those who have died before Christ’s return. They greet the RETURNING Christ and accompany him to the earth. This passage is about the Second Coming of Christ, not a rapture. Christ does not turn around and take the believers up to heaven. Instead, they accompany him to the earth. The purpose of the passage is to assure the Thessalonian believers, who are concerned about their family and friends who have died before Christ’s return, that they will all be together in resurrected life. There is nothing even hinting of a rapture in this passage.

Matthew 24:39-42 talks about a coming judgment like in the days of Noah when evil-doers were swept away. The context in which this passage occurs makes it clear that as a believer you want to be one of the ones left behind to join Christ in Christ’s return to the earth. There is nothing in this passage to even suggest a rapture.

Rapture proponents lack hermeneutical integrity in combining these two passages. The authors of these two books never knew each other nor read one another’s work. They are talking to two very different communities about two very different things.

**Myth** has gotten a bad rap in modern evangelical, literalist, Christian culture, but myth was and remains a powerful literary genre for communicating truth. Modern evangelical literalism fails to recognize that the Bible is composed of various forms of literature that were never intended to be read or understood literally and were not so understood within historic Judaism or the early church. The literary genre of myth plays an

important role in the Bible, especially in the book of Revelation. “Revelation is a book of myth. Dragons, plagues, multiheaded beasts populate the book ... It’s the truth behind those events that Revelation is trying to convey, not their literal happening in history. The myths of Revelation also play another important role: they subvert the myths of those in power, in this case Rome... Revelation takes myths, sayings, and images known to its original audience and subverts them with new myths, sayings and images. In doing so, Revelation sets up an alternative way of living, an alternative truth to that which was proclaimed by empire.” *Unraptured* by Zack Hunt, pp.169-170.

### **Why It Matters**

Interpretations of the Revelation of John that are shaped by rapture and dispensationalism theology are violent and destructive. They posit that the final goal of God’s salvation history is the destruction of the earth. This destruction is accomplished in a violent, tormentous manner at the hands of God, resulting in a replacement of this earth with a new one that will be occupied only by those who espouse an exclusive Christianity of a chosen few. This view of the culmination of salvation history is contrary to the biblical witness. The biblical witness, the witness of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is that the final goal of God’s salvation history is to heal the world – all of it; not to kill millions of people and destroy entire eco-systems and all species of creatures on the earth. The message of scripture and of Jesus is that God loves the world so much, God gave God’s own life to save it and will never leave the behind the world, it’s people, the earth, or its creatures.

Rapture, destructionist, “end times” theology has led to a disregard of our stewardship responsibility for the earth and its creatures. Polluting, destroying whole species, and raping the earth and stripping it of its resources is justified for the benefit of the privileged few because if God is going to destroy the earth and start over, there is no need to save it. It has also led to destructive, abusive U.S. policy of expansionism and militarism in the Middle East. It also supports the kind of withdrawal from the world that is the hallmark of the private Christian school movement, the disregard for the poor, the immigrant, and other marginalized groups as unentitled, and the exclusiveness of churches with their own sports complexes, entertainment venues, and “Christians like us only” community building that supports a view of insiders vs outsiders whose main concern is to make sure they don’t get left behind. God called us to go into the world and be a force of healing, life, and hope in it, not to escape from it. We need the message of the Revelation of John now more than ever. Let’s make sure, however, that we are listening to the biblical witness of that book and not the invented theology of

rapture that leaves behind people made in the image of God, for whom Christ died, as well as God's good and beloved earth and its creatures.