

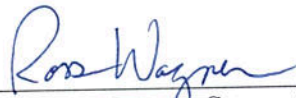
The Lamb Roars: Christ's Apocalyptic Message to Emerging Adults

by


Russell L. Lackey

Date: 4/24/19

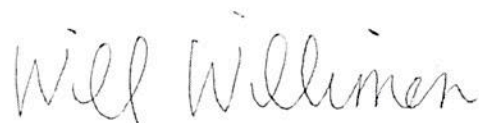
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William Willimon, D. Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT


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Abstract

What would a conversation between John of Patmos and Jordan of Portland look like? To say it another way, how might Christ's apocalyptic address to the seven churches of Revelation (Rev 2-3) aid in the faith formation of today's emerging adults whose worldview has been described as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? This thesis utilizes biblical and practical theology to address three issues facing emerging adults: the replacement of a love ethic with a tolerance narrative that aids market globalization but harms emerging adults; the problem of mass consumerism; and the coddling of young people with the aim of safety over against a life filled with a willingness to suffer for lasting joy. The thesis concludes with a whimsical conversation between John and Jordan that demonstrates what a mentoring relationship might look like between two people in different stages of their faith development.

*To Jamie, Abigail, Sydney, and Brenna;
the members of Luther Memorial Church;
and the emerging adults I am blessed to work with.*

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List of Abbreviations

ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FTE	Forum of Theological Exploration
HSYTI	High School Youth Theological Institute
MTD	Moralistic Therapeutic Deism
NEXUS	NEXUS Community of Young Christian Leaders
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NSYR	National Study of Youth and Religion

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I am thankful for the many people who accompanied me throughout this project. Special thanks to Craig Koester for helping me chart a course for this thesis as well as to Ross Wagner and Fred Edie for being the first and second readers on it. Heartfelt gratitude to the members of Luther Memorial Church for their generous support throughout the D. Min. program. I owe much to the wonderful people at the Lilly Endowment and FTE whose work with the High School Youth Theological Institutes inspired me to learn more about emerging adults. To my wife, Jamie, and daughters: Abigail, Sydney, and Brenna whose sacrifice allowed me to complete this program. Finally, to my friends Shane Comellas, Kate Faas, Craig Giera, Carole Henning, Ken Sundet Jones, Mark Mattes, along with Sarah Musser whose contributions and encouragement were so extensive that my thesis would not have been completed without them.

Russell L. Lackey
Grand View University, Des Moines
Antipas of Pergamum Feast Day, 2019

Introduction

Can the Lamb roar? A lamb is soft and cuddly. Its *bleat* is more annoying than mighty. A lion, in contrast, is strong and has a ferocious roar. A lion is not a lamb, and a lamb is definitely not a lion. However, in John's vision in Revelation, Christ is both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb who was slain. As the Lion of Judah, Christ fulfills the prophets' declaration to Israel that God would send them a powerful ruler. As the slain lamb, Jesus pours out his mercy on the cross for the salvation of the world. One might expect the Lion to be the stronger of the two images, but it is the slain lamb who is mightier. As Christ, the Lamb roars!

This thesis attempts to bring two vastly different worlds together: the world of first century Asia Minor and the world of today's emerging adults, that is, 18-to 29-year-olds.¹ More specifically, it aims to see how Christ's address to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev 2-3) can positively affect the faith development of this demographic. Or, to state it another way, this project attempts to facilitate a conversation between "John of Patmos" and "Jordan of Portland" with the hope of renewal and reformation for today's emerging adults and their faith communities.

¹ Jeffery J. Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties." *The American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000), 469-480. In 2000, Jeffrey Arnett presented a theory of emerging adulthood in which he argued that young people were taking longer to grow up than previous generations, as measured by their entry into stable adult roles as well as their own self-perception of not-fully-adult status. As a result, a new term needed to be created. In a later work, Arnett argues that the lengthening of emerging adulthood is the result of four revolutions within society: the Technology Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Women's Movement, and the Youth Movement. Important to this thesis is the opportunity a delayed adulthood has for the church because emerging adults have extended time to explore matters of faith. Jeffery J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2-8.

Comparing the worlds of John and Jordan is like comparing a wooden bridge that connects two sides of a river to the Channel Tunnel that links England to France. Both bridges assist in transportation. But they are vastly different. In the same way, the worlds John and Jordan inhabit differ greatly. John's world was dominated by the Roman Empire and its imperial cult. Residents in the lands occupied by Rome were subjects to the empire's rule and vision of life. People were not free in this system. Indeed, many were slaves and servants whose value consisted in maintaining imperial peace in order to facilitate political and economic stability.² John Kraybill notes that the pressing issue for Revelation's readers was "how Christians, who gave their highest loyalty to Jesus, should conduct themselves in a world where economic and political structures assume that everyone would worship the emperor."³ To oppose Rome was to stand against a conquering system designed to control and pacify the masses. Rebellion brought swift retribution from the Roman sword.

Jordan's world is much more complex as technologically aided globalization allows for an interconnectivity in which information, goods, and services flow freely on a planetary scale. The disparity of wealth breeds deep tensions within such interconnectivity and interdependence, as does the spread of the rule of law and the rise of global criminal networks, the advancement of a common culture and the demise of local cultures, the creation of social networks and the loss of privacy, along with

² Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power; vol. 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 250. Mann, writes that: "The interest of Rome lies in its imperialism... as Rome institutionalized the rule of its legions more stably and over a longer period of time than any other society before or since... The empire of domination eventually became a true territorial empire, or at least had about as high a level and intensity of territorial control as could be attained within the logistical constraints imposed on all agrarian societies.... What Rome acquired, Rome kept."

³ Nelson J. Kraybill. *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 15.

advances that can both enhance and destroy life.⁴ As a result, many American emerging adults have embraced a belief system that Christian Smith has named Moralistic

Therapeutic Deism (MTD). As defined by Smith, MTD has five principles:

- God exists, has ordered the world, and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.⁵

On the surface, MTD appears to be a good option for individuals flourishing within a global economy. While it is true that millions of people are doing well within this system, many others are not. And because God is a mere outsider to this system, today's worldview lacks the kind of transcendence needed to bring about a healthier world for all people.

With such a wide disparity between the worlds in which John and Jordan live, one might wonder what they have in common. The quick answer is sin and grace. Sin is the condition that holds the world captive and manifests itself in systems that exploit the masses, ideologies that divide people, diseases and addictions that destroy health, and also in individual attitudes and actions destructive of community with God and fellow human beings. Sin is what Augustin of Hippo (d. 430) describes in his *Confessions*: "But my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in God but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion, and error."⁶ But

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion In A Globalized World*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 35-36.

⁵ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-163.

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1992), bk. 1, 20.

where there is sin, grace abounds (Rom 5:20). Grace is manifest in God's love for this world and Christ's death on the cross (Rom 5:8). Grace delivers people from the dominion of sin, death, and the devil making them into a holy nation and a royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9-10). God's grace, in Christ, is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Heb 13:8).

In John's day, the dragon (Satan) gave power to the beast (Rome) so that the Mediterranean region would experience stability and order and in turn come under its dominion (Rev 13:4). Similarly, in today's world, Western societies idolize markets, and the dragon uses the global economy to mold individuals whose desires are oriented toward various forms of consumption. Global capitalism feeds the illusion that we make autonomous choices based on individual preferences that will not harm others when, in fact, our desires are encoded by sin that corrodes communities and creation. MTD is a natural consequence of being fettered to a vanity that is captivated by the glitter that global capitalism offers. Though John's world is more authoritarian and less individualistic than Jordan's, sin remains the constant that Christ must defeat and that his people must strive against.

To help facilitate a conversation between these two worlds, literary, historical, cultural, and theological tools are needed. In addition, a preacher's imagination is helpful. As Jonathan Wilson, the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Chapel of Harvard University, explains, "Each Sunday, preachers seek to bring Jesus forward from the annals of antiquity in order that he may be pressed upon the hearts and minds of the contemporary hearer in real and relevant ways."⁷ Walton's words

⁷ Jonathan L. Walton, *A Lens of Love: Reading the Bible in Its Word for Our World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 44.

are true with one caveat: the preacher must also decide which aspects of Jesus' character are needed for the occasion. Does our context require the rabbinic Jesus, the divine Jesus, the liberating Jesus, the crucified Jesus, a combination of these, or another aspect of Jesus altogether?⁸ What is too often neglected in today's proclamation is the apocalyptic Jesus who can speak an "apocalyptic no" *against* this world while also delivering an "eschatological yes" *to* his people.

The word "apocalyptic" can be a frightening word because it is often associated with end-time prophecy. Though some people have used the book of Revelation in this way, a better definition of the word "apocalyptic" is a "disclosure" or "revelation" of the way things really are.⁹ This includes God's final victory over evil, but it embraces much more than this. The book of Revelation is a witness of Christ who, in these last days, ends the world as we know it.¹⁰ This witness is confrontational to the rulers of this world who defy God as well as to the churches who have fallen away from following Christ.¹¹ The apocalyptic witness is also comforting to those who suffer from following Jesus. In John's day, the oppressor was Rome. In today's world, the oppressor is the greed and lust for power that manipulates globalization for selfish gain. An apocalyptic message is needed to name the destructive antichrists that destroy life while also providing a vision of a godly life for God's people to follow as they wait for vindication (Rev 6:9-11).

⁸ The preaching task must consider both the context and audience. When occasions for repentance is needed, a confronting word from Jesus is required. However, there are other moments when a more comforting word is needed. Even more, there are times when the same message brings comfort to one person and confrontation to another.

⁹ Paul D. Hanson, "Apocalypse and Apocalypticism: The Genre," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 279-282.

¹⁰ The church has been in the last days, anticipating Christ's return, since his ascension. The New Testament speaks of the day of Christ's return as "at hand" or "near" (Rom 13:11-12; Heb 10:24-25; 1 Pet 4:7; Jas 5:8).

¹¹ An example of this kind of apocalyptic witness occurs in the preface to the Augsburg Confession (1530) where the confessors "make public witness and appeal" to Emperor Charles V.

This is where Revelation can speak a powerful word. Although there are glimpses of an apocalyptic point of view throughout the New Testament, the clearest picture is found throughout Revelation as Jesus is neither afraid to confront the destroyers of the world, nor shy to call his church to follow him. In fact, the reader of Revelation is required to participate in the apocalypse. As Richard Hays explains, “Revelation opens with a blessing on those who are to ‘perform’ it... For this work to have its effect, it must be read aloud; that is the sort of text that it is, like a script for a play – a play in which the readers now find themselves the performers.”¹² The apocalyptic Jesus does not allow the people of his church to wait on the sidelines; they must commit. Either they will follow the Beast or follow the Lamb. Neutrality is not and cannot be an option.

Of course, such a dualistic vision of life is threatening to a globalized world.¹³ Religious exclusivity of any kind has the potential to inspire violence in a highly interconnected and independent world. Faith, however, can also be an indispensable part of human flourishing in such a world.¹⁴ It is no accident that the most successful large-scale reconciliation efforts in the twentieth century – the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Gandhi’s struggle for Indian independence, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights movements – were inspired by ideas of reconciliation grounded in religion.¹⁵ The apocalyptic Jesus is able to speak a transcendent word that

¹² Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 184.

¹³ Steven J. Friesen, “A Useful Apocalypse: Domestication and Destabilization in the Second Century.” In *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, edited by Adela Yarbro Collins (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2017), 79-103. Friesen argues that the potential of John’s apocalypse to destabilize society caused church leaders in the second century to domesticate its message. Influenced by David Chidester’s work on “wild religion,” Friesen argues that Revelation functions as a domesticating and destabilizing agent making it useful in creating lasting change.

¹⁴ Volf, *Flourishing*, 13.

¹⁵ Volf, 183.

can renew and reform the Church, freeing it to provide an alternative message of reconciliation to a world turned in on itself.

Though the entire book of Revelation provides the fullest picture of the apocalyptic Jesus, the focus of this thesis is on Christ's address to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev 2-3). It attempts to answer the theological, biblical, and practical questions related to how the apocalyptic Jesus provides resources to combat the MTD worldview while also offering ways to move forward. The questions are as follows:

- **The theological question:** How does Christ's address to the seven churches of Revelation speak an "apocalyptic no" to the contemporary American context characterized by MTD, and an "eschatological yes" to an alternative life that witnesses and worships the Lamb in a global world?
- **The biblical question:** How might Christ's address to the seven churches of Revelation, which critiqued the Roman imperial cult, be used to critique the abusive practices that arise from globalization?
- **The practical theology question:** How can Christ's address to the seven churches of Revelation help the church call emerging adults into a life of discipleship beyond the trappings of MTD? In other words, how can Revelation shatter MTD's hold on emerging adults so that they would be open to the life-giving teachings of Christ?¹⁶

These are big questions that cannot be answered in a single thesis. However, my hope is to advance the conversation.

In attempting to answer these large questions, a more practical one arises: How should the seven churches be organized and grouped into chapters? For John, the message to the seven churches was arranged to be heard by all seven churches. For

¹⁶ Jeffery Jensen Arnett, "The Psychology of Globalization." *American Psychologist* 57, no. 10 (2002), 774-783. Arnett argues that globalization primarily effects emerging adults in middle-to-upper class families who have the economic freedom to delay work and marriage. Thus, in one sense, the practical theology question is primarily a middle-to-upper class question. However, as Arnett explains, the message of globalization does influence the outlook on life of the poor and thus their attitudes towards happiness, consumption, and resiliency.

example, a strong warning about consumption to the Laodiceans was heard by the poor Smyrnaeans. Likewise, Christ's promises to the poor Smyrnaeans were heard by the rich Laodiceans.¹⁷ Because of the fluidity of these addresses, I will organize my thesis chapters based on major issues facing today's emerging adults: the replacement of a love ethic with a tolerance narrative that aids market globalization but harms emerging adults and their relationships; being consumed by mass consumerism; and the coddling of young adults with the aim of safety over against a life filled with a willingness to suffer for lasting joy.

In Chapter 1, Ephesus and Thyatira are examined. The Ephesians were chastised for abandoning love, whereas the Thyatirans distorted love by tolerating a false teacher whose message affirmed Rome's colonizing practices. Christ commends both communities for the good work they are doing, but also, in love, confronts them to change. It is the confrontational nature of Christ's address that is difficult for many adherents of MTD to grasp. Globalization must bring all people to the table in order to allow markets to flourish. But to accomplish this, people are called to abandon, or at least to not talk publicly about, core convictions; they must settle for the lowest common denominator with little hope of having actual debates about competing values because divisions disrupt commerce.¹⁸ And yet, Revelation assumes people are faced with

¹⁷ Marianne Meye Thompson, "Reading What Is Written in the Book of Life," in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, edited by Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 162. Thompson argues that even though the address is to seven historical churches in Asia Minor, there were many other congregations in the region who "overheard" the message. This is important for today's reader because "the individualized word that targets each church may also be directed to anyone who has ears to listen, whoever they may be and wherever and whenever they may live."

¹⁸ Keith Hampton, Lee Rainie, Weixu Lu, Maria Dwyer, Inyoung Shin, and Kristen Purcell, "Social Media and the 'Spiral of Silence'," *Pew Research Center Internet and Technology* (August 26, 2014). Hampton and his team of researchers discovered that "when social media users felt their opinions were not supported online, they were less likely to say they would speak their minds."

competing allegiances that they must struggle to name and then decide whom to serve. The call to love summons the community to engage alternative ideologies without succumbing to violence so that faith and reconciliation might occur. This is particularly frightening for emerging adults, whose social media comments can cost them friendships and employment opportunities.

In chapter 2, Christ's addresses to Sardis and Laodicea challenge Christians benefiting from the Roman economic system. Their wealth made them believe their lives were secure and meaningful. Though Christianity affirms the mundane world and the gifts of creation, it also is adamant that humanity does not live on bread alone. Today's emerging adults and their families have bought into the illusion that mass consumption provides security. They have been programmed via marketing to be consumers, with hollow promises that each purchase will bring more satisfaction when in reality it provides less. Just as Christ called the churches in Asia Minor to question Rome's economic system, Christ calls today's church to do the same. Christ invites his followers to detach from mass consumption in order to see their attachment to God, which in turn allows them to experience the deepest enjoyment of God's creation.

In chapter 3, Christ's addresses to Pergamum, Smyrna, and Philadelphia commend these three churches for battling against the Roman imperial cult. For the Christians in Pergamum, this was a risky endeavor, as Antipas was put to death for his witness (2:13). In Smyrna, Christians faced extreme poverty because of their faithfulness. For the Philadelphians, following Christ meant being locked out of the inner circle of society. In none of these instances did Christ promise safety or an end to suffering. Instead, he called them to endure. Endurance is core value of Christianity because

allegiance to Christ assumes persecution at the hands of those with differing loyalties.

Thankfully, Christianity, with its understanding of persecution in the present and vindication in eternity, offers the resources for faithful resistance and endurance.

Unfortunately, emerging adults who have been taught to retreat to safety instead of facing suffering do not develop the skills to endure. In such a complex world, Christians who follow Christ have the resilience to love courageously and, in so doing, witness to the lamb whom they will enjoy forever.

The conclusion presents a summary of the thesis along with a whimsical conversation between John of Patmos and Jordan of Portland. This conversation is meant to provide an example of what a mentoring relationship might look like between two very different people. This, of course, is a metaphor for the larger question: How can the scriptures be used to form and reform the faith of emerging adults?¹⁹

On a personal note, this project matters to me because of my work as a pastor on a university campus.²⁰ Many of these students have a therapeutic worldview and are riddled with anxiety. These students belong to one of three main tribes. The first is the

¹⁹ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017). This question is influenced by an observation Andrew Root makes about the use of scripture in faith formation: "Even though MTD is a helpful idea it nevertheless is entirely a sociological descriptor, coming from a certain tradition of thought that is helpful but different from the theological or biblical perspective that has been discussing faith for thousands of years" (Root, xvii). Root goes on to say, "Giving in to this immanent definition of faith, we've allowed sociologists and their immanent instruments to constitute the shape and temperature of faith itself – as if faith has no transcendent quality" (Ibid., 148). This thesis attempts to use biblical and theological language to engage the religious descriptors used by sociologists.

²⁰ This thesis draws on my employment at Grand View University as campus pastor as well as my oversight of the NEXUS Community of Young Christian Leaders (NEXUS). NEXUS is part of the Lilly Endowment's High School Youth Theological Institute (HSYTI) program and primarily serves white middle-class high school students. Grand View University's demographics are different from NEXUS' demographics. Though Grand View is located in Des Moines, the student body is more ethnically diverse than the region due to the recruitment of student athletes from outside of Iowa. Many of the students at Grand View are first in their families to attend college. The average ACT score is 21, and Grand View has an acceptance rate of 98.7%. Due to socioeconomic reasons, most students must work while balancing athletic and academic loads.

“evangelical orthodox tribe.”²¹ This tribe is small and uses the language of faith but often struggles to articulate the nature of the life of faith. The second tribe is the “liberal protestant tribe,” which in its ecumenism invites all students, regardless of creed, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, to participate in social activism endeavors. This tribe is also small and, though it does a better job articulating the life of faith, it rarely uses the language of faith. The third tribe encapsulates most students. This group has some exposure to church and occasionally engages one of the other two tribes when they have time to do so. These students are the most comfortable living in a neutral zone believing they are completely free from the trappings of religion. Unbeknownst to them, they are captive to an oppressive cultural and economic system and are unaware that Christ can help them flourish. All three tribes have been deeply influenced by market globalization in one way or another and need a deeper encounter with Jesus to free them from the MTD worldview.

There is a promise in the book of Revelation that those who read, listen, and keep the revelation will be blessed (1:3). It is my hope that this thesis will open the readers’ ears to the blessings that come from hearing the Lamb’s roar!

²¹ Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Ministry: From A Strategy of Influence To A Theology Of Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007). Root argues that evangelical Protestants have an “engaged orthodoxy” where its members engage American culture by holding to orthodox beliefs (Root, *Revisiting*, 61-64). This engagement provides evangelicalism with strong margins that delineate who is adversarial and who is an adherent resulting in adherents having a strong sense of identity (belonging) and purpose (meaning) which is hard to maintain in a pluralistic world (Root, 65). Root notes that a potential problem with this approach is that such groups too often “make relationships only about personal influence that feels good” instead of “accompaniment” (Ibid., 79).

Chapter 1:

Love Is Greater Than Tolerance

*“Above all, maintain constant love for one another,
for love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8, NRSV)*

*“Beloved, let us love one another.
For love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God
and knows God.” (1 John 4:7)*

*“I reprove and discipline those whom I love.”
(Rev 3:19)*

To be a Christian is to be captured, changed, and sent out into this world by the love of Christ. Love is at the very heart of God and is demonstrated in Christ’s humble birth, self-giving life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection. His love liberates us from sin and drives us into the world to love as we have first been loved (1 John 4:19).

But what happens when Christians abandon love? What happens when the cruciform life of Christ no longer shapes the community? These are the questions Revelation raises for the church at Ephesus. In Thyatira, the issue is not about forsaking love as much as it is about distorting love by tolerating a false teacher whose message affirms Rome’s colonizing practices. Christ commends both communities for the good work they are doing but also, in love, confronts them and bids them to change.

It is the confrontational nature of Christ’s address that is difficult to accept, especially for today’s emerging adults. Globalization’s goal of flourishing markets requires bringing people to the table as consumers. But to accomplish this, these same people must also be called to abandon, or at least to not publicly talk about, core

convictions or have actual debates about competing values because divisions disrupt commerce. And yet, Revelation assumes people do face competing allegiances as a common human experience and must struggle to both name and decide whom to serve.

Unfortunately, today's church preaches a message of a tolerance, urging us to avoid offense, rather than a loving gospel willing to both comfort and confront. When this happens, the church loses its vitality and becomes a limbless body unable to care for the neighbor. For this reason, Christ must speak to the churches in Ephesus and Thyatira, as well as to today's church. His message is not nice, but it is filled with love – the kind of love that engages alternate ideologies without succumbing to division and or violence with the aim of reconciliation.

Christ Addresses Ephesus: “You Have Abandoned Love!” (Rev 2:1-7)

The city of Ephesus was one of the chief urban centers of Asia Minor. Ephesus housed the residence of the Roman governor and was a prominent port city with major streets and public squares.¹ Athletic festivals were held in its stadium, and its theater could hold up to 24,000 people. Ephesus was home to the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.² What isn't as widely known is that the church at Ephesus was a model community of resistance.

For the Ephesians, standing up for truth meant standing against the dominant culture. Christ commends them for this: “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to

¹ Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*. New Testament Library Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 49.

² Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 57-58.

be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary” (Rev 2:3-4). Even more, Christ commends them for hating “the works of the Nicolaitans,” which Christ also hated (2:6).³ This common hatred is significant in the ancient world because “having a common enemy, in this case the Nicolaitans, was a sign of friendship between Christ and the Ephesians.”⁴

It is out of deep friendship that Christ rebukes the Ephesians: “You have abandoned your first love” (2:4).⁵ This language is strong. The Ephesians have abandoned, let go, forsaken, walked away from their “first love.” They are guilty like the Corinthians, to whom Paul wrote: “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor 13:2). There is much to consider in Christ’s call to love.

A few questions need to be asked: First, *what or who is the “first love” the Ephesian church abandoned?* This is a difficult question to answer because the passage provides no further explanation. There is no scholarly consensus on this matter.⁶ The very

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 195. Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that “it is likely that all three names ‘Nicolations, Balaam, and Jezebel’ characterize the same group of Christian prophets who allowed eating food sacrifice to idols and accepted compromise with the emperor cult.”

⁴ David A. DeSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 187.

⁵ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 269. Culturally, an honest confrontation about someone’s shortcomings was understood to be an act of friendship.

⁶ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 230. Beale suggests love for God or Christ is the issue. Blount, Koester and Mounce see opposition to false teaching that has led to a loss of love for other believers. Hemer suggests that the loss of love has cooled zeal for evangelism. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishers, 2001), 41. Aune is silent on this issue. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*. Word Biblical Commentary; 52, A (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 1997. Caird does not mention what love they have abandoned but only the effects of losing such love. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966), 31.

fact that the object of its love is not identified might suggest a common understanding of love within the community. It is quite plausible that John did not have to define the nature of love, because “love is,” as Victorinus of Petovium (d. 304) states, “the principal commandment of Christianity.”⁷ In other words, Christians love God, neighbor, community, and even enemy as a response to Christ’s love.

Second, *why should the Ephesians listen to Christ on the topic of love?* In the Old Testament, prophets would often speak a hard word and then provide an apology for their words. John makes no such apology; instead he assumes Christ’s credibility is enough. David DeSilva explains, “The speaker offers no evidence for the premise in the way of a list of specific acts or behaviors that reveal this alleged failure of love. The audience is expected to accept the diagnosis on the basis of the speaker’s authority.”⁸ The reason Christ can speak with authority about love is because, in his life, death, and resurrection, he is an expert on the topic.

In the first chapter of Revelation, Christ is described as a lover of his church: “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood...” (1:5). The combination of motive and action is similar to other passages in the New Testament that highlight Christ’s work.⁹ For instance, in Galatians 2, Paul speaks of “the Son of God, who *loved me and gave himself for me*” (2:20). In Ephesians 5 we read, “Christ *loved us and gave himself up for us...*” (5:20). However, in Revelation 1:5, Christ’s love is not in the aorist tense, which might signify a past deed, but rather it is in the present tense highlighting Christ’s ongoing love. Craig Koester explains the significance: “Early Christians spoke of

⁷ Victorinus. CSEL 32-34 as cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 19.

⁸ DeSilva. *Seeing John’s Way*, 236.

⁹ Aune argues that “the combination of *motive* and *action* has a traditional ring, for there are a number of formulaic statements that contain the motif of the voluntary self-sacrifice of Christ” (Aune. *Revelation*, 46).

the love Christ showed in the past, especially by laying down his life for others. Revelation sees Christ's love being expressed in his death but here uses the present tense to convey Christ's ongoing love."¹⁰ The active love of Christ provides assurance that he does and will continue to preserve and vindicate them (3:9). For readers who are complacent, however, Christ's love will be experienced as a confrontation, for love is not acceptance of evil but a force that overcomes it. Thus, it is Christ's very confrontation of the Ephesians that demonstrates his great love for them.

Third, *why is love important for this community's formation?* Again, John gives no explanation as to the benefits of love. Instead, John uses strong words such as "forsaken" and "fallen away," and he even threatens that Christ will "come and remove your lampstand" (2:5) if the Ephesians do not remember their first love.¹¹ Why is Christ so adamant about their falling from love, and why would he make such a threat?

Practical theologian James K. A. Smith offers an insight into the importance of love for faith formation that is helpful for understanding the Ephesian situation. Smith says:

Jesus' command to follow him is a command to align our loves and longing with his – to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all. . . . To follow Jesus is to become a student of the Rabbi who teaches us how to love; to be a disciple of Jesus is to enroll in the school of charity.¹²

Smith, influenced by both Aristotle and Augustine, understands that humans can be co-opted by false gods and false narrative that in turn distort their loves and their lives.

¹⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 217.

¹¹ Caird states the seriousness of this threat, "For all its apparent strength and vigor, this church is in danger of losing its lamp, of ceasing to be a real church" (Caird, *Revelation*, 31-32).

¹² James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 2.

Smith suggests that Christians need habits (or virtues), aided by counter-cultural liturgies, that draw people toward love. For Smith, people “either follow after love or fall from love!”¹³ In the case of the Ephesians, Christ is calling them to practice love, because if they do not, then their actions will soon become hard, cold, and hypocritical.¹⁴

There is also a communal aspect to Christ’s call to love. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains: “The strength of the Christian community in Asia Minor consists: in mutual love, in service to others, in fidelity, and steadfastness, in the keeping of God’s word and the rejection of false teachers, in the confession of its faith even during persecution, and in consistent resistance.”¹⁵ Following Christ is to resist culture. When a counter-cultural stance leads to trauma, a caring community is needed for mutual building up and empowerment. Without such care, a move towards vengeance is likely to occur.

In her book, *From Out of the Shadows*, Viki Ruiz details how acts of love by Mexican women in the United States transformed the lives of Mexican-Americans. During the late nineteenth century in barrios throughout the Southwest, mutual aid societies called “*mutualistas*” were created to offer supplies and simple acts of kindness for their participants’ communal benefit. The consequence was that these *mutualistas* united communities and empowered women. Ruiz explains, “For women, *mutualistas* represented the space between family and community where volunteer work was

¹³ Smith, 6.

¹⁴ It is important to note that this is not the first time the Ephesians were told to love. A generation earlier, Paul challenged the community to be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ in order to grow into maturity (Eph 3:16-19; 4:15-16; 6:23-34).

¹⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 53.

accepted and respected.”¹⁶ These women’s acts of love transformed their communities as they learned how to organize for maximum benefits, and they show us that love helps oppressed communities survive and flourish.¹⁷

Another reason to love is because love is at the very heart of the Trinity. John of Damascus (d. 7th century) described the Trinity as a “dance” of mutual love, joy, and delight.¹⁸ Knowing God as Trinity is to be invited into the Trinitarian dance. Love is the glue that holds the Trinity together.¹⁹ For Nick, a former student and mentor at Grand View University’s NEXUS Community of Young Christian Leaders, it was the Trinity that captured his heart. Nick grew up in a non-denominational church where the Apostles’ Creed was never spoken. After coming to a Lutheran church for a semester, Nick told me that his favorite part of Lutheran worship was saying the Apostles’ Creed. When I asked him why, he said that he loved the way it referred to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He loved that the Trinity worked together in unity to create, redeem and sanctify this world. We both experienced great joy on the day he was baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Love was present in the sacrament not only because we care for each other, but because the Trinity was there. Because love is at the heart of the

¹⁶ Vicki Ruíz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89.

¹⁷ Russell L. Lackey, “Ruth Changes the World with *Chesed*.” *Lutheran Forum* (Winter 2017), 16.

¹⁸ Fred P. Edie and Alaina Kleinbeck, “Christian Worship: Dancing in the Joy of the Trinity” (Working paper).

¹⁹ In their working paper, Fred Edie and Aliana Kleinbeck write about the how love is the glue that holds the triune relationship together. Reflecting on John of Damascus’ idea of Trinity as a loving dance, they write, “In this dance each triune member steps in loving synchrony with the others so perfectly as to accomplish unity. Their mutual love for one another makes them one. At the same time, divine love allows each member to leap and twirl consistent with its creative, redemptive, and sanctifying mission. Perfect love and therefore perfect union between members of the Trinity goes hand in hand with each triune person’s freedom to attend to its unique divine role. Mutual loving relations between the Trinity amounted to a ‘surplus of love’ which set in motion the original act of creation.”

Trinity, love is at the heart of the church, the sacraments, reconciliation, vocation, and worship.

Christians who have fallen out of the practice of love cut themselves off from the Trinitarian dance, making the community vulnerable to fracture in the face of persecution. Because of this, John says, “Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first” (Rev 2:5a). “Remember” is an important biblical word. David Aune explains, “To remember was a device frequently used in early Christian texts to encourage those addressed to live up to or to recapture earlier moral and spiritual standards.... In the OT and early Judaism, the motif of ‘remembering’ was sometimes used in contexts where people were summoned to repentance.”²⁰ Adding urgency to the call to remember is the warning attached: “If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (2:5b). Removing the lampstand is the equivalent to snuffing the church out. Christ is in a position to follow through on his threat because he is not far off, and “he holds the seven stars in his right hand, and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1). Rhetorically, the threat is intended as a prod to move the community to action.²¹ The idea of Christ threatening his followers might appear harsh for modern readers; however, for ancient people, it would have been viewed as appropriate.²² The point, of course, is not the threat. Rather, it is the

²⁰ Aune, *Revelation*, 147.

²¹ DeSilva explains, “The threats help to move the congregations toward discovering the ‘works’ that manifest the recovery of their ‘first love,’ or genuine ‘life,’ so as to avoid encountering this powerful figure to their harm” (DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 183).

²² Alexander E. Stewart, “*Argumentum ad baculum* in the Apocalypse of John: Toward an Evaluation of John’s use of Threats,” In *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, edited by Adela Yarbro Collins (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2017), 461-471. Stewart evaluates John’s use of real threats to motivate his hearers. Stewart explains that the legitimacy or fallaciousness of an *ad baculum* argument can be evaluated in three ways: the argumentative context, the use of the threats, and the character, purpose and intentions of the one making the threat. Stewart argues that John’s threats are being used in a culturally appropriate argumentative context in order to motivate his hearers.

seriousness with which Christ calls his church to love God and their neighbor. Without love, the community cannot endure.

Finally, *what is the connection between love and eating from the Tree of Life?*

Most interpreters do not make a connection between the two. Instead, they regard eating from the Tree of Life as a future reward for overcoming a present problem. Once again, we are left to our own devices. In attempting to draw a connection between love and reward, readers might look to the end of Revelation where John says the leaves from the Tree of Life are for the “healing of the nations” (22:2). The call to love and the promise of eating from the Tree of Life could point to the power of love to heal the nations, beginning with the immediate community. Peter testifies to the power of love by urging his audience to “maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8). Love not only restores those within the community, but it also has the potential to heal the nations through its transformative power.

Though the address leaves much to the interpreter, what is clear is that love matters deeply to the Christian life. To abandon love is to abandon Christianity’s primary principle. To abandon love puts the community at risk. To abandon love is to walk away from the Trinitarian dance.

Christ Addresses Emerging Adults: “Love Is Stronger Than Success”

From a faith development perspective, the primary danger of abandoning love is the alternative narrative that replaces it. In the case of the Ephesians, seeking truth without love had become the practice of the church and both exposed the community to internal fracture and weakened its outreach. In today’s church, the narrative of “personal

happiness” often replaces the message of love, putting terrible stress upon emerging adults.

As mentioned in the introduction, Christian Smith and his team of researchers at the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) suggest the constellation of beliefs of today’s young adults should be identified as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD, Smith explains, posits that the “central goal of life for emerging adults is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.”²³ The main vision of life for those with MTD is the middle-class desire to “get a good job, become financially secure, have a nice family, buy what you want, enjoy a few of the finer things in life, avoid the troubles of the world, retire with ease.”²⁴ Though Smith does not consider the historical and philosophical traditions that make MTD plausible in our culture,²⁵ he does list dangerous side effects of MTD plaguing emerging adults: living morally adrift, consumed by consumerism, addicted to drugs and alcohol, misunderstanding the power of sex, and remaining civically and politically disengaged.²⁶ This description is a concerning one.

²³ Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162-163.

²⁴ Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog. *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 236-237.

²⁵ Smith argues that MTD is the product of the triumph of liberal, democratic capitalism that has erased from the common American imagination any higher transcendent purpose and replaced it with the middle-class vision of life. I disagree with Smith’s assessment that MTD’s origins are somewhat new. In fact, the American context has always made MTD plausible because it is a narrative long held in this country —by Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, etc.—that was eclipsed by the Second Great Awakening. As revival fires have long died, MTD has taken its place. A more in-depth discussion would shift our focus, but we can take note of what is “plausible” or believable for young people. Why is the Christian faith so implausible, given all the good that it has done in the world? Why is the narrative of faith as sinister so believable? That hermeneutic of suspicion and the charge that Christianity is hypocritical, is indebted to the French Enlightenment. Of course, MTD doesn’t look at the faith as sinister so much as misguided. The real God would never involve himself in your life because he would never interfere with your self-actualization project. Thus, as Charles Taylor, who calls this age the *age of authenticity*, says we are in an immanent frame that does not believe in transcendence.

²⁶ Smith, *Lost in Translation*.

An additional problem of MTD is the pressure it places on young people to be successful.²⁷ The implicit cultural mantra present in the minds of young adults says, “To be happy a person needs a good job. To get a good job, a person needs to go to a good college. To go to a good college, a person needs to have an impressive application. To have an impressive application, a person needs to do well in school and participate in many co-curricular activities.” As a result, a day in the life of a mid-adolescent looks something like this:

A high school junior who arrives home from school promptly at 5:30 after volleyball practice begins a four - to six - hour nightly ordeal called homework – on an average night. She has dinner over a textbook, which allows her to avoid conversation with her mom and falls asleep exhausted at midnight, only to rise the next morning at 5:30 for band practice before her 7:00 a.m. AP calculus class.²⁸

One must wonder about the impact of such pressure. Madeleine Levine says, “We need to investigate the possibility that some aspects of this culture: materialism, individualism, perfectionism, and competition may actually contribute to psychological problems.”²⁹ Levine notes, “Regardless of whether research has focused on younger kids, older kids, or has followed youngsters throughout their adolescence, two factors repeatedly emerge as contributing to their high levels of emotional problems. The first is *achievement pressure* and the second is *isolation from parents*.”³⁰ This, of course, might seem a contradictory statement; however, what it means is that parents are overinvolved in areas that lead to their children’s success and inadequately involved in the other areas of their

²⁷ Though this thesis focuses on MTD’s effect on emerging adults, it is equally true that MTD has and is continuing to affect both previous and later generations.

²⁸ Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 30.

²⁹ Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 18.

³⁰ Levine, *Price of Privilege*, 28.

lives. David Elkind explains, “Postmodern children and adolescents believe that they must suppress their own needs for security and protection to accommodate their parents’ and the society’s expectations that they be independent and autonomous.”³¹ Chap Clark believes such misdirected involvement causes young people to feel abandoned by their parents. Clark writes, “We have evolved to the point where we believe driving is support, being active is love, and providing any and every opportunity is selfless nurture. We are a culture that has forgotten how to be together.”³² Could it be that when we abandon love (Rev 2:4), we abandon our young people? Might today’s obsession with success be analogous to the Ephesians’ pursuit of truth? In both instances, the community is harmed by these pursuits.

The church should be a place that helps emerging adults bear the weight of MTD. Unfortunately, as Kenda Creasy Dean argues, today’s church promotes MTD, which both harms young adults and drains the Church of its missional impulse of self-giving love.³³ For Dean, a therapeutic worldview is what is left when the church offers “a watered-down gospel so devoid of God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ, so immune to the sending love of the Holy Spirit, that it might not be Christianity at all.”³⁴ The deepest problem for Dean is that even though MTD “comforts, bolsters self-esteem, helps solve problems, and lubricates interpersonal relationships by encouraging people to do good, feel good,” it ultimately, “keeps God at arm’s length.”³⁵ The irony is that in trying to care

³¹ David Elkind, *Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 10-11.

³² Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 31.

³³ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 39-40.

³⁴ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 12.

³⁵ Dean, 29.

for their young people by not imposing the gospel on them, the church is actually separating them from Christ, the one who cares most for them.

Thankfully, not all is lost. There are still young adults who are being formed with a consequential faith. In his research, Christian Smith found young adults whose faith played an instrumental role in their lives. A common thread among these teenagers was the existence of religious and spiritual practices that formed their faith. Smith writes:

For such teens, faith involves the intentionally engaging in regularly enacted religious habits and works that have theological, spiritual, or moral meaning that forms their lives, such as habitual worshiping with other believers, reading scriptures, praying regularly, practicing confession and forgiveness, reconciliation, engaging in service to others, using and not using one's body in particular ways, tuning into religious music and other religious art forms, and engaging in regular faith education and formation.³⁶

Echoing Smith's observations, Dean writes: "In Christian tradition, a creed, community, call, and hope are tools God uses to enter the world, and to enter us."³⁷ When God breaks into lives, a missional impulse is created which rules out MTD because "Christian discipleship enacts the inside-out logic of a self-giving God, whose power is weakness, who deems love worthy of suffering and who promises that life will spring from death."³⁸ This is what Nick experienced with the Apostles' Creed. Nick currently is at seminary studying to become a pastor. He has been caught up in the Trinitarian dance and is living a life of sacrificial love.

Martin Luther is helpful on this point. Luther wrote the *Small Catechism* because of the "deplorable, miserable conditions" he observed while participating in the Saxon

³⁶ Smith, *Soul Searching*, 27

³⁷ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 60.

³⁸ Dean, 64.

visitations of the late 1520's.³⁹ He believed that if the "church is to flourish again, one must begin by instructing the young."⁴⁰ Luther's strategy was to mobilize parents to instruct their children by having them memorize the catechism. Luther would not have been surprised by the NSYR's findings that "parent religiosity during the teenage years was one of the strongest predictors of young people's faith in emerging adulthood."⁴¹

Luther's insistence on intentional formation is stressed in his *Large Catechism*:

We Christians ought to make every day such a holy day and devote ourselves only to holy things, that is, to occupy ourselves daily with God's Word and carry it in our hearts and on our lips. However, as we have said, because we all do not have the time and leisure, we must set aside several hours a week for the young people, or at least a day for the whole community, when we can concentrate only on these matters and deal especially with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and thus regulate our entire life and being in accordance with God's Word.⁴²

For Luther, God's Word has power to change the heart and thus create passion. Luther explains:

You must constantly keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. . . . On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living.⁴³

³⁹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), 345.

⁴⁰ Martin Albrecht, "The Effects of Luther's Catechism on the Church of the 16th Century," Lecture, at Dr. Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (1979), 1.

⁴¹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 111-112.

⁴² Kolb and Wengert. *The Book of Concord*, 398.

⁴³ Kolb and Wengert, 400.

Of course, catechization is more than simply presenting information; rather, it is about the catechumen receiving a word that shapes the entire life of a person in both church and home.

James K. A. Smith also recognizes the importance church and home have on the forming and reinforcement of love.⁴⁴ Smith writes: “We learn to love not primarily by acquiring information about what we should love but rather through practices that form the habits of how we love.”⁴⁵ Like Luther, Smith sees the intersection between church and home as necessary for these habits.⁴⁶ In worship, it is “the basic structure of the liturgy – gathering, listening, communing, and sending – that restores our love because it restor(i)es our imaginations.”⁴⁷ Once our hearts are calibrated in worship, then we can cultivate liturgies (habits) to be used in the mundane activities that occur throughout the week: “The capital-L Liturgy of Sunday morning should generate lowercase-l liturgies that govern our existence throughout the rest of the week.”⁴⁸ The home can become a place where we gather to “eat, pray, sing, think, and read together.”⁴⁹

What is crucial for Dean, Luther, and Smith is the importance of church and home for creating and sustaining love. Unfortunately, churches have forgotten this message, and the home has become a place of spiritual abandonment. What might happen if churches were to preach the gospel? What might happen if parents were to take the time to teach their children the message of love instead of the message of personal happiness?

⁴⁴ Though James K. A. Smith and Martin Luther don't appear to be very similar, in fact Luther in his explanation of the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism* insists that it is the heart which defines human nature and the heart that is wired to be united with God. This makes Smith and Luther views similar.

⁴⁵ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 21.

⁴⁶ Smith, 78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

Then the lampstand of faith would shine brightly in homes as children would be incorporated into the community of faith through their parents' instruction. And perhaps the words of Malachi would ring true: "Then the hearts of parents will turn to their children and the hearts of children to their parents" (Mal 4:6). In this, they would get a foretaste of the healing that comes from the Tree of Life.

Christ Addresses Thyatira: "Love Is More Than Tolerance" (Rev 2:18-29)

If the Christians at Ephesus had abandoned their first love, those at Thyatira had distorted it. Thyatira was located in a broad valley 50 miles inland from the Aegean Sea. As an important commercial center, Thyatira was home to a wide variety of trade guilds, including potters, tailors, leather workers, shoemakers, linen workers, bakers, coppersmiths, cloth dyers, and wool merchants.⁵⁰ In Acts, the merchant Lydia, who dealt in purple cloth (Acts 16:14), was from Thyatira. What's more, cultic propaganda in Thyatira went so far as to declare the Roman emperor the incarnation of Apollo, and therefore a son of Zeus. The prominence of the imperial cult put pressure on Christians living there. Brian Blount notes, "The religious-political alliance heightened the risk for persons who tried to opt out of the Greco-Roman cultic infrastructure; rejection of the gods implied resistance to the state."⁵¹

For the Christians at Thyatira, the pressures of syncretistic accommodation were intense. Christ commends them for resisting the imperial cult: "I know your works – your love, faith, service, and patient endurance" (2:19a). This list "indicates that the four terms 'love and faith and service and endurance' are all terms that emphasize various aspects of

⁵⁰ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 61-62.

⁵¹ Blount, *Revelation*, 62.

the behavior of Christians.”⁵² All of these nouns, with the exception of service,⁵³ occur multiple times throughout Revelation. In fact, the mention of works (*erga*) is significant throughout Revelation as John uses the term twenty times, twelve of which occur in chapters 2 and 3.⁵⁴ Not only were the Christians in Thyatira doing the work of faith, they were even increasing in their works. Christ commends them for this: “I know that your last works are greater than the first” (2:19b). Rhetorically, the “amplification to praise” sets up an effective transition for the rebuke that will follow; nevertheless the praise also highlights the good work occurring at Thyatira.⁵⁵ Blount sees their increasingly good works as their defiant witness. Blount explains: “Such a defiant witness performs a great service in bolstering the larger mission of testimony to the lordship of God and the Lamb.”⁵⁶ In the face of societal pressure to conform, the Christians at Thyatira worked hard to maintain their Christian witness.

Even after all the good work they were doing, Christ rebukes them for tolerating a false prophet who was promoting accommodation: “But I have this against you: you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (2:20). The woman is nicknamed “Jezebel” to associate her with the infamous queen of Israel who incited the

⁵² Aune, *Revelation*, 202.

⁵³ Eugene M. Boring, *Revelation: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 95. Boring notes that John’s use of the word “service” is significant because it calls the church to “do more than passively endure; rather there is a ministry to be performed in the meantime.”

⁵⁴ Blount, *Revelation*, 49.

⁵⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 298.

⁵⁶ Though many commentators translate the word *diakonia* to mean general service, Blount and Beale see the service as a part of a larger public witness (Beale, 260; Blount, 62).

Israelites to compromise and “fornicate” by worshipping Baal (1 Kgs 16-21; 2 Kgs 9).⁵⁷ There is much to consider in this rebuke.

First, *why does Christ tolerate Jezebel but not want the community to tolerate her?* Christ’s tolerance of Jezebel was meant for repentance: “I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication” (2:21). DeSilva notes, “In Jewish-Christian and Greco-Roman discourse, Divine vengeance delays to make room for repentance and emendation of life. However, Jezebel has not made good use of the delay, which now nears its end.”⁵⁸ Christ’s tolerance of “Jezebel” is a merciful gesture (2 Pet 3:9). The community’s tolerance is a matter of convenience that allows her to “beguile them to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (Rev 2:20). The identical phrase “to fornicate and eat food sacrificed to idols” is used in the letter to Smyrna (2:14), indicating that the social situation and problem of compromise with idolatrous facets of society wasn’t isolated to Thyatira.⁵⁹

The reason that food offered to idols is such a big deal is its far-reaching implications for community formation and potential abuses of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11-12). Aune notes, “Participation in cultic meals united the participants within the community. Those who avoided such occasions erected barriers between themselves and their neighbors. Christians of high social status were more integrated into society than those from the lower class.”⁶⁰ This is particularly problematic because Roman worship

⁵⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza is helpful at this point: “All three terms – Nicolaitans, Balaam, and Jezebel – theologically label probably the same group of Christian prophets who allowed their followers to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols and to participate in pagan religious festivities. This theological stance probably offered political, economic, and professional advantages to Christians living in the prosperous trading cities of Asia Minor, since the meat sacrificed to idols was served at meetings of trade guilds and business associations as well as at private receptions” (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision Just World*, 56).

⁵⁸ DeSilva, *Seeing Things*, 243.

⁵⁹ Beale, *Revelation*, 261.

⁶⁰ Aune, *Revelation*, 193.

practices were part of the Roman political system.⁶¹ Most likely, “Jezebel” claimed a “deep knowledge of God” in her attempt to relax the barriers of Christianity to accommodate the imperial cult with the hope of promoting tolerance and economic wellbeing. Though we cannot know her complete argument, it would be reasonable for her to argue that, for the sake of commerce, participation in pagan festivals was allowable since the gods are not real, and the emperor is not a god, no matter what he says.⁶² But eating meat offered to idols is not a neutral activity; it is instead an affirmation of the system that John likens to Israel’s captivity in Babylon. This is highlighted later in Revelation with the whore of Babylon. Koester explains: “The vision of Babylon, the whore, equates the practice (eating food offered to idols) with the religious infidelity that is linked to the brutality and materialism that John sees in imperial society.”⁶³ Thus, to eat food sacrificed to idols affirmed a system that exploited and abused people. Such an abuse of power is condemned in I Kings 21 as Queen Jezebel had Naboth killed to acquire his land.

The practice of accommodation has theological implications. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains: “Such accommodation provided an alternative theological perspective to the ‘either/or’ rhetoric of John because it provided a theological compromise. This alternative prophetic rhetoric allowed Christian believers to participate actively in the commercial, political, and social life of their cities and the Empire.”⁶⁴ John stresses that behind idols stands the demonic power of Satan, the ultimate adversary of God and of Christians, and that no compromise can be made between Caesar and God. Schüssler

⁶¹ Koester, *Revelation*, 306.

⁶² Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of Just World*, 56.

⁶³ Koester, *Revelation*, 306.

⁶⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of Just World*, 56.

Fiorenza goes on to say, “John advocates an uncompromising theological stance because he and his followers view the dehumanizing powers of Rome and its allies as theologically so destructive and oppressive that a compromise with them would mean a denial of God’s life-giving and saving power.”⁶⁵ By calling Jezebel a “false prophet,” the community is forced to consider the effect of her teaching. Koester is helpful at this point: “False prophets in Revelation are not charged with making false predictions. Instead, a true prophet encourages loyalty to God and a false one draws people away from God and works against faith in Jesus.”⁶⁶ Clearly, Jezebel seeks an impossible loyalty to both.

Second, *what arguments does Christ give for his complaint?* As in the address to Ephesus, Christ does not offer an apology for his strong words. Instead, the reader is told that Christ has “eyes like a flame of fire” (Rev 1:14; 2:18; 19:12) that are able to penetrate beneath appearances, to “search minds and hearts” (2:23). The image of Christ’s fiery eyes is symbolic for his “ability to see both what we show and what we hide, even from ourselves.”⁶⁷ His eyesight allows him to look deeply to offer both judgment and mercy. As a symbol of judgment, Christ searches hearts and minds in order to “give to each of you as your works deserve” (2:24).⁶⁸ As a symbol of mercy, Christ can see where mercy is needed: “But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call ‘the deep things of Satan,’ to you I say, I

⁶⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, 57.

⁶⁶ Koester. *Revelation*, 305.

⁶⁷ DeSilva explains, “This superior insight gives his words authority beyond the hearer’s potential objections, since the latter are based on inferior self-knowledge” (DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 244).

⁶⁸ Blount is helpful in explaining how sight and judgment works: “The theme of judgment continues with the clarification that Christ examines hearts and minds as if they are open books and, on the basis of what he finds, gives to each what their works of either witness or or accommodation deserve. This discerning activity also connects Christ integrally with God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is the one who judges hearts and minds” (Blount, *Revelation*, 64).

do not lay on you any other burden; only hold fast to what you have until I come” (2:24-25). No “other burden”⁶⁹ is placed on those who resist the “deep things of Satan.” Instead they are commended to “hold fast” by continuing to show love and to resist idolatry.⁷⁰ The point is that Christ sees all things and can offer either judgment or mercy. Such sight makes him able to record our works in the books of deeds (20:11-13).

When I started my work as a pastor, I met a high school student, named Gabe, who had read the book of Revelation and wanted to know why Jesus had laser-beam eyes. Gabe said, “I wish I had laser-beam eyes to melt my enemies.” Gabe had been mistreated by many people in his life and, like most of us, believed revenge was the best option. I looked at Gabe and said, “You know, Jesus uses his eyes to look deep into our hearts to give us what we need.” Without missing a beat, Gabe said, “Well, I hope he sees that I need good things and that my enemies need punishment.” I couldn’t help but laugh. Working with young people is so much fun.

Third, *why does Christ give authority to those who conquer?* Jesus said, “To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered—even as I also received authority from my Father” (2:26-28a). The violence in this section is

⁶⁹ Koester comments, “The ‘burden’ is similar to the decree of the Jerusalem Council, which agreed not to impose on Gentile Christians any ‘further burden’ that to ‘abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:28)... Some interpreters suggest that Revelation recalls the decree by placing no other burden on Christians who abstained from what was sacrificed to idols and from immorality (Beale).” Koester notes that it is “more likely that Revelation and the decree reflect similar concerns but are not directly connected (Aune)” (Koester, *Revelation*, 301).

⁷⁰ Such rhetoric is important for the community as it encourages the faithful while challenging those united with Jezebel. DeSilva explains: “Although overtly affirming those who have not become Jezebel’s partisans, this shift of focus has a strategic impact on those from Jezebel’s circle who ‘overhear’ this oracle... Christ’s positive evaluation of these others, and his suggestion that they enjoy a secure position in regard to Christ’s forthcoming inspection and judgment, potentially arouses feelings of emulation, disposing Jezebel’s partisans more strongly toward a change of course” (DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 245).

difficult for modern readers' sensibilities as Christ gives an "iron rod" to crush the nations like "clay pots." Blount is helpful at offering perspective: "Here, Christ promises authority over the nations. Unfortunately, that authority is already held by the Romans. If John's believers are to have it, God must, on their behalf, take it away from others."⁷¹ Because Christ has received authority from his father, he can give authority to his followers.⁷²

In addition to authority, Jesus gives his followers the morning star: "To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:28b-29). The morning star is mentioned at the end of Revelation (22:16) as Christ is identified as that star. This allusion to Numbers 24:14-20 and serves as a symbol of a future rule. Again Blount is helpful: "The symbol of the morning star refers to Christ's messianic status and future rule. Christ's promise that he will convey this star to the believers in Thyatira is a powerful testimony that he will give them a prized place in his messianic reign."⁷³ It is important to remember that Christ can offer such a promotion to his followers because Christ's own life, marked by suffering and death, led to his vindication and exaltation. Christ, who has fiery eyes and walks between the lampstands, not only sees through the false teaching of Jezebel, but also sees beyond the present to a future reality where his church reigns with him. Christ is calling his church to see as well.

⁷¹ Blount, *Revelation*, 64.

⁷² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 69. Bauckham notes the importance of Psalm 2 in the book of Revelation: "'The nations' and 'the kings of the earth' conspire against the LORD and his anointed (Ps 2:1-2 & Rev 11:18; 16:14). The Messiah is 'God's son' (Ps 2:7 & Rev 2:18) who is set on 'Mount Zion' (Ps 2:6 & Rev 14:1). God promises to give his son the nations as an inheritance (Ps 2:8 & Rev 2:26-28) and the son will break the nations with a rod of iron (Ps 2:9 & Rev 2:26-28; 12:5; 19:15)."

⁷³ Blount, *Revelation*, 64-65.

Christ Addresses Emerging Adults: “Love Is Greater Than Tolerance”

Emerging adults are “morally adrift,” says Christian Smith.⁷⁴ In his research, Smith notes that “6 out of 10 emerging adults regard morality as a personal choice; entirely a matter of individual decision.”⁷⁵ Smith goes on to say, “The vast majority of emerging adults could not engage in a discussion about real moral dilemmas, nor even think of a moral dilemma.”⁷⁶ Even worse, Smith reports, most emerging adults believe that they “should never suggest a course of moral action to another... because each person has a right to be free from external suggestion.”⁷⁷ In other words, emerging adults are both moral relativists and moral individualists who use intuition to address moral dilemmas. This lack of moral reasoning extends to faith engagement on public issues. Focusing on the religious lives of African American youth, Alameda Wright notes that when youth encounter critical societal issues, they disconnect the issues from their faith.⁷⁸ In some ways, Wright’s research is surprising, because privatized Christianity occurs more often in mainline Protestantism than in other traditions. However, even evangelicals and African American Christians struggle to connect faith with societal issues.⁷⁹ All of this seems to support Smith’s assessment that emerging adults are “morally adrift.”

Jeffery Arnett challenges Smith’s and others’ negative assessment of the moral individualism of emerging adults: “Smith’s dire claim is difficult to square with other

⁷⁴ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 19-69.

⁷⁵ Smith, 23.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁸ Alameda Wright, “Personal Jesus, Public Faith, Cultivating a Generation of Young Public Theologians,” *Faith Forward: A Dialogue on Children, Youth, and a New Kind of Christianity*, edited by David M. Csinos and Melvin Bray (Kelowna, BC: Copperhouse, 2013), 171-174.

⁷⁹ Lene A. Jensen and Jessica McKenzie, “The Moral Reasoning of U.S. Evangelical and Mainline Protestant Children, Adolescents, and Adults: A Cultural-Development Study,” *Child Development* 87, no. 2 (2016), 451.

evidence about their lives. For example, they volunteer in higher proportions than their parents did, and service organizations such as the Peace Corps, Americorps, and Teach for America are composed almost entirely of emerging adults.” Arnett adds: “In the terminology of Lene Jensen’s cultural-developmental model of morality, they draw on not only an individualistic *Ethic of Autonomy* but also a collectivistic *Ethic of Community*, and some also are guided by a religion-based *Ethic of Divinity* [that God is immanent in all things].”⁸⁰ Even Wright seems to change course when she contends that “the discussion of emerging adult spirituality too often focuses on the problems that need to be ‘fixed’ in youth instead of their potential to be ‘participants’ in the faith.”⁸¹ It is this potential that is significant because it leaves open the possibility that, with additional formation, emerging adults can develop a more robust ethic.

This picture of moral development becomes more complex when one considers the effects globalization has on emerging adults. Jensen explains that on account of globalization, “It is no longer a question of becoming an adult member of one culture but instead of figuring out how to negotiate multiple cultures.”⁸² This openness to diverse cultural beliefs and behaviors offers both risks and rewards. Jensen explains, “At the individual level, openness may lead to cultural identity confusion where a person is unable to make a commitment to specific goals, beliefs, and customs. At the social or civic level, too much openness to diverse value systems leads to lack of commitment to and engagement with any society.” This might be why emerging adults are unwilling to

⁸⁰ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 237.

⁸¹ Almeda Wright, “The Kids are Alright: Re-Thinking Problem-Based Approaches to Adolescent Spirituality,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 14, no. 1 (2015), 108.

⁸² Lene A. Jensen and Jeffery J. Arnett, “Going Global: New Pathways for Adolescents and Emerging Adults in a Changing World.” *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 3 (2012), 473.

make absolute moral claims. Even more, interacting with peers who “hold diverse values often serves as a catalyst for a broadening of individual knowledge and beliefs, as well as newfound empathy toward the circumstances of others.”⁸³ In effect, globalization, aided by social media, creates both the opportunity and risk that comes with “multiply loyalties.”

Christ’s address to Thyatira naturally raises concerns for today’s readers, especially those open to multiple loyalties. Greg Cary sees the rhetoric in Revelation as abusive because John “curses anyone who veers from his program.”⁸⁴ Even more, Carey sees Jezebel as mistreated because she is not given a voice in the rhetoric.⁸⁵ DeSilva disagrees. He counters that Carey really faults John for “not making room at the table for Jezebel and for declaring her vision for Christian practice ‘out of bounds.’”⁸⁶ DeSilva does not see Jezebel as a victim of John’s authoritative voice; rather, Jezebel promotes a world where John’s voice, backed by the prophetic tradition and the voice of the martyrs, needs to speak out. The God of the Hebrew scriptures is not very tolerant on matters such as Baal worship, Asherah poles, etc. John’s either/or claim silences Jezebel because her message aligns with the freeing message of scripture but rather with the enslaving message of misguided power. Furthermore, just because John speaks this message doesn’t mean that the community must agree. They must decide whose voice best reflects God’s voice.⁸⁷

⁸³ Jensen, “Going Global,” 484.

⁸⁴ Greg Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John*. Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics; 15 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press. 1999), 60.

⁸⁵ Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse*, 44.

⁸⁶ DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 317.

⁸⁷ DeSilva, 321.

This debate is important because it seeks to discern the role tolerance plays within the Christian community. This is particularly important for emerging adults who often view Christianity as exclusive and intolerant.⁸⁸ Tolerance, of course, is a bedrock of religious freedom within a liberal democracy. In a global economy, tolerance is needed for innovation and growth.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, when tolerance is understood through the lens of a therapeutic worldview, it too often becomes “acceptance.”⁹⁰ When this happens, people are permitted to do whatever feels right as long as they do no harm.⁹¹ Christians cannot settle for this because love requires a much higher moral road than a tolerance defined as acceptance. Christ’s love requires sacrifice of self for the sake of the other. MTD sets the bar too low for the church and for young people. In truth, when emerging adults see the church as intolerant, what they are actually seeing is a church unwilling to do the hard work of love.⁹²

A student came to my office needing help with a speech. He was to speak about his personal beliefs, and he was having trouble articulating his faith. I began by asking

⁸⁸ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church And Rethinking Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 169-184.

⁸⁹ Joel Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 12. Mokyr claims that “innovation requires diversity and tolerance.”

⁹⁰ Marie Ann Eisenstein, *Religion and the Politics of Tolerance: How Christianity Builds Democracy* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 15.

⁹¹ Jean M. Twenge, “The Evidence for Generation Me and Against Generation We,” *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 1 (March 2013), 14. Twenge argues that “the increase in tolerance supports the idea that this generation is more individualistic. It does not, however, necessarily mean they have greater empathy. Tolerance is not the same as empathy, which involves seeing things from someone else’s perspective.”

⁹² Kenda Creasy Dean, “Faith, Nice and Easy: The Almost-Christian Formation of Teens,” *Christian Century* 127, no. 16 (August 10, 2010), 22. Reflecting on the NSYR, Dean says, “In the end, the NSYR may simply demonstrate that young people are not the religious relativists we make them out to be. It may simply be that Christianity – or what passes for Christianity, as teenagers see us practice it – does not merit a primary commitment.” Jeffery Arnett argues that emerging adults who reject religious institutions, usually do so “not because they are self-absorbed but because they doubt the morality of those institutions” (Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 242-243).

him a series of questions to draw out his faith.⁹³ One of the questions asked about his religious history. It was this question that really opened him up. He spoke of being raised Catholic and how, in high school, he walked away from the faith. I followed up and asked why he left. He said that his mom wanted him to get confirmed but he did not want to do the homework. Because of this, he had to meet with the priest. Instead of challenging him on matters of faith, the priest let him get confirmed without doing any work. The student said: “I decided to get confirmed to appease my mom. I still didn’t fill out the booklets. They still confirmed me. This shows the hypocrisy in all of this. Religion is simply recruiting and nothing else.”

This student ran into a faith of acceptance and convenience instead of one willing to do the hard work of love to figure out why a young person was struggling in the first place. By allowing him to skate by, this young man was shown acceptance but not love. Although tolerance as acceptance sounds good on the outside, to many it is deeply unsatisfying. For this reason, the church has a wonderful opportunity to present a different message.

An example of love-in-action that is better than tolerance-as-acceptance is the gang-intervention ministry of Father Gregory Boyle in Los Angeles. Boyle’s ministry is open to all people; however, he expects a change in their behavior. The program has rules such as, tattoos must be removed, employees cannot wear gang paraphernalia, no fighting, etc. Boyle believes every person is created in the image of God but there are things that stand in the way of knowing this liberating message. Boyle writes, “You need

⁹³ Nancy Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Many of the questions I asked the student came from the questions Nancy Ammerman asked in her study.

to dismantle shame and disgrace, coaxing out the truth in people who've grown comfortable believing the opposite."⁹⁴ Tolerance-as-acceptance allows people to remain as they are. Love-in-action calls people to be who they are created to be.

Today's preacher must do what John originally did, namely, persuade. The preacher must present the message of Revelation as one of resistance and empowerment for those without a voice.⁹⁵ Revelation also serves as a mirror to reveal the degree to which the church imitates Babylon instead of Christ. At various points in American history, reading Revelation this way has influenced the church to fight for the welfare of others (abolition, suffrage, and the civil rights movements).⁹⁶ In a time when emerging adults find themselves struggling among multiple loyalties arising from the pressures of globalization, the church must offer a credible witness that is both passionate and persuasive. The church can be confident that Christ's fiery eyes see through the shallowness of tolerance and offer a much stronger and satisfying message of love. This is neither a "nice" nor a "tolerant" message. Love rarely is. But it is a message that can heal families and give purpose and passion to the church. Love is at the heart of the Trinity and, as the church loves, it participates in the divine dance.

⁹⁴ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2011) 194-198. An example of transformation that occurs through Boyle's ministry is what happened to a man named Bandit who came to see Boyle after being locked up for selling crack. Boyle put him to work at a warehouse. Fifteen years later, Bandit now runs the warehouse, has his own home, a wife and three kids. Bandit's oldest daughter attends Humboldt College and studies forensic psychology.

⁹⁵ Richard B. Hays argues: "Revelation can only be read rightly by those who are actively struggling against injustice." He goes on to say, "It is no coincidence that the most powerful modern readings of Revelation have come from interpreters in socially marginalized positions who were seeking to call the church to countercultural resistance movements: for example Martin Luther King, Jr., William Stringfellow, and Alan Boesak" (Hays, *Moral Vision*, 183).

⁹⁶ Koester, *End of All Things*, 12-14.

Chapter 2: Wealth Is Dangerous

*“The lover of money will not be satisfied with money;
nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.” (Eccl 5:10)*

*“No one can serve two masters;
for a slave will either hate the one and love the other,
or be devoted to the one and despise the other.
You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matt 6:24)*

*“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their
eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and
pierced themselves with many pains.” (1 Tim 6:10)*

It seems rigged! Wall Street, the banks, and world governments each have the power to alter billions of lives. A nation goes to war and millions of refugees flee their homes. Banks manipulate subprime rates and the housing market is destroyed. CEOs appease their investors and jobs are sent overseas. In each case, those in power use their position for selfish gain with dire consequences for the most vulnerable.¹ In his book *Saving Capitalism for the Many Not the Few*, former Labor Secretary Robert Reich addresses the growing income gap between the rich and poor: “In the 1950s and ‘60s, CEOs of large corporations earned an average of about twenty times the pay of their typical worker. Now they get substantially over two hundred times.”² Such greed occurs globally as well. In her book, *Damned Nations: Greed, Guns, Armies, and Aid*, Samantha Nutt points out how the communication devices in our pockets from companies such as

¹ Russell L. Lackey, *Power and Purpose: The Book of Revelation For Today* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016), 123-124.

² Robert Reich, *Saving Capitalism: For the Many, Not the Few* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016), xi.

Nokia, Apple, Hewlett-Packard, Shape, Lenovo, Panasonic, Toshiba, and Motorola contain metals and minerals harvested from mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that help fund mass rape, murder, and illegal weapons distribution within and around the DRC.³ There appears to be no escaping an economic system that enslaves millions and brings divisions and war from our home-towns to the developing world.

When Revelation was written, the economic reach of the Roman Empire stretched throughout and beyond the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. With Rome's economic expanse came a consolidation of wealth among the elite who exploited their subjects and manipulated the masses.⁴ For example, the list of goods mentioned in Revelation 18 shows the reach and scope of the imperial economy:

Rome imported gold and silver from Spain, precious jewels from India, pearls from the Red Sea. Fine linens arrived from Egypt. Silk came from China. Scarlet from Asia Minor. Citrus wood from Morocco. Ivory came from North Africa and India. Costly wood from Africa and India. Iron from Spain and Pontus. Marble from Africa, Egypt, and Greece. Cinnamon was imported from south Asia. Incense from the East and wine from Sicily and Spain.⁵

Mentioned last on the list in this passage, and most disturbing, was Rome's trading of "slaves and the souls of human beings" (Rev 18:13).⁶ This was a world economy that brokered human lives, with Rome as the primary beneficiary. According to Richard

³ Samantha Nutt, *Damned Nations: Greed, Guns, Armies and Aid* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012), 56-57.

⁴ "A vast pyramid of power relationships, called the patronage system, linked every person in the Roman Empire from the emperor to the lowliest slave.... Patrons in ancient society were people with political or economic power who provided benefits such as protection, loans, or employment to less powerful clients. Clients, in turn, variously gave service, allegiance, or public praise back to their patron.... The Romans relied on their vast patronage system which generated praise to Caesar, to hold the empire together" (Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 145).

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 350-366.

⁶ Craig R. Koester, "Roman Slave Trade and the Critique of Babylon in Revelation 18," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2008), 771-772. Koester argues that by adding the phrase "souls of human beings," John want to make the point that "those trafficking in bodies are actually selling human lives."

Bauckham, “The Pax Romana was really a system of economic exploitation of the empire. Rome’s subjects gave far more to her than she gave to them.”⁷ When John calls Rome Babylon, he does so because “Rome resembled the Old Testament Babylon in being a proud, idolatrous, oppressive empire that used power to conquer and oppress the people of God.”⁸ Though it might have appeared advantageous to participate in the Roman system, in the end it was costly.

Christians living in Asia Minor had to decide how much they would engage Rome’s economic system. In truth, they could not entirely escape the tentacles of Rome’s economy, but they did not have to fully embrace it in return.⁹ For many Christians living at Sardis and Laodicea, embracing the Roman system brought benefits. Their wealth made them believe their lives were secure. Even more, they had a reputation of being a thriving church. Revelation, however, makes clear that Christ does not see them as alive but rather dead. The danger facing these congregations is not hostility to persecution but the kind of “comfortable conditions that lead to complacency.”¹⁰ Such complacency sickens Christ.

Today’s emerging adults who face the question of how much to engage America’s economic system find themselves in a similar position. Though they have feasted on a

⁷ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 347.

⁸ Bauckham, 345.

⁹ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis & Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984), 137-138. Yarbro Collins is helpful in explaining the radical call Revelation makes to resist Rome’s economic system: “The social crisis and trauma expressed in the Apocalypse was dealt with by a call to social radicalism. The response of the perceived crisis elicited by the book involves the establishment of Christian independence and identity by withdrawing from Greco-Roman society into an exclusive group with rigorous rules and an intense expectation of imminent judgment against their enemies and of their own salvation. No accommodation to polytheistic culture was allowed. Christians could not join any of the widespread unofficial societies for mutual benefit. Certain coins had to be avoided; detachment from wealth and property was demanded. Continence was held up as an ideal. Most of all, thoroughgoing opposition to Roman government was expected, a very radical stance indeed.”

¹⁰ Koester, *End of All Things*, 66.

rich diet of dystopian novels that speak about the danger of wealth and power, they are still mass consumers. Most do not see a problem with consumerism, and those who do likely regard the problem as too big to address. They have bought into the lie that consumption leads to life. They have united themselves with the harlot, not realizing the great price they and the greater community pay. Just as Christ called the churches in Asia Minor to resist the harlot (18:4), he calls for today's church to avoid the trap of mass consumption. Will we have ears to hear?

Christ Addresses Sardis: “Wake Up, Before It’s Too Late!” (Rev 3:1-6)

Sardis was a fortified city set on a hill with a reputation for being invulnerable.¹¹ Located 45 miles east of Smyrna, it was the capital of the kingdom of Lydia and the former seat of the famous and wealthy kingdom of Croesus. This wealth came from its famous woven textiles and the gold found in the river Pactolous, which flowed through the middle of the city.¹² Being situated at the western end of an important highway that led from Susa through Asia Minor, Sardis' reputation as a place of wealth, fame, and security flourished.¹³ However, Sardis' reality was not as grand as its renown. The city had been conquered by the Persians in 547 BCE, by the Greeks in the third century, and by the Romans in 133 BCE. In 17 CE, a devastating earthquake decimated its population. Under Tiberius, Rome provided financial assistance to help with reconstruction.¹⁴ Thus, the reputation of being a rich and fortified city was tied more to reputation than reality.

¹¹ Blount, *Revelation*, 66.

¹² Aune, *Revelation*, 218.

¹³ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*. Series: New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 92.

¹⁴ Koester, *Revelation*, 310.

Though its reputation of being a rich city was an exaggeration, its reputation for being a populous city was not. Estimates are that between 80,000 to 200,000 people resided inside and around Sardis. As a result, the city's diverse religious life thrived. Artemis and Zeus were guardians of civic welfare. Their combined temple was more than 300 feet long. Apollo, Herakles, and Dionysus were also celebrated. A cult to the goddess Roma was established. A synagogue called Beth Alpha, the largest known ancient synagogue, was built in the 3rd century B.C.E. and could hold 1000 people within its walls.¹⁵ In fact, the Jewish community at Sardis was well-received and even had permission to provide its own food, free from the taint of idolatrous rituals.¹⁶

With so many different and active religions in the city, the blending of religious traditions occurred. An example of syncretism was the celebration of the god called Holy and Righteous, who served as the intermediary between the divine and human world. Craig Koester explains, "The terms 'holy' and 'righteous' are used in Revelation exclusively for the God of Israel, the context at Sardis shows the potential for a blending of biblical and Hellenistic religious traditions."¹⁷

With Sardis' thriving religious activities and its fortifications and wealth, the church there came to be known throughout the churches in Asia Minor as a community that "exhibited a notable vitality."¹⁸ Things, however, were not as they seemed. In Revelation 3, Christ addresses their reputation and offers the following complaint: "I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and

¹⁵ Aune, *Revelation*, 218.

¹⁶ Hemer, *Local Settings*, 131.

¹⁷ Koester, *Revelation*, 310-311.

¹⁸ Koester, 317.

strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God” (3:1b-2). In other words, wake up before it’s too late.

Sardis and Laodicea are the only two churches of the seven that do not receive an encouraging word from Christ.¹⁹ The strong rhetoric against both churches is meant to move them from complacency to engagement. In both cases, Christ does not argue with them; instead, he diagnoses the problem. This is an example of what George Kennedy calls “radical Christian rhetoric,” which relies solely on the authority of the speaker and intuitive confirmation of the message.²⁰ David DeSilva notes: “The speaker expects the congregation to accept the diagnosis and to sift through their own experience to discover what is lifeless about their witness and work as well as to determine where to begin to revivify their congregation and validate their endangered reputation.”²¹ The mention of Christ holding the “seven stars” intensifies the rhetoric as it helps the reader recall Christ’s address to the church at Ephesus which had fallen from a privileged position.²² All of this is to say that Christ’s judgment on Sardis is intentionally strong in order to provoke change.

What Christ is actually saying to Sardis has a number of facets. Initially, *Christ offers multiple metaphors to describe the situation of Sardis*. Christ begins by saying that

¹⁹ The structure of each letter follows a basic pattern: (1) Address from Christ; (2) Words of rebuke and/or encouragement; and (3) Promise to the conqueror. Only Sardis and Laodicea receive rebuke without encouragement, whereas Philadelphia and Smyrna receive encouragement without rebuke. Both Sardis and Laodicea are criticized for their wealth. Both churches have fallen into complacency (Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 56).

²⁰ George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 7.

²¹ DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 246.

²² Hemer notes there are similarities between the letters of Ephesus and Sardis, as both are censured for a fall from a former position (2:5 and 3:3), both are called to remember and repent (2:5 and 3:3), and both promise the victor life (*zoe*) (Hemer, *Local Settings*, 141).

the church “has a name²³ of being alive, but is dead” (3:1). There is a play on words in this passage between “death” and “life.” Brian Blount explains, “To make his contrast between living and dead, Christ does not pit one adjective (alive) against another (dead); he balances a kinetic verb (*zao*, being alive) against a static adjective (*nekros*, dead).”²⁴ Often in Revelation, John speaks of someone who is dead (*nekros*) being brought back to life (cf. 1:5, 17, 18; 2:8; 3:1; 11:18; 14:13; 16:3; 20:5, 12, 13). In Sardis’ case, however, the pattern has been reversed, suggesting the antithesis of resurrection. Blount explains that “unfortunately, that is precisely what had happened; though having a name for ‘being alive,’ the Sardis believers are really ‘dead.’”²⁵

Most commentators suggest that being “dead” means Sardis’ witness was dead (Blount, Rowland, Beale, Mounce). Koester does not dismiss this view as much as he expands it: “Deadness can signify spiritual and moral deficiency. The ‘dead’ are the marginally committed (Matt 8:22; Luke 9:60), whose faith does not express itself in action (Jas 2:22, 26) and who are unconcerned about sin (Eph 2:1, 5).”²⁶ One cannot help but wonder if there is a connection between the works that each church is judged by and the Book of Deeds mentioned in Revelation 20 where the dead are judged for their works.²⁷ What is certain is that, although this church appears to be alive, Christ sees it as dead.

²³ Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys Publishers, 2001), 72. Four times in this passage, the word “name” is used (vv. 1, 4, 5 [twice]). Reddish comments, “This word-play emphasizes the problem.... They have become a church in name only.”

²⁴ Blount, *Revelation*, 66.

²⁵ Blount, 67.

²⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 317.

²⁷ Most commentators, in an attempt to stay away from the problem of works righteousness, steer clear of this question directly, and instead indirectly make connections between the works of the seven churches and the Book of Deeds. Blount’s says the primary ethic of the church is “witnessing,” which will be judged on the last day (Blount, *Revelation*, 373). Beale highlights the importance of judgment throughout the book of Revelation where both the wicked and the faithful, both great and small, will be judged or rewarded

Christ's complaint continues as he changes the metaphor from someone who is dead to someone who is ill, and then changes it again to show himself as a master returning to find his servants neglecting their duties: "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death. For I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God" (Rev 3:2).²⁸ The exhortation to "wake up" shows that the church has "become lethargic about the radical demands of their faith in the midst of a pagan culture."²⁹ The call to be "watchful" is used for the metaphor of a master returning from a journey with the expectation that the house will be in order.³⁰ Rhetorically, these metaphors pave the way for Christ's charge: "Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent" (3:3a). Clearly a "spiritual awakening is urgently needed. As disciples, wakefulness and watchfulness involve paying close attention to what is important and ignoring what is unimportant."³¹ Although the church has a reputation for

based on their works (Beale, *Revelation*, 1033). Koester ties the Book of Deeds to works mentioned throughout Revelation by explaining that, even though Revelation does not include a comprehensive list of righteous and unrighteous actions, things can be inferred: "On the positive side is worship of the Creator and the Lamb (4:11; 5:11-14; 14:8). Christ showed love, so those who follow him are to do works of love (1:5; 2:4-5, 19). Since God and Christ are true, God's people are to reject what is false (2:2). Since God (21:5; 22:6) and Christ (1:5; 3:14; 19:11) are faithful, people are also to show fidelity (2:19). On the negative side, the opposite of true worship is idolatry (2:14, 22; 9:20; 21:8; 22:15)" (Koester, *Revelation*, 791). Schüssler Fiorenza makes a connection with the "second death" described in Revelation 20 and the mentioned of it in the address to Smyrna: "Only those found guilty are thrown into the lake of fire. This is what is probably meant by the expression 'second death,' which the faithful need not fear (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision Just World*, 108).

²⁸ There is a question about whether Christ addresses the congregation as a whole with a different metaphor or whether he addresses a different group. Aune argues for a "shift in metaphor from characterizing the congregation as a whole as being 'dead,' to describing some members of the congregation who are not 'dead' but rather weak and 'on the point of death'" (Aune, *Revelation*, 219). In addition, there is a question as whether *ginou gregoron* should be translated as "be watchful," or "wake up." Mounce suggests, "The exhortations to watchfulness would carry special weight in Sardis because twice in its history the acropolis had fallen to the enemy due to a lack of vigilance on the part of the defenders" (Mounce, *Revelation*, 93).

²⁹ Beale, *Revelation*, 273.

³⁰ This is a popular motif in the New Testament (Matt 24:45-51; Mk 13:32-37; Lk 12:35-40, 41-48).

³¹ James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 95.

being alive, the believers in Sardis focus on the wrong things. Their works are not perfect in the sight of God.

The metaphor changes again, this time to a thief breaking in: “If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you” (3:3b). The image of the unwanted intruder appearing in the middle of the night “underlines their need to remain vigilant,” an exhortation that occurs several times in the proclamations to the seven churches (2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11).³² On the question of what it means to remain vigilant for the coming of Christ, David Aune notes that there are two types of “coming” mentioned in Revelation: There is a “coming in judgment,” which has a negative connotation (2:5, 16; 3:3), and the “return of Christ,” which has a positive connotation (2:25; 3:11).³³ In the case of Sardis, the coming of Christ is one of judgment.³⁴ Held together, the metaphors of illness, returning master, and unwanted intruder are meant to stir the church to action before it is too late.

Further, the Lord’s message is that *there is still a remnant who remains faithful*. Christ says, “Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy (3:4). An encouraging word finally comes. This time the congregation is told that some of its members have not defiled their clothing. The image of being dressed complements the call to wake up as “outer clothing is often emblematic of inner character, and those dressed with spotless

³² Resseguie, 95-96.

³³ Aune, *Revelation*, 221.

³⁴ Hanns Lilje, *The Last Book of the Bible: The Meaning of the Revelation of St. John*, Translated by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 90. Though most commentators refer to Revelation 16:15 in connection to Revelation 3:3, Lilje makes a provocative suggestion, namely, that “at this point, in the middle of the third verse, it looks as though we ought to insert the verse from Rev 16:15, which seems out of place there; while here it fits in well.”

garments represent the ones who are spiritually pure at Sardis.”³⁵ Clothing is an important theme throughout Revelation. The church of Laodicea is rebuked for their lack of clothing (3:18); the 24 elders are dressed in white robes (4:4); the martyrs crying out for vindication are given white robes (6:11); the great multitude washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (7:14); those unprepared for the coming of Christ go to be naked (16:15); the harlot’s clothing reveals her impurity (17:4); the Bride is clothed in righteous deeds (19:7-8); the army of the Lord wears fine linen (19:14); and those who have washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb have the right to enter the New Jerusalem (22:14). Believers keep their clothing undefiled by “resisting the religious, economic, and social practices that violate their commitments to God, Christ, and the Christian community.”³⁶ By mentioning that there are some whose clothing is not sullied, Christ gives an “incentive for others to do the same.”³⁷

Finally, *those who conquer will have a reputation that truly reflects their inner reality*. Christ concludes his address with the following words: “If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels.” (3:4-5). There are three promises given to the conquerors: the promise of wearing white garments, the receiving an eternal name, and having their name acknowledged by Christ.

The promise of wearing white garments. It was customary in the ancient church for believers, baptized naked, to be dressed in a new white garment “to indicate the

³⁵ Resseguie, *Revelation*, 96.

³⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 319.

³⁷ Koester, 318.

beginning of a new life of purity and victory.”³⁸ This is consistent with the importance of white garments throughout Revelation. Like Christ, whose garments were transfigured, so too are Christians whose outer dress reflects their inner reality as “dazzlingly clad believers.”³⁹

The promise of an eternal name. The proclamation is that the faithful will not have their names blotted out of the scroll of life.⁴⁰ “In Athens, whenever any citizen was sentenced to be executed for a crime, his name was first erased from the roll of citizens.”⁴¹ Blotting out of a name is a metaphor for judgment.⁴² The promise is that although those who conquer might be kicked out of their city, they will not be kicked out of the city of God.

The promise of having their name acknowledged by Christ. Jesus says that those who confess his name before people would have their names confessed by him before God and his angels (Matt 10:32; Luke 12:8). This is the opposite of having one’s name blotted out. It is this final promise that fixes the problem at Sardis, as it was a place that had a name of being alive but was spiritually dead. Money and a fortified city cannot buy them such acknowledgement. Rather, it comes by waking, watching, repentance, and obedient discipleship. Such deeds clothe the saints of God.

³⁸ Catherine Gonzalez and Justo L. Gonzalez, *Westminster Bible Companion: Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 33.

³⁹ Blount, *Revelation*, 71.

⁴⁰ I experienced the power of these words when I met a group of Iranian refugees in Denmark. One Iranian man who had converted to Christianity told me that his father crossed his name out of the family book when he converted to Christianity.

⁴¹ Aune, *Revelation*, 225.

⁴² Aune, 224.

Christ Addresses Laodicea: “Your Wealth Makes Me Sick!” (Rev 3:14-22)

Situated on a plateau six miles south of Hierapolis, ten miles northwest of Colossae, and a hundred miles east of Ephesus, Laodicea sat at a major intersection that enabled it to operate as a hub on a lucrative trade route. The city was well-known and well-endowed by its textile, banking, and medical industries. Its signature commercial items “were a shiny black wool and a so-called Phrygian powder, from which a medicinal eye salve was made.”⁴³ After an earthquake destroyed the city in C.E. 60, the city had such great financial resources that it refused imperial financial assistance in rebuilding.⁴⁴

Roman imperial rule produced tremendous wealth. Koester explains that, economically, “imperial rule was good for business.” Residents of Asia Minor produced textiles, metal and leather goods, wine, and grain, and they traded in slaves. Koester goes on to explain:

The Romans provided better access to markets by improving the road system. By suppressing piracy, they made sea travel safer, a boon to port cities like Ephesus and Smyrna. Groups of Roman businesspeople lived in many cities in the province, engaging in commerce locally and facilitating trade with Rome.⁴⁵

So many goods flowed into Rome because of trade that Aelius Aristides, appearing before the imperial court in Rome, could say, “Many merchants’ ships arrive here, conveying every kind of goods from every people every hour and every day, so that the city is like a factory common to the whole earth.... The arrivals and departures of the ships never stop.”⁴⁶ It is easy to see how good Roman imperial rule was for business.

⁴³ Blount, *Revelation*, 80.

⁴⁴ Aune, *Revelation*, 249.

⁴⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 93.

⁴⁶ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 376.

Unfortunately, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains, not all people flourished. “Only the provincial elite of the Asian cities benefited from the international commerce of the Roman Empire, while the masses of urban populations mostly lived in dire poverty or slavery under the heavy burden of taxation.”⁴⁷ Because of this, there was great hostility toward those in power. As Plutarch described the Roman milieu, “The masses are more hostile to a rich man who does not give them a share of his wealth than to a poor man who steals from the public funds, for they think that the former’s conduct is due to arrogance and contempt of them but the latter’s to necessity.”⁴⁸ In fact, Bauckham argues that the book of Revelation was “one of the fiercest attacks on Rome and one of the most effective pieces of political resistance literature from the period of the early empire. Its thoroughgoing criticism of the whole system of Roman power includes an important element of economic critique.”⁴⁹ Though Roman imperial rule was good for business, it was a business that exploited most people.

The church in Laodicea was wealthy and benefited from the Roman system. This church was an established Christian community that was well-connected with the believers in Colossae. Paul’s letter to the Colossians refers to the Laodicean church five times (2:1; 4:13, 15, 16 [twice]). There is even a mention of Epaphras, whose missionary work linked him with the churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (Col 4:12-13).⁵⁰ Even though they had a good beginning, the church clearly subscribed to the Roman economic system. For this, Christ rebukes them:

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot,

⁴⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision Just World*, 100.

⁴⁸ Yarbro Collins, *Crisis & Catharsis*, 94.

⁴⁹ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 338.

⁵⁰ Blount, *Revelation*, 80.

I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.” You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev 3:15-17).⁵¹

There is much to consider with these words. First, *Christ’s complaint is meant to disturb*. The vivid descriptors of “hot,” “cold,” and “lukewarm,” combined with Laodicea’s local background have caused a variety of interpretations of Christ’s words. Aune notes, “In OT wisdom literature, the images of the ‘hot’ (negative) and ‘cold’ (positive) person relate to the motif of self-control, for ‘hot’ is a pejorative metaphor for lack of control (Prov 15:18), while ‘cold’ is a positive metaphor for restraint (Prov 17:27).”⁵² From an ethical perspective, tepidness can be taken to indicate vacillation, similar to the term “wishy-washy.” Another interpretation says that the terms “hot,” “cold,” and “lukewarm” are metaphors drawn from the water supply of the city of Laodicea. Unlike the hot, medicinal spring of Hierapolis, and the cold water of Colossae, the lukewarm water of Laodicea was ineffective.⁵³

⁵¹ Throughout Revelation, Christ sides with the poor and oppressed. As Schüssler Fiorenza notes, “The author of Revelation not only sharply criticizes the community of Laodicea, which boasts of its riches, but he also repeatedly announces judgment and destruction for the world’s rich and powerful (6:12-17; 17:4; 18:3, 15-19, 23)” (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision Just World*, 100). In fact, the only two churches that do not receive a rebuke are Philadelphia and Smyrna, which are poor churches.

⁵² Aune, *Revelation*, 257.

⁵³ Aune, 257. Laodicea was situated near hot springs at Hierapolis. As the mineral rich water flowed the six miles from the hot springs, it would have cooled to a lukewarm temperature that would have been nauseating to taste. The problem with this interpretation is that the aqueduct brought water from Denizli not Hierapolis (Mounce, *Revelation*, 109). Of course, the aqueduct could have brought bad water from Denizli; however, this seems unlikely. Koester notes, “Laodicea’s water was of good quality. A donor named Hedychrous gave his name to part of the first-century water system of the city. Since his name meant “sweet complexioned,” he created a word-play that emphasized the pleasing quality of the “sweet complexion” water being brought to the city. Koester notes, “Revelation’s image focuses on what was used for drinking – taken into the mouth – yet the hot water at Hierapolis was not valued for drinking but for bathing and dying fabric” (Koester, *Revelation*, 337). See also Craig R. Koester, “The Message to Laodicea and the Problem of Its’ Local Context,” *New Testament Studies* 49, no. 3 (2003). 407-424.

A more likely interpretation is the idea of tepidness in the context of a banquet.⁵⁴

In such a situation, a hot drink or a cold drink were desirable, whereas a tepid drink was not. Koester notes:

It was thought that lukewarm liquid was conducive to vomiting. For example, when a slave was charged with eating his master's figs, he drank lukewarm water and put his fingers down his throat to make himself vomit, so that everyone could see what was in his stomach.⁵⁵

The point of this vulgar image of Christ vomiting the tepid Christians out of his mouth is meant to disturb the hearers. Koester explains:

The metaphor creates a crisis of discernment, as has been the case in previous messages, which warned that the Ephesians' 'lampstand' would be moved, that Christ would make war at Pergamum with the 'sword' of his mouth, and that he would put Jezebel to 'bed' (Rev 2:5, 16, 22).⁵⁶

Couple this imagery with the fact that Christ does not find a remnant within the community to praise, and one quickly realizes the Laodicean church is in trouble. Effectively, Christ says that their witness nauseates him.

Second, *Christ's complaint is based on the Laodicean's trust in wealth.* Like the previous churches, Christ knows their works (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). In this case, their deeds are not good because their security is found in economic prosperity instead of God: "For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (3:17). They have fallen into a false logic: "I am rich and need nothing."⁵⁷ In doing this, they sound similar to Babylon who put her

⁵⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application Series Commentary: Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 159. Keener argues that tepid water offered as an emetic was a common practice at banquets.

⁵⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 344.

⁵⁶ Koester, 344.

⁵⁷ Aune, *Revelation*, 258.

trust in her own wealth and said in her heart, “I rule as a queen, I am no widow, and I will never see grief” (18:7). Laodicea and Babylon are intimately connected.

Later in Revelation, John calls Rome a harlot (17:1, 5, 15, 16; 19:2) because of its economic system. “With all the wealth and luxury in Rome, all the travel to and from Rome, are but the signs of a highly successful whorehouse.”⁵⁸ The basic idea is that those who associate with a harlot pay a high price for her privilege. And Rome is no ordinary harlot; as Bauckham explains, she is a rich courtesan, whose expensive clothes and jewelry (17:4) indicate the luxurious lifestyle she maintains at her lovers’ expense:

Rome is a harlot because her associations with the peoples of her empire are for her own economic benefit. To those who associate with her she offers the supposed benefits of the *Pax Romana*, much lauded in the Roman propaganda of this period. Rome offered the Mediterranean world unity, security, stability, the conditions of prosperity. But in John’s view, these benefits are not what they seem: they are the favors of a prostitute, purchased at a high price. The *Pax Romana* is really a system of economic exploitation of the empire. Rome’s subjects give far more to her than she gives to them.”⁵⁹

When he wrote about Rome subduing parts of Britain in C.E. 83-84, Tacitus told of the local chieftain Calgacus, who laid this charge against the invaders: “Robbers of the world, now that earth fails their all-devastating hands, they probe even the sea: if their enemy have wealth, they have greed; if their enemy be poor, they are ambition.” Calgacus goes on to say, “To plunder, butcher, steal, these things Rome misnames as empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace.”⁶⁰ Rome benefited from its rapacious arrangements with other nations.

⁵⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 221.

⁵⁹ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 347.

⁶⁰ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 59.

The image of “nakedness” and the call to buy “white robes” (3:17, 18) adds to the association of the Laodiceans with the harlot. Later in Revelation, John contrasts Babylon with the Bride of Christ. The bride is described as one who wears pure linen, whereas the harlot’s wealthy clothing is actually full of impurity. Bauckham notes, “The Bride’s attire is a stark contrast to the whore who clothed herself in purple and scarlet, and bedecked herself with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication (17:4).”⁶¹ The Bride needs no such adornment because her righteous “works” clothe her, guaranteeing a secure future (19:7).⁶² The question for the church at Laodicea is whether the believers there will follow the false logic of Babylon, which trusts in wealth and leads to death, or whether they will follow the Bride’s true logic which trusts in Christ and leads to life.

Third, *Christ can be trusted because his motive is love*. In his address to the church (3:14), Christ calls himself: “faithful and true,” which is a label attached to Christ throughout Revelation (3:14; 19:11; 21:5; 22:6). Like other claims, Christ does not offer a defense for his title. Instead, he is to be trusted because his words are faithful and true. As the metaphor changes from Christ as the true witness to Christ as the true merchant whose goods are worth buying, such trust is called forth: “Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.” (3:18). This church, whose wealth came from Rome and was spent on

⁶¹ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 167.

⁶² The connection between the deeds mentioned among the churches and the righteous deeds that clothe the bride is a valuable one to make. The author of Revelation calls the churches to clothe themselves in righteous deeds.

Roman goods, Christ calls to buy from him.⁶³ Reflecting on this passage, St. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) writes:

You therefore who are rich and wealthy, buy from Christ gold tried by fire. Then you may be pure gold, with your filth burned out as if by fire. Buy for yourself white raiment, that you who had been naked according to Adam, and were before frightful and tasteless, may be clothed with the white garment of Christ. You who are wealthy and rich matrons in Christ's church, anoint your eyes, not with the eyewash of the devil but with Christ's eye salve, that you may be able to attain to see God, by deserving well of God, both by good works and character.⁶⁴

The contrasts between what Christ sells and what Rome sells is at the very heart of the address. It demands that we confront the question of which merchant sells true goods.

The reason why the Laodiceans should buy from Christ is his love for them: "I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (3:19-20). At Ephesus, Christ commanded his church to love, which is at the heart of Christ, who actively loves his church. In the case of Laodicea, it is Christ's love that causes his rebuke, much like a parent confronting his or her child: "My child, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproveth the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov 3:11-12). It is this love that causes Christ to knock on the door of the church! The "knocking" can be interpreted in two ways: either Christ is a guest or a master. As guest, Christ knocks on the door to visit them. As master, Christ comes to make sure they are prepared. It is most likely that Christ comes as master.⁶⁵ Christ comes expecting his

⁶³ The idea of buying eternal wealth through righteous deeds was a common idea in the early church (Matt 6:19-21; Js 2:5; I Pt 1:6-7).

⁶⁴ Cyprian. ANF 5:479-480 as cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 52.

⁶⁵ Bauckham argues that without "the eschatological interpretation of 3:20, this one of the seven messages would be lacking in any reference to the impending eschatological crisis which pervades the rest of the

servants to be ready for his return (cf. Luke 17:7-8). The great blessing is that not only does the master make sure they are ready, but he wants to eat with his servants.⁶⁶ This is love!

Finally, *Christ will give power and position to those who conquer*. The concluding promise of the address runs parallel with the addresses to the other churches: “To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” (Rev 3:21). DeSilva notes, “The logic of this promise, which rests in the foundational principal that like causes have like effects, once again reflects the equally widespread conviction that Jesus’ story of arriving at glory through suffering and death establishes a pattern that will apply to Jesus’ followers as well, a conviction already seen at work to undergird argumentation in the oracles of Smyrna and Thyatira.”⁶⁷ The Laodiceans think that a life of ease is life’s *telos*. Christ tells them that it is through righteous work they will earn a place on the throne. Later in Revelation, the reader will learn that the dragon gives the beast his power, throne and authority (13:2). To those who conquer through righteous work, Christ gives his followers the gift of authority and a place with him on his throne (2:28; 3:21). Whose message will they trust? Whose goods will they purchase? The Laodiceans have sided with Rome. Thankfully, they have time to repent and buy from Christ who is the true merchant and who gives true authority.

seven and provides their major link with the rest of the Apocalypse. Revelation 16:15, which develops the imagery of 3:18, make is clear that the Laodiceans’ need for repentance has eschatological urgency: they must not be found naked at the *Parousia* (Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 108).

⁶⁶ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 108.

⁶⁷ DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 253-254.

Christ Addresses Emerging Adults: “Wealth Is Dangerous!”

God made us to consume. Indeed, Christ promises to give life and life abundantly (John 10:10). As part of the abundant life, there is nothing better than a chocolate milkshake. That is one of the important truths in creation. If we do not consume food and water, we die. Clothes and shelter are essential human needs. The Bible affirms this in the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11). In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther explains this petition’s meaning as encompassing everything that humans need to flourish:

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.⁶⁸

But what happens when the legitimate desire to satisfy this need turns into consumerism (that is, materialism or mass consumerism)? What happens when our covetousness moves us to use and desire more than we need? What happens when this excess comes at the expense of those around us? Even more, what happens when the church is seduced by materialism?

In his book *Con\$umed*, Benjamin Barber argues that Americans who were once obsessed with being productive are now obsessed with consumption. Driven by corporations trying to make people purchase things they do not need, consumerism fosters an “enduring childishness” among consumers who are uninformed in their tastes

⁶⁸ Luther, *Small Catechism*, 357 as cited in the *Book of Concord*..

so that they can be easily manipulated by advertising and branding.⁶⁹ Such advertising is occurring on a global level. Lene Jensen explains:

In urban areas, young people come into contact with the ideology and values promoted by the global economy, including independence, consumerism, and individual choice... Media such as television, movies, music, and the Internet also contribute to the rapid and extensive spread of ideas across cultures, and adolescents and emerging adults have more of an interest in popular and media culture compared to children or adults.⁷⁰

This is consistent with Christian Smith's findings about emerging adult attitudes toward consumption. According to Smith, "For nearly all emerging adults, mass consumerism is either an unqualified good in life, or it may have some problems, though none that they can understand to do anything about, and so therefore none with which they should be concerned."⁷¹ "Contemporary emerging adults," according to Smith, "are either true believers or complacent conformists when it comes to mass consumerism."⁷²

For the majority of emerging adults, visions of an ideal life consist of securing the resources needed for a good life.⁷³ When asked about what makes a good life in terms of an ideal kind of lifestyle, most emerging adults "expressed some variant of this answer: A family, a nice car, nice house, my own practice, be happy, stuff like that."⁷⁴ This is problematic because it turns the means of life into the ends of life. Hartmut Rosa offers

⁶⁹ Benjamin Barber, *Con\$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: Norton, 2007), 7.

⁷⁰ Jensen, "Going Global," 475.

⁷¹ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 78.

⁷² Smith argues that emerging adults who are "essentially quite content with mass consumerism, account for 61 percent of interviewed emerging adults. Another 30 percent, equally male and female, fall into the category of expressing some concerns about mass consumerism but thinking that they can do nothing about it." (Smith, 78-79).

⁷³ Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmum, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 26.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 93. Smith did find a group (approximately nine percent of participants who did criticize mass consumption. Interestingly, their concerns "did not focus on inequality, the exploitation of overseas labor, or misplaced life values and priorities. They nearly all addressed instead problems around the environmental impact of mass consumerism and waste" (86).

an image to this modern situation: “In a way, we moderns resemble a painter who is forever concerned about improving his materials—the colors and brushes, the air condition and lighting, the canvas and easel, etc.—but never really starts to paint.”⁷⁵ The implications are alarming. When resources need to be secured “then money becomes a currency of power.”⁷⁶ This in turn leads people to become instruments for consumption because “materialism emphasizes wealth, status, image, and material consumption and measures over other things in our lives, like friends, family, and work.”⁷⁷ In such a system, the poor are alienated, “which puts the labor force at the disposal of the wealthy, permitting the wealthy to impose their own law and conception of life, their own thought and religion.”⁷⁸ Such a worldview keeps us wedded to external metrics of accomplishment for a sense of self: prestige, power, money for adults; grades, clothes, electronics for kids.

This can be observed in the changing attitudes among emerging adults regarding college. “In the early 1970’s, about 70 percent of young people went to college to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. Today, the number has dropped to 40 percent. Even more, 75 percent of current freshmen say they go to college to be very well off financially.”⁷⁹ This is consistent with Smith’s research:

For large numbers of emerging adults, the reasons they value college seem to have little to do with the broadly humanistic vision of higher education described above. Rather, their motivations have almost entirely to do with

⁷⁵ Hartmut Rosa, “Two Versions of the Good Life and Two Forms of Fear: Dynamic Stabilization and Resonance Conception of the Good life,” paper presented at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture conference on Joy, Security, and Fear (New Haven, CT, November 8-9, 2017), 7.

⁷⁶ Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 47.

⁷⁷ Levine, *Price of Privilege*, 45-46.

⁷⁸ Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1984), 78.

⁷⁹ “A Long Way from Flower Power,” *Economist*, 346, no. 8051 (January 17, 1998). 26.

the instrumental advantages it produces for them as competitive individuals.⁸⁰

More alarming is a shift in attitude towards work, termed “workism,” where today’s educated elite work more hours than their predecessors in order to achieve success that promises to bring identity, transcendence, and community.⁸¹ With the pursuit of success being such a dominant aspect of a therapeutic worldview, one wonders if it can be overthrown.

According to research, materialism not only *can* be reversed, it *should* be reversed. In the article “Changes in Materialism, Changes in Psychological Well-being: Evidence from Three Longitudinal Studies and an Intervention Experiment,” Tim Kasser and his team of researchers confirmed their hypothesis that “people’s well-being improves as they place relatively less importance on materialistic goals...whereas orienting toward materialistic goals relatively more is associated with decreases in well-being over time.”⁸² Kasser noted, “We found that, actually, you can decrease materialism and that the effect on well-being was still there months later.”⁸³ Kasser went on to say, “For the children who started the study high in materialism and who got the intervention, their self-esteem went up over time. For the children who started the study high in materialism and didn’t get the intervention, their self-esteem went down over time.”⁸⁴ These findings are consistent with other research examining the relationship between

⁸⁰ Smith, *Lost in Translation*, 101.

⁸¹ Derek Thompson, “Workism is Making Americans Miserable,” *The Atlantic* (February 24, 2019). Thompson argues that for college educated elite, work has morphed into a religious identity that promises identity, transcendence, and community, but fails to deliver.

⁸² Tim Kasser et al, “Changes in Materialism, Changes in Psychological Well-being: Evidence from Three Longitudinal Studies and an Intervention Experiment,” *Motivation and Emotion* 38, no. 1 (2014), 2.

⁸³ Kasser, 17.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 6

wealth and happiness. In their work, Diener and Emmons note that, even though wealth provides access to basic needs and therefore a high level of happiness, “non-wealthy people showed a level of happiness that was not much lower than wealthy people.”⁸⁵ Levine echoed these results: “For most people, the correlation between income and personal happiness is ‘virtually negligible.’ In spite of a short-lived change in mood, the accumulation of more money or goods has essentially no impact on how we feel.”⁸⁶ The point in all of this is that not only does wealth fail to produce happiness, but the move away from materialism actually produces greater levels of self-esteem and well-being.

An exercise that students participate in during Nexus is to take away smartphones for a day. Both the students and mentors love this day. They talk more to each other and are acutely aware of their immediate surroundings. The next morning, they are given their phones after morning worship and reflection. It is amazing to see the change in their countenances when they get their phones back. On one level, they are relieved to get their phones back because their phones connect them to the world. On another level, they are burdened when their phones – the very symbol of mass consumption and globalization – are returned to them.

When the voice from heaven says, “Come out of her, my people,” this is intended to be a liberating call. Of course, John’s call to resist Rome’s economic system is a radical stance because it asked Christians to refrain from joining societies for mutual benefit, using certain coins that had images on them, and attaching themselves to

⁸⁵ Horwitz E. J. Diener and R. A. Emmons, “Happiness of the Very Wealthy.” *Social Indicators Research* 16, no. 3 (1985), 270.

⁸⁶ Levine goes on to say, “Studies on lottery winners show that within approximately eight weeks, most of these individuals return to pretty much the same state of mind they were in before their windfall.” (Levine, *Price of Privilege*, 39-40).

wealth.⁸⁷ In today's world, such a stance appears improbable, because it would require people to live like the Amish, but without the land, knowledge, and community the Amish have. That, however, does not mean strategies cannot be developed to combat materialism.⁸⁸ The book of Revelation is a model to engage consumption, and at least three models and three strategies can be derived from this model.

Strategy #1 – Use the book of Revelation as a mirror to expose the greed within today's church. Barry Harvey notes, “The majority of those who continue to call themselves Christian... embrace the heady hedonism and narcissism of popular culture and do not see that this contradicts biblical faith.”⁸⁹ For example, today's megachurches look like shopping malls, and church members' spending habits are no different than those of their non-Christian peers. The strength of Revelation is that it is not afraid to correct esteemed members of society. Five of the seven churches were called to repent. Even John had to be corrected twice for mistakenly worshiping an angel (19:9-10; 22:8-9).⁹⁰ Christ confronts those whom he loves. The church of today should use Revelation to do the same.

Strategy #2 – Use the message of Revelation to fuel movements that oppose today's idolization of money and power.⁹¹ This is an area attractive to emerging adults. Many long for a passionate church. They see things are wrong but do not hear the church speak out against it. Revelation has the power to confront wicked systems. John

⁸⁷ Yarbro Collins, *Crisis & Catharsis*, 138.

⁸⁸ Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness Following the Lamb Into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 184. Gorman argues that “Revelation is not primarily a book to be dissected but to be lived; that is the nature of resistance literature.”

⁸⁹ Barry Harvey, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 3.

⁹⁰ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 182.

⁹¹ Gorman, 185.

challenged Rome's economic practices. The book of Revelation has been used in the abolition, suffrage, and civil rights movements to speak truth to powers that enslave.⁹²

Emerging adults know there are problems, especially in terms of the harm consumption does to creation. The church can advocate for creation care and educate members about how destructive rampant materialism can be to laborers who are exploited. Naming the evils and complexities of the economic system for its members would be an important step. The message of Revelation can help do this.

Strategy #3 – Create communities that help break the chains of materialism.

Historically, churches have been places for people to gather for mutual care. Churches today can offer classes and support systems to help people struggling with consumption.

Backed by the scriptures that speak against the dangers of consumption, churches have a legitimate opportunity to offer wisdom on this matter. There are already practices in place in which the church engages (like tithing, Lenten disciplines, fasting, confession, etc.) that could be enriched by education and theological reflection related to Christian practices and the counter-formation encouraged by capitalism. Even more, the Church can offer an alternative and counter-understanding of joy that does not depend on how much money one has but that depends, instead, on God's love for this world.⁹³

⁹² Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 2. Hochschild show how William Wilberforce's faith in God and outrage of human enslavement drove Wilberforce, and a band of supporters, to organize a campaign for the British Parliament to abolish slavery. This campaign was particularly impressive because, at the time, slavery was the primary labor force of the world's economy. "At the end of the eighteenth century well over three-quarters of all people alive were in bondage of one kind or another, not the captivity of striped prison uniforms, but of various systems of slavery or serfdom.... In parts of the Americas, slaves far outnumbered free persons.... Slavery spread throughout the Islamic world, and the Ottoman Empire.... In India and other parts of Asia, tens of millions of farmworkers were slaves. Native Americans turned prisoners of war into slaves and sold them to other tribes.... In Russia the majority of the population were serfs, often bought, sold, whipped, or sent to the army at the will of their owners" (2).

⁹³ Judith Lichtenberg, "Consuming Because Others Consume." In *Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship*, edited by D. Crocker and T. Linden (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 23. Lichtenberg argues, "To the extent that a person consumes because others do, she

The book of Revelation calls blessed those “who read, who hear and who keep what is written...” (1:3). A central message in Revelation is the significant price people pay who unite themselves to the harlot of mass consumption. Like the churches of Sardis and Laodicea in the first century, many Christian communities today have succumbed to the allure of wealth. While many contemporary churches seem alive and vibrant due to their shiny new buildings and high-tech styles of worship, their assumption of and reliance upon consumerist practices renders them sick, if not dead. Their members are unprepared for Christ’s return because they are encouraged to clothe themselves with designer brands instead of being adorned in the righteous deeds of believers. The Church’s nakedness and shame is apparent to Christ and is becoming more evident to emerging adults. Revelation importantly reminds us that wealth is dangerous. Blessed are those who heard this message and repent both in the first century and the twenty-first.

could consume less if others did too without diminishing her well-being. It follows that our usual hand-wringing about how much we can reasonably ask people to limit their consumption – in order to prevent irreparable harm to the environment, to allow for a more just distribution of resources, or to promote a less materialistic way of life – is exaggerated and beside the point. Reductions in consumption, when effected in a concerted way, need not involve deprivation in the sense generally envisioned. It is not a matter of "sacrificing because others sacrifice," but rather of not having to sacrifice when material consumption falls collectively.”

Chapter 3: You Will Suffer

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:10-12)*

*“In the world you face persecution. But take courage;
I have conquered the world!” (John 16:33)*

*“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking
place among you to test you, as though something strange were
happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s
sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy
when his glory is revealed.” (1 Pet 4:12-13)*

The old hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers” and many others like it are built on the assumption that Christians are at war. This metaphor of battle might seem strange to many who think military imagery contradicts Christianity’s ethic of love.¹ War seems to be the opposite of love. Preachers today steer clear of warfare language. In some ways, this shift is good. In the past, military imagery was used to advance virulent political and national ideologies. Military metaphors, however, can be useful in understanding faith. As Sarah Hinlicky Wilson says, “Faith means war — not against the frail bodies of our brothers and sisters made in the image of God but against the sin within and the powers without.”² Witnessing to the Lamb guarantees a battle. There are conflicts in this world that must be fought: human trafficking, addiction, exploitation of the poor, and many

¹ Steve Moyise, “Models for Intertextual Interpretation of Revelation.” In *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, edited by Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 31-45. Moyise argues that the “sheer quantity of violent language” in the book of Revelation creates an interpretive problem and can even be “dangerous” for people who believe God is on their side. Moyise suggests that intertextual theory can provide a humility in interpretation that allows for multiple voices to be heard in order to offset the violent language.

² Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, “Peace, Peace, When There is No Peace,” *Lutheran Forum* 42, no. 1 (2008), 3.

more. Those caught up in the sex trade need liberation. Even Jesus used military language in his very first sermon when he promised to “liberate the captives and the oppressed” (Luke 3:18).

The churches in Asia Minor found themselves battling the Roman imperial cult. To confess Jesus as Lord meant to stand counter to the emperor. This did not mean rising up in armed rebellion; rather, it meant witnessing to the truth against an opposing world.³ For the Christians in Pergamum, this was a risky endeavor as Antipas was put to death for his witness (Rev 2:13). In Smyrna, Christians faced extreme poverty, while believers in Philadelphia found themselves locked out of the inner circle of society because of their witness.

Today’s emerging adults find themselves in a battle. Unlike the context of Revelation, their war is not as explicitly confrontational. As mentioned in previous chapters, a negative consequence of globalization is the rise of the Moralistic Therapeutic Deistic (MTD) worldview whose aim is to create happiness through materialism. Unfortunately, this therapeutic worldview does not deliver happiness to many but instead contributes to great anxiety and depression. This is particularly prevalent among college students who, according to the American Collegiate Health Association survey, “feel overwhelming anxiety” (59% of students surveyed) and are so “depressed they can hardly function” (37% of students surveyed).⁴ Because of an increase in mental health issues,

³ Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 112. Rossing explains, “War is something done against God’s people by evil beasts and by Rome, not something that God’s saints or the Lamb practice in this book.... Jesus does not make war with the sword of battle but by ‘the sword ‘of his mouth.’ The word is Jesus’ only weapon – this is a reversal as unexpected as the substitution of a lamb for a lion. These reversals undercut violence by emphasizing Jesus’ testimony and the word of God.”

⁴ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Artia Books, 2017), 103-104. Twenge sees a direct correlation between depression and the

higher education institutions have begun seeking ways to care for young people. This has led to schools providing trigger warnings, safe spaces, and additional mental health staff to serve students.⁵ This provokes the following questions: Why are young people so fragile? Does protecting them heal or harm them? When suffering occurs, what happens to emerging adults who identify as Christian? Do they have the kind of resilience to carry the crosses placed on them? These are difficult questions to answer, but what is certain is that Christ remains both the Good Shepherd who protects his sheep and the slain Lamb who leads his flock into battle. It is to these three churches who suffered deeply that we now turn.

Christ Addresses Pergamum: “You Are In a Battle!” (Rev 2:12-17)

Forty miles north of Smyrna and sixteen miles inland from the Aegean Sea rose the impressive city of Pergamum. Built on a cone-shaped hill a thousand feet in height, Pergamum was described by Pliny as “by far the most distinguished city in Asia.”⁶ Pergamum’s name means “citadel,” and the city became independent under Philetaerus (343-263 B.C.E.) who founded what became known as the Attalid dynasty, one of the

use of smartphones: “The sudden, sharp rise in depressive symptoms occurred at almost exactly the same time that smartphones became ubiquitous and in-person interaction plummeted.”

⁵ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up A Generation For Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 1-18. Haidt and Lukianoff argue that emerging adults feel anxious and that choices by parents, schools, and culture to protect them are making matters worse. Three untruths that are being promoted in our culture among emerging adults are: 1) The Untruth of Fragility, 2) The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning, and 3) The Untruth of Us vs. Them. Haidt and Lukianoff argue that whatever a young person’s identity, background, or political ideology, they will be happier, healthier, stronger, and more likely to succeed in pursuing their own goals if they do three things: 1) Seek out challenges rather than eliminating or avoiding everything that feels unsafe; 2) free themselves from cognitive distortions rather than always trusting their initial feelings; and 3) take a generous view of other people, and look for nuance, rather than assuming the worst about people within a simplistic us-versus-them morality.

⁶ Mounce, *Revelation*, 78.

great powers in western Asia.⁷ The city was an important center for banking and finance and relied on textile production. During the first century C.E., increasing numbers of Pergamenes obtained Roman citizenship and were upwardly mobile.⁸ One of its most famous citizens was Galen (ca. C.E. 129-99), who cared for gladiators and “eventually became a court physician to emperor Marcus Aurelius in Rome.”⁹ Adding to its fame was Pergamum’s library, which was one of the most “celebrated libraries in the ancient world.”¹⁰ The city was so famous for book production that the term “parchment” originates from Pergamum.¹¹

Along with a bustling economy, Pergamum saw the flourishing of Greco-Roman cults. The patron goddess was Athena, whose temple stood on the acropolis. She was called Nikephorus, the bringer of victories.¹² Pergamum boasted a great temple to Zeus, an entire complex dedicated to Asclepius, as well as temples to Athena, Dionysus, and Demeter.¹³ Even more, in 29 B.C.E., the emperor Augustus allowed the city to become the first municipality in Asia Minor to build a temple honoring the emperor’s deified status.¹⁴ The most spectacular religious architecture of the city was the great altar of Zeus that was positioned near the top of the mountain. At the base of the altar is a frieze that “depicts the gods of Greece in victorious combat against the giants of earth (symbolizing the triumph of civilization over barbarism).”¹⁵

⁷ Aune, *Revelation*, 180.

⁸ Koester, *Revelation*, 284.

⁹ Aune, *Revelation*, 180.

¹⁰ Blount, *Revelation*, 56.

¹¹ Aune, *Revelation*, 180.

¹² Koester, *Revelation*, 284.

¹³ The Pergamum Altar was excavated between 1878 and 1886. It was relocated in Berlin and is on display in the Pergamum Museum. Currently, the display is being renovated and the Pergamum Altar is not open to the public. This is a fact that I learned the hard way on my visit to Berlin this summer.

¹⁴ Blount, *Revelation*, 57.

¹⁵ Mounce, *Revelation*, 78.

A Christian congregation was established at Pergamum before the mid-80s C.E.¹⁶ Little is known about its origin, but we know that Christians in Pergamum were under tremendous pressure to accommodate to the larger culture.¹⁷ According to Greg Beale, “In such an atmosphere, it would be more difficult for Christians to maintain a high profile about their faith without running into conflict with those committed to the officially accepted pagan religions, behind all of which Satan stood as king.”¹⁸ Refusal to assimilate is most likely the cause for Antipas’ martyrdom (Rev 2:13).

To this congregation, set high on a hill and under such great demands to assimilate, Christ threatens to attack: “Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth” (2:16). This is a provocative statement because it does not specify who it is that Christ makes war against. It is not immediately apparent whether Christ plans to make war against the church, the city, or someone/something else. Thankfully, the passage offers a few clues.

First, *Christ promises to make war on Satan*. In his address, Christ says: “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword: ‘I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives’” (2:17-18).¹⁹ In four of the seven addresses, Satan is referred to in the address (2:9, 13, 24;

¹⁶ This is deduced from the timing of Antipas’ martyrdom (Rev 2:13).

¹⁷ Koester, *Revelation*, 285.

¹⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 246.

¹⁹ Blount notes, “The verb to live, *katoikeo*, occurs throughout Revelation (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8) and refers to “inhabitants (dwellers) of the earth who have accommodated themselves to Rome’s domination and lordship claims” (Blount, *Revelation*, 57).

3:9). However, in Pergamum, Satan is brought to the forefront because it was the city “where a Christian had been put to death.”²⁰

Satan’s residency in Pergamum establishes his throne there. Current scholarship is unable to know for certain what “Satan’s throne” was, although there are numerous possibilities: the Temple of Augustus, the Judge’s Bench, the Temple of Asklepius, or the shape of the city hill itself.²¹ The most likely option is the Temple of Zeus and its Great Altar.²² Whatever it was, the importance was its association with the Roman imperial cult. Adela Yarbro Collins explains, “The notion that Satan had given his power and throne and great authority to the beast would then be John’s critical assessment of the idea current in the province of Asia at the time, that Domitian was the embodiment of the power of Zeus on earth.”²³ Revelation 12 highlights this in its description of the Dragon (Satan) giving the throne to the Beast from the Sea (13:2).²⁴ Such an association would not have been missed by the readers of Revelation. Nor would they miss the contrasting reigns of Satan and God.²⁵

²⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 292.

²¹ Aune, *Revelation*, 182-184.

²² Adela Yarbro Collins, “Pergamum in Early Christian Literature.” In *Pergamum, Citadel of the Gods: Archeological Record, Literary Description, and Religious Development*, edited by Helmut Koester (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 175. Yarbro Collins is helpful at this point: “The visual basis for the Great Altar of Zeus being the ‘throne of Satan’ is because of the association of Zeus with the emperor in John’s time. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the God of the Jews, Samaritans, and Christians was often understood as equivalent to Zeus... It would have been a small step for John to invert this common perception into an identification of Zeus with Satan.” Yarbro Collins, goes further to explain how the outer frieze of the altar would work well with the combat myth present in ancient Near Eastern and Greek cultures: “Although the book of Revelation and the outer frieze of the Great Altar of Pergamon both drew upon the plot and motifs of the combat myth, they did so in quite different ways. The combat myth functions in the frieze in the classic ancient Near Eastern and Greek manner, that is, to legitimize the current ruler. The Book of Revelation, on the other hand, adapted the myth in the subversive mode typical of apocalyptic literature. It stands the propaganda of the current ruler on its head: Roman imperial power represents the forces of chaos that threaten to dissolve the order intended by the divine ruler of all” (Yarbro Collins, 184).

²³ Yarbro Collins, 175.

²⁴ Aune, *Revelation*, 182.

²⁵ It is important to recognize the difference between God’s rule and Satan’s rule. God gives his authority to the Lamb who was slain (5:6-7, 12-13) whereas Satan gives his throne and authority to the Beast. The

Second, *Christ makes war on those aligned with Satan*. If Christ's war against Satan occurs at the end of the age, his confrontation against those siding with Satan is more immediate:

“But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth” (2:14-16).

Once again, eating food previously offered to idols is mentioned. This was a significant issue for the churches in Asia Minor, as it tempted Christians to cross boundaries and assimilate to the norms, values, and beliefs of an anti-Christian culture.²⁶ By comparing the teaching of the Nicolaitans with Balaam, John argues that just as the teachings of Balaam caused Israel to stumble, so too will the teaching of the Nicolaitans do the same. As a result, Christ must use the sword protruding from his mouth to fight against the false claims leading to assimilation.²⁷

Christ's call is categorical. It demands allegiance as Christians must side either with Christ or Rome. Rome is likened to a beast sitting on the throne of Pergamum with

Lamb rules for eternity (11:15) whereas the Beast rules for a short time (13:5). The Lamb conquers by sacrificial love (5:5) whereas the Beast conquers by war (13:7). Finally, the Lamb ransoms from every tribe (5:9) whereas the Beast oppresses people from every tribe (13:7). Furthermore, God's throne is established in the center of the New Jerusalem and from it flows the River of Life (22:1-5) whereas Satan's throne is established in Pergamum where Antipas is martyred (2:13). God's war against Satan is best explained in Revelation 11: “Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing, ‘We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name both small and great and for destroying those who destroy the earth’” (11:16-18). In other words, God destroys the destroyer.

²⁶ Resseguie, *Revelation*, 91.

²⁷ A sword was a powerful symbol in Pergamum because in a provincial capital the proconsul was granted the “right of the sword” (*ius gladii*), the power to execute at will (Mounce, *Revelation*, 79). Christ's sword is a powerful polemic against the Roman Imperial cult, whose symbol of the *Pax Romana* was the sword. Rome used the sword to beat down opposition whereas Christ uses his sword to liberate. Later in Revelation, Christ will use the sword to defeat the enemies of God (19:15, 21) (Beale, *Revelation*, 247).

the sword of the *Pax Romana* in hand to destroy rebellion. Christ is the Lamb who sits on the throne from which flows the River of Life and whose sword is truth. Those who teach people to side with Rome, thinking they will escape the sword, will discover the harsh realities of their choice. Not only does the Beast enslave them in the present (13:7), but the future includes Christ waging war against them with the sword of his truth. They are to be like the faithful witness Antipas, instead, whose allegiance was to God and the Lamb. Antipas earned the title “faithful witness” (2:13) – the very title given to Christ (1:5) – for his resistance to Roman accommodation.²⁸

Third, *Christ promises the spoils of war to those who conquer*. Christ declares: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it” (2:17). In each of the seven addresses, Christ promises a reward to those who conquer (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).²⁹ The call to conquer assumes that Christians are in a war against Satan and his beastly minions.³⁰ Endurance is needed because

²⁸ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Persecution and Vengeance in the Book of Revelation.” In *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12-17 1979*, edited by David Hellholm (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 733. Though some argue Antipas was killed by mob violence, Yarbro Collins argues that “witness” suggests that Antipas was killed after standing trial.

²⁹ The verb “to conquer” (*nikan*) means conquest and victory. As a military metaphor, it is used for soldiers who conquer on the battlefield. As an athletic metaphor, it is used for those who win contests and are given a wreath as a crown. There is a third sense in which *nikan* is used, namely, as a metaphor for faithfulness. Before his death, Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome (*nenikeka*) the world” (Koester, *Revelation*, 265).

³⁰ Allusions to Psalm 2 and a Messianic war occur throughout Revelation: “The nations” and “the kings of the earth” conspire against the LORD and his anointed (Ps 2:1-2 & Rev 11:18; 16:14). The Messiah is God’s son (Ps 2:7 & Rev 2:18) who is set on Mount Zion (Ps 2:6 & Rev 14:1). God promises to give his son the nations as an inheritance (Ps 2:8 & Rev 2:26-28) and the son will break the nations with a rod of iron (Ps 2:9 & Rev 2:26-28; 12:5; 19:15) (Bauckham, *Theology*, 69). Christians follow Christ into battle as Christ is the “faithful and true witness” (1:5; 3:14) whose only weapon is the sword in his mouth (1:16). Christ stands on Mount Zion with the 144,000 (14:1). His name is “Faithful and True” (19:11) as well as the “Word of God” (19:13). He rides into battle with his robe dipped in his own blood (19:13) and uses the

following Christ brings trouble.³¹ Readers of Revelation are invited into the trouble. Stefan Alkier explains: “All other readers who are brought into the readership through the prophetic words of the proemium in 1:1-3 can also feel integrated into the community of oppressed witnesses and, similarly, with those who have a share in the kingdom of God.”³² This is why there is a “call for endurance” (14:12), because opposition from Satan occurs as Christ and his church battle to turn the “kingdoms of this world” into the “kingdom of the Lord.”

Two promises are offered to the victorious Christians at Pergamum: hidden manna and a white stone. Manna was the food Israel ate in the wilderness. It was called “bread of heaven” (Exod 16:4; Neh 9:15) or “bread of angels” (Ps 78:25; Ezra 1:19). After Israel entered the land of Canaan, the manna ceased (Josh 5:12). Manna was preserved in the Temple and hidden in the ark by Jeremiah before the Temple was destroyed. It was believed that manna would be restored when the Messiah appeared (2 Macc 2:4-8).³³ More than an eschatological food, the hidden manna is a symbolic alternative to the food offered to idols. Brian Blount explains, “The hidden manna was a stroke of brilliance; to a people starved for idol food, he offered food delivered directly

sword in his mouth to break the nations (19:15). As partners in the tribulation, Christians conquer Satan “by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony (12:11).”

³¹ Stefan Alkier, “Witness or Warrior? How The Best of Revelation can Help Christians Live Their Political Lives.” In *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, edited by Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 134. Alkier translates the word “tribulation” (*thlipsis*) as “trouble” (1:9). Thus John is in trouble on the Island of Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of the gospel.

³² Alkier, 134.

³³ Beale notes, “Some have proposed that the hiddenness is linked to the Jewish tradition that Jeremiah hid the manna in the ark before the temple was destroyed and that it would be revealed again when the Messiah came” (Beale, *Revelation*, 252).

from the one true Lord and God.”³⁴ Those who reject meat offered to idols receive their sustenance both now and into eternity from the Lord who gives “daily bread.”

A white stone is also promised to the conquerors. There are many possible meanings for the white stone; the likeliest is that the stone signified favorable judgment upon those who conquer.³⁵ Craig Koester explains, “The white stone is a symbol of honor that is comparable to receiving a laurel wreath (2:10, 17).”³⁶ Etched on the stone is Christ’s name, just as his name is written on believers (Rev 3:12), written on the foreheads of the redeemed (14:1) and written on his own robe (19:12). Of course, to say that no one knows Christ’s name is esoteric. Rather, it is only those who receive the white stone, and thus are vindicated by Christ, who truly know what Christ’s lordship means.³⁷

The Christians at Pergamum were faced with the choice to worship either Satan or God and were not allowed half-measures. Both God and Satan have thrones, swords, and dominions. However, Satan’s reign leads to enslavement, whereas Christ’s reign leads to life. Antipas was a faithful witness, and this cost him his life. Christians who follow Christ must endure the trouble that comes with following the Lamb. Those who conquer with Christ receive nourishment and learn the depths of what it means to be a Christian.

Christ Addresses Smyrna: “Suffering Makes You Rich!” (Rev 2:8-11)

For many of the residents of Smyrna, life was comfortable because the city was affluent. Located thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, Smyrna sat at the end of a lucrative

³⁴ Blount, *Revelation*, 60.

³⁵ There are alternate interpretations of the meaning of the white stone. Aune argues that the white stone is like an amulet that signifies protection. Beale and Mounce see the stone as a token of admission to the messianic banquet. Blount understands the stone to be either a token of admission or a favorable verdict in a criminal trial.

³⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 290.

³⁷ Koester, 290.

Asia Minor trade route.³⁸ Its harbor brought commerce to the region and with trade came prosperity. The city's streets were paved with stones and bordered by porticoes. During the Roman period, Smyrna was a center for science, medicine, fine wine, beautiful buildings, and wealth.³⁹ Smyrna also had a good library and a shrine to the famous Greek poet Homer.⁴⁰ Roman religion flourished when the city built a temple dedicated to the goddess Roma. The Roman Senate established Smyrna as a *neokoros*, "temple keeper" (Acts 19:35), for the cult of Tiberius.⁴¹ In addition, an influential Jewish community was well-established.⁴²

Though Smyrna was known for its wealth and beauty, it was a place of poverty and persecution for Christians.⁴³ The believers in Smyrna were poor.⁴⁴ Though most of the churches mentioned in Revelation faced a similar situation, the case in Smyrna was extreme.⁴⁵ The poverty for the Christians there was the result of not engaging the economic system that was tied to the Roman cultic practice and indicates that the church members did not participate in the life of the city in ways that would move wealth in its direction.⁴⁶ Adding to their poverty was a spate of persecutions arising from a conflict

³⁸ Blount, *Revelation*, 53.

³⁹ Aune, *Revelation*, 160.

⁴⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 271-282.

⁴¹ Blount, *Revelation*, 53.

⁴² Koester notes, "A variant reading of I Macc 15:23 suggests that Jews lived in Smyrna by the second century BCE.... An inscription from the early second century CE lists donations given to the city by an imperial high priest, hymn singers and *hoi pote Ioudaioi*" (Koester, *Revelation*, 273).

⁴³ Most commentators collapse the poverty and persecution. Blount, however, does not: "Though John speaks about the two together, he does not equate them. Their persecution is not their impoverishment" (Blount, *Revelation*, 53).

⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, an apocalyptic message can speak either a confronting or comforting word. Those exploited or abused by mass consumption receive a comforting word like the one spoken to the church at Smyrna.

⁴⁵ Aune notes, "The fact that no mention is made of the economic poverty of the other six Christian communities suggests that the situation of this congregation is unusual." (Aune, *Revelation*, 161).

⁴⁶ Beale notes, "Indeed, the imperial cult permeated virtually every aspect of the city and often even village life in Asia Minor, so that individuals could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult." (Beale, *Revelation*, 240).

between the Christian community and its Jewish neighbors that led to the Christians being denounced (*blasphemia*) and marginalized.

It is to these Christians whose poverty and persecution outstrips that of the other churches that Jesus says:

I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (2:9-10).

With these words, Christ offers no critique or complaint against the Smyrna church.⁴⁷

Instead, he helps them see suffering in a number of different ways.

First, *Christ sees that Satan is behind their suffering*. The economic situation of Smyrna was aggravated by members of the Jewish synagogue who “denounced” (*blasphemia*) Christians. It is difficult to reconstruct the motivation for this denouncement.⁴⁸ However, one can understand how denouncement worked in the ancient world. According to Koester: “In the first and early second centuries, Roman officials generally did not initiate action against Christians but responded to charges made by others. For denunciation to lead to imprisonment, officials had to be shown that Christians were a threat (Acts 16:16-24; 17:1-9; 19:37-39).” Koester goes on explain, “Synagogue members had to present themselves as loyal citizens while charging that

⁴⁷ Smyrna and Philadelphia are the only two churches, of the seven addressed in Revelation, that do not receive a threat or complaint against them. Instead, they are commended for their work and promised a reward for conquering.

⁴⁸ Mounce suggests social tensions caused by congregation members leaving the synagogue to become Christian could be the cause for the denouncement (Mounce, *Revelation*, 75). Schüssler Fiorenza argues the denouncement was caused by a privilege extended to Jews that became muddy with the growth of Christianity: “The Jewish people had received the privilege of practicing their religion in any part of the Roman Empire, but they were exempt from obligations of military service as well as giving obeisance to the Roman religion” (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision Just World*, 55).

Christians threatened the social order. By doing that, the synagogue members would show their allegiance to Rome (Satan) instead of God.”⁴⁹ It is because of this denouncement by the synagogue members that Christians suffered. As a result, John calls the synagogue members a “synagogue of Satan.”

Some scholars have argued that John’s rebuke is anti-Semitic. At face value, this charge appears to hold water; however, most commentators hold a more nuanced view.⁵⁰ A helpful perspective comes from Yarbro Collins who explains, “The polemic against the ‘synagogue of Satan’ in Revelation 2:9 must be seen not as a rejection of religious and ethnic Judaism viewed from a distance, but as a passionate polemic against a sibling or parent faith.”⁵¹ The issue is not an ethnic one for John but distinctly theological. This is seen later in Revelation 12 as John describes the work of Satan to be like a dragon who “denounces the people of God day and night” (12:10). If Satan is the source of denouncement, then a synagogue denouncing Christians would warrant the epithet of “synagogue of Satan.” Furthermore, Christ warning that the persecution at Smyrna will intensify (2:9-10) also connects to the work of Satan mentioned later in Revelation 12: “But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” (12:12). For John, the catalyst for the

⁴⁹ Koester, *Revelation*, 280.

⁵⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza argues that, “John’s identification of the synagogue as a congregation of Satan would not be misread as anti-Semitism since the author expresses great appreciation for true Judaism” (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision Just World*, 55.) Aune states, “Here it is important to realize that the term ‘Jews’ is used positively (i.e., of those who are committed to do the will of God) but that, according to John, those who call themselves ‘Ioudaioi do not live up to the standard implied in that designation” (Aune, *Revelation*, 162). Blount, who is sensitive to this potentially explosive phrase, argues: “The enduring issue, then, is one of ethics, not ethnicity” (Blount, *Revelation*, 54). Carey might be the most critical of John’s usage because he thinks John is “dismissing their [the Jewish synagogue members] perspective by attacking their collective ethos”; however, Carey does not see this as anti-Semitism (Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse*, 148).

⁵¹ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Insiders and Outsiders in the Book of Revelation and Its Social Context,” In “*To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity*,” edited by Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs and Carolina McCracken-Flesher (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 208.

denouncement is Satan. By denouncing Christians, the synagogue members have thrown their lot in with Satan. Jesus makes a similar claim about the religious leaders of his day whose murderous designs exposed them to be children of the devil (John 8:44-45).

Second, *Christ sees suffering as a test*. By human standards, the church members were poor; however, Christ sees them through a different lens: “I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich” (Rev 2:9a). In one sentence, Christ can call them rich because they are eschatologically wealthy on account of their future entrance into the New Jerusalem as well as their receipt of the victor’s crown (2:10; 21:7).⁵² This declaration, however, is in the present tense, suggesting that following Christ has its advantages in the here-and-now despite the lack of material possessions. The economically disadvantaged could be considered rich “in nonmaterial possessions such as virtue of wisdom (Philo, Prob 8), grace (Eph 1:7; 2:7), or good works (I Tim 6:18).”⁵³ James speaks of both present and future wealth when he writes, “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith (*present*) and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised (*future*) to those who love him?” (Jas 2:5). In this way, Christ offers an alternative understanding of wealth. Unlike Laodicea, which flourished economically but was poor in faith (Rev 3:17-18), the poverty-stricken congregation in Smyrna flourished with faith and thus was rich.⁵⁴

While the people of Smyrna might see their immediate suffering as persecution, Christ regards it as a brief test: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten

⁵² Aune, *Revelation*, 160.

⁵³ Koester, *Revelation*, 274.

⁵⁴ This is a helpful corrective to today’s market-driven narrative of happiness through mass consumption.

days you will have affliction” (2:10).⁵⁵ Throughout the scriptures, the people of God are tested. Sometimes the test is administered by God, at other times by Satan. Abraham was tested by God, but Job was tested by Satan. Whether it is from God or Satan, the proper response to a test is fidelity to God (Exodus 16:4; Deut 8:2). Jesus himself was not exempt from being tested.⁵⁶ As DeSilva notes, “Just as Christ bore witness in the face of opposition, remained faithful unto death, and was rewarded with an unquenchable life beyond death, so the disciple who bears witness in the face of opposition, even unto death, can be assured of the same reward.”⁵⁷ For the believers in Smyrna, their test is an opportunity to witness to the Lamb who was slain.⁵⁸ In doing this, they follow their Lord’s example while also sharing the Lord’s resurrection.⁵⁹

Third, *Jesus sees death as the way to life*. Christ, the one who died and was raised, promises the “crown of life” to those who conquer: “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10b). The crown (*stephanos*) of life is a laurel wreath cast in gold (4:4; 14:14). Here, the wreath is linked to victory or conquest, and it draws on three types of associations: 1) Athletics – wreaths were given to victors in

⁵⁵ It is worth noting that under the Roman legal system, imprisonment was not a punishment; but instead was “used either as a means of coercion to compel obedience to an order issued by a magistrate or else as a place to temporarily restrain the prisoner before execution” (Aune, *Revelation*, 166). That is why the length of the test is significant because it marks a period. Rhetorically, the mention of a ten-day test is intended to provide perspective. As DeSilva explains, “The one who overcomes, who successfully endures the ‘test’ of forthcoming anti-Christian actions, will escape an even greater danger by means of heeding Christ’s advice. The additional argument from the consequences employs the topic of relative expediency: it is better to endure a temporary hardship than one of longer duration and greater severity” (DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 240). For this test, they will either remain faithful until death or remain faithful until release. In both cases, fidelity is key.

⁵⁶ The call for imitation was significant in the early church and basic to early Christian discourse (Mark 8:34-35; Rom 6:1-11; Phil 3:10-11; II Tim 2:11-12; Heb 12:2; I Peter 1:11; 2:21).

⁵⁷ DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 240.

⁵⁸ Blount, *Revelation*, 55.

⁵⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Volume 3, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress (2003), 473-474. Wright argues: “Not only are martyrs specified rather than ordinary Christians who died in their beds, but one type of martyr is signaled out: those who are beheaded. This group appears, then to be as it were an advance party of the righteous, sharing already in the future rule of the Messiah.”

competitions; 2) Military – wreaths were worn by those who triumphed in battle; and 3) Public Service – benefactors and others who performed civic service were publicly honored with wreaths.⁶⁰ The wreath is the reward for suffering unto death.⁶¹ The crown is the eschatological reward mentioned earlier in the address.

There is a second reward offered to those who conquer, namely, the elimination of further suffering: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not⁶² be harmed by the second death” (2:11). The idea of a “second death” was common in both Jewish and Christian discourse (see 2 Macc 6-7; 4 Macc 5-15; Matt 10:28; Acts 5:29). Mounce notes, “The second death was a rabbinic term for the death of the wicked in the next world.”⁶³ In Revelation, the second death is identified as the lake of fire (20:14) and it is the place where the “cowardly go” (21:8). However, for those who are courageous and suffer to the point of death, the “second death has no power” over them (20:6).⁶⁴

The anticipation of suffering might cause a person tremendous anxiety. Even more, someone suffering might be tempted to see poverty and persecution as a punishment inflicted by God or as abandonment by God, a turning of the divine face away in judgment. But Christ sees things differently. He who bore the cross and

⁶⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 277

⁶¹ Aune explains: “Even though such wreaths were never awarded posthumously either to victorious athletes or for military achievements, it appears that this must in fact be a victory wreath expressing the agon motif. The metaphor of the award of a posthumous wreath benefactor is reflected not only here in Rev 2:10 but also in Heb 2:9, where it is claimed that Jesus was crowned with glory and honor for the suffering of death...” (Aune, *Revelation*, 167).

⁶² In the passage there is a double negative, *ou me*, indicating they will not be hurt by the second death.

⁶³ Mounce, *Revelation*, 77.

⁶⁴ David Bagchi, “Luther and the Problem of Martyrdom.” *Studies in Church History* 30 (1993), 209. Bagchi argues that martyrdom was “important to Luther above all because it epitomized his idea of the Church as a suffering community, an idea integral to his theology of the Cross.” Luther argued in a treatise on the nature of the Church that suffering and persecution were a mark of the Church. See *On the Councils and the Church: LW 51:143-178*.

overcame the world promises that his followers will overcome as well. The reward for such endurance is the crown of life and a promise that what awaits them in eternity is an end to suffering.

Christ Addresses Philadelphia: “You Have Access to What Matters Most!” (Rev 3:7-13)

Philadelphia, the ancient antecedent to the Pennsylvanian city of brotherly love, was located southeast of Sardis. It was founded in the second century B.C.E. by the king of Pergamum. Philadelphia was situated in a broad valley with fertile soil that supported wine production. Aqueducts brought water to the region. Its industries included textile and leather production. Philadelphia had a cordial relationship with Rome. When Philadelphia, like Sardis, was devastated by an earthquake, the emperor Tiberius granted a five-year tax exemption to help with the rebuilding of the city.⁶⁵ In fact, after the earthquake, the city took the name Neo-Caesarea for a time in appreciation for the emperor’s assistance in rebuilding.⁶⁶ Later, while under the reign of Vespasian, the name Flavia appeared on city coins.⁶⁷

Nicknamed “Little Athens” because of its many temples, Philadelphia had a vibrant religious environment.⁶⁸ The principal deity of Philadelphia was Anaitis, the Persian goddess, who was a blend of the goddesses Demeter and Artemis. Additional deities with temples in the city included Zeus, called Kindly; Koryphaios, called Leader;

⁶⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 321.

⁶⁶ Mounce, *Revelation*, 99.

⁶⁷ Mounce, 99.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

and Soter, called Savior.⁶⁹ Because of the grape industry, the wine god Dionysus was also honored. Some local deities were even worshiped as the “God Most High” and the “God Holy and Righteous.”⁷⁰ Philadelphia’s cultic life included an association dedicated to Emperor Augustus of Rome.

Like most of the cities mentioned in Asia Minor, Philadelphia also boasted a Jewish community. As in Smyrna, there were hostilities between the Jewish and Christian communities.⁷¹ Blount notes the bitter irony that, in the municipality of brotherly love, “two communities of kindred Jewish roots, one witnessing to Jesus the Christ, the other opposing any such proclamation, found absolutely no love lost between them.”⁷² Thankfully, even though the church had “little power,” its members were faithful in keeping Christ’s word and not denying his name (3:8).

To this church, Christ offers three promises. First, *Jesus promises to vindicate the martyrs while opening the door for his followers.* To a church that has been shut out of societal influence by members of the synagogue, Jesus declares:

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. “I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (3:7-8a).

Christ identifies himself as the Holy One and True One, both of which titles were used for God throughout the Old Testament (Holy One – Isaiah 1:4; 5:19; 40:25; True One – Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Is 65:16). These titles are mentioned in Revelation 6:10 as the souls

⁶⁹ Koester, *Revelation*, 322.

⁷⁰ Koester, 322.

⁷¹ Martin Kiddle with M. K. Ross, *The Revelation of St. John*, The Moffat New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), 48. Kiddle points out that the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia address the same issue, point by point.

⁷² Blount, *Revelation*, 73.

of the martyred cry out to God, “the Holy and True One,” for vindication. The implication is that Christ will “execute judgment against all who defy the martyrs’ testimony and/or torment those who profess it.”⁷³ Later in Revelation 16, God’s judgment is poured out, bringing vindication to the martyrs.⁷⁴

Beyond his vindication of the martyrs, Christ also holds the key of David with which he unlocks the messianic kingdom for his followers. Earlier in Revelation, Christ is described as holding the keys to Death and Hades (1:18). Later, Satan is locked away, with a key, in the bottomless pit for a thousand years (20:1, 3). A key is a significant metaphor because it has the ability to both open and close doors. Jesus’ ownership of the “key of David” signifies his ability to open the door to the messianic kingdom bestowed in David’s line. In Isaiah 22:22, the steward Eliakim is given the key to the house of David and, thus, has the power to determine who may enter and who is barred from the king’s presence. Since Christ is the one who holds the key, he alone is responsible for opening the door to his messianic reign. The door Christ opens “no one is able to shut” (Rev 3:8). A door is mentioned four times in Revelation: Jesus stands at the door and knocks (3:20 [twice]); John walks through an open door to heaven (4:1); and the Philadelphians have an open door to the mysteries of the messianic kingdom.⁷⁵ Though the faithful in Philadelphia have had the door of the synagogue closed to them, Christ has the key to open the messianic door to his kingdom.

⁷³ Blount, 74.

⁷⁴ The vindication of the martyrs occurs when the bowls of wrath are poured out (Rev 16). After the fourth bowl is poured out, the angel says God’s wrath is just (16:5-6). Those at the altar (including the saints under the altar) say, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!” (Rev 16:7).

⁷⁵ Resseguie, *Revelation*, 97-98.

Second, *Jesus promises to keep those who keep his word*. The narrative advances with a promise of protection and deliverance:

I know that you have but little power, and yet you have *kept* my word and have not denied my name. I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have *kept* my word of patient endurance, I will *keep* you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown (3:8b-11, italics mine).

James Resseguie points out a play on words in the passage as the verb “kept” occurs v. 8 and v. 10. “Since the Philadelphians have kept (i.e. obeyed 3:8, 10a) the word of patient endurance, they will be kept (i.e., preserved; 3:10b) in the hour of trial.”⁷⁶ The Philadelphians can keep God’s word, because Christ loves them (1:5). It is this very love that the synagogue members will acknowledge at Christ’s coming as they “bow down” before the Philadelphians.⁷⁷

There is no need for God to test the Philadelphians who love and are loved by God. This mutual love is a crown upon their head that no one can seize. However, those who “live on the earth” and do not know Christ, will be tested by God.⁷⁸ Of course, the idea of a test can be difficult to hear. Earlier in Revelation 2, the Christians at Smyrna were told they would be tested by Satan (2:10). God’s test is different as it is meant to be

⁷⁶ Resseguie, 98.

⁷⁷ Koester is helpful at this point as he argues that the image of “bowing down” is consistent with the metaphors used for the various churches: “Christ will move the Ephesians’ ‘lampstand,’ make war at Pergamum with the ‘sword’ of his mouth, put Jezebel to ‘bed’ at Thyatira, and ‘vomit’ the Laodiceans out of his mouth (2:5, 16, 22; 3:16)... This image might appear to be a role reversal of the people of God dominating those who tried to dominate them. Rather, the adversaries bow down in recognition of God’s love for those whom they themselves had opposed” (Koester, *Revelation*, 330-331).

⁷⁸ Koester explains there are two possibilities for those who live on the earth: “On the negative side, the expression ‘those who live on the earth’ usually identifies those who drink the wine of Babylon (17:2), worship the beast (13:8, 14; 17:8), oppose the faithful (6:10; 11:10) and come under God’s judgment (8:13). On the positive side, the call to worship God is extended to all ‘those who live on earth’ (14:6), which opens the possibility of repentance and redemption” (Koester, 331).

an opportunity for the community to understand what awaits their neighbors. This serves to restrain the community from seeking vengeance upon their enemies because such vengeance belongs to God and not to us (Rom 12:29). It also encourages them to evangelize their neighbors with the hope that their neighbors experience God's mercy. Christ, the one who speaks these words, is the only one worthy to administer justice and mercy, because he is the one who did not seek vengeance against those who killed him but, instead, prayed for their forgiveness (Luke 23:34).

The fact that Christ alone handles vengeance is significant because this truth shapes how the community reacts to persecution and violence. I cannot help but think of Jim, a 21-year-old, whose life was forever changed when a bomb exploded at a border checkpoint in Afghanistan. After surgery, rehab, and many long months of torment, Jim was finally home. His father asked if I would visit him. Talking with Jim was difficult at first because the sweet boy I had known as a confirmation student had died when the bomb detonated. Instead, Jim was angry. He was angry at the woman who had carried the bomb. He was angry at our government for sending him to Afghanistan. He was angry at people who could not understand his situation. He was angry at himself because he could not control the many emotions within him. And he was angry with God. We talked many times in the following months. A recurring theme was his desire for revenge. Jim wanted a lot of people to hurt as much as he did. But Jim also knew that vengeance belonged to God. But this is where his real theological struggle occurred because he knew that Jesus handled both vengeance and forgiveness. Jim genuinely was stuck. It has been many years since those conversations. Jim has not resolved his questions or his struggle. Instead, he lives in the paradox of wanting both vengeance and forgiveness. He even

prays for his enemies and genuinely hopes for reconciliation to occur in eternity. Clearly, Jim has been kept by the love of Christ that continues to make and shape him. Jesus does not say his followers will not suffer. Instead, he pledges to keep them throughout the suffering and struggle.

Third, *Jesus promises a permanent place with him in eternity.* The Lord declares to those who conquer that they will be made into pillars in the temple of God and will have three names etched on them: “If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (Rev 3:12). Earlier in Revelation, it was said that the Ephesians endured for the sake of Jesus’ “name” (2:3) and the believers in Pergamum held fast to his “name” (2:13). At Sardis, a few “names” did not soil their clothes (3:4), and the conquerors’ “names” would not be blotted out of the Book of Life (3:5). The Philadelphians who do not deny Jesus’ “name” (3:8), will have etched on them the name of God, the name of the city of God, and the name of Christ (3:12). These names are “inscribed on the people who are pillars of faith, identifying them with the God and city to which they belong.”⁷⁹ Even though they have been locked out by members of the synagogue, Christ’s love has opened the door to his messianic reign, guaranteeing them a permanent place with him. Because the door is open, evangelism speaks a word not of judgment but of invitation for others, including enemies, to join the feast.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 327.

Christ Addresses Emerging Adults: “You Will Suffer!”

“Is Aslan safe?” That was Susan’s question to Mr. Beaver in C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* as she learns of the great lion (and Christ figure) upon entering the magical kingdom of Narnia. Mr. Beaver replies, “Safe? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King.”⁸⁰ There is nothing safe in the book of Revelation, because John assumes that Christians are undergoing the kind of trouble where suffering occurs and endurance is needed.⁸¹ John knows this firsthand as he is a partner in the trouble because of “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). Later in Revelation, John is given a scroll to eat which at first is sweet as honey but then causes him abdominal distress. The message of the scroll is sweet, because it is the gospel, but it is bitter because witnessing to the gospel leads to suffering.⁸² In the same way, readers of Revelation are meant to witness in a manner that might bring about their own suffering and/or death.⁸³

Martin Luther saw from both scripture and from reports of actions against his fellow reformers that witnessing to the truth leads to suffering. Many were martyred for their faith during the Reformation. In fact, Luther personally struggled over the fact that he had not been martyred. After the death of his friend Winkler, Luther suffered deeply

⁸⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Scholastic, 1995), 77-81.

⁸¹ J. P. M. Sweet, “Maintaining the Testimony of Jesus: The Suffering of Christians in the Revelation of John (and Use of Zech 12-14 in the NT),” in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G.M. Styler*, ed. W. Horbury (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 103.

⁸² Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 104.

⁸³ Revelation’s message is certain, namely, that testifying to the truth can result in martyrdom. Of course, it is not martyrdom that makes them conquer, otherwise martyrdom would be a requirement for salvation. Rather, it is in testifying to the truth that the saints conquer. This is why John can be a faithful witness (1:5) and a partner in the tribulation (1:9) even though he was not martyred. As Sweet explains, “It is not only verbal witness to the true God and his will that attracts persecution, but also the obedience to his commands that goes with it: purity of life, over against the immorality that stems from idolatry, is equally painful to the godless” (Sweet, “Maintaining the Testimony,” 106).

not only over the loss of his friend but also from the belief that “God had abandoned him, by not accounting him worthy of martyrdom.”⁸⁴ During a sermon on Psalm 60, Luther broke off from his sermon and began talking about suffering and martyrdom using the image of the pot of Moab (Ps 60:8). Luther writes: “The pot represents this troublous life, in which the faithful are thoroughly cooked and turned into angelic food fit for heaven. Jesus Christ is the good cook, who boils his saints vigorously, but spares the ungodly because they are to be discarded. The moral is clear: do not avoid temptations and tribulations, because the way of suffering, the way of the Cross, is the only sure way to heaven.”⁸⁵ Luther understood that witnessing to the truth of Christ leads to suffering and death. Just as Christ had a cross to carry, so, too, does his church.

To witness to the truth requires being formed by the faith in order to live it out. Have emerging adults been formed enough to be persecuted? Christian Smith would answer, “They have not!” According to his research: “The vast majority of teens are incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives.... We found very few teens who are able to articulate their religious beliefs and explain how those beliefs connect to the rest of their lives.”⁸⁶ This trend is prevalent among adults as well.⁸⁷ Though one does not need to know much about Christ to witness to the truth, there needs to be an awareness that suffering and

⁸⁴ Bagchi, “Luther and Martyrdom,” 212.

⁸⁵ *LW* 10 (Psalm 60:6).

⁸⁶ An exception to Smith’s study are Mormons and conservative Protestant teens who are more articulate.... Mainline Protestants were the least articulate of all the teens (Smith, *Soul Searching*, 131).

⁸⁷ Nancy Ammerman, “Spiritual but not Religious?: Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (June 2013), 34. On the one hand, the inability to articulate the faith is most likely the result of a failure of formation. On the other hand, as Nancy Ammerman suggests, religion is not neatly contained in binary categories of organized v. individual, religious v. spiritual, theistic and transcendent v. non-theistic and immanent. It may be that people cannot articulate their faith as well because there is so much blending of categories occurring within our culture.

rejection are part of the faith. The danger of a therapeutic worldview is its incompatibility with suffering. Many Christians today think, “God just wants us to be happy.” Of course, Christ wants his followers to flourish with “life abundantly” (John 10:10). However, Christianity teaches that crosses are given to Christians and that they have resiliency to turn suffering into hope because the Holy Spirit indwells with them (Rom 5:1-5).

I showed the movie *Silence* (2016) to a group of freshmen in an introduction to Christianity class to teach them about martyrdom. In their reflection papers, many students did not believe martyrdom actually happened. The majority could not understand a scenario where God would allow Christians to suffer. However, one student wrote, “After watching this movie, I think I need to pray more about real issues going on in this world instead of my prayers asking for athletic success.” When teaching focuses on therapy, then safety is the goal. When the focus is the cross, people are witness to the truth in word and deed.

It is tragic that the message of the cross is rarely taught to young adults, especially since they suffer no lack of pain, loneliness, anxiety, and rejection. I am reminded of two Christian students who had very different approaches to suffering. The first was an athlete, an honor student, and a very handsome young man. His faith was intricately tied to his success. When everything was going right, he was happy and regarded God as good. When he faced even the slightest adversity, he was convinced that God had forsaken him. The other student had been physically abused by his mother when he was a small child. This young man had learned that God was with him in his suffering. He learned how to talk about what had happened to him and was even willing to show people the physical scars from the abuse. He wasn't afraid to admit that the trauma was still with

him. He learned that God's grace was sufficient for him in his weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

Both students had been raised in the church, but only had one encountered the theology of the cross.

How did the church become a place unwilling to talk about the cross? In her book, *Practicing Passion*, Kenda Creasy Dean explains how the Religious Education movement of the early 20th century moved religious education away from the passion-fueled revivals of the nineteenth century toward a more methodological approach to understanding faith, which in turn removed the language of suffering from the conversation. The leaders in the movement, John Dewey, Francis E. Clark, George Albert Coe, and many others, celebrated the mind over the passions.⁸⁸ The result was that churches “surrendered their more organic shape (as “family,” “body,” or as “broken bread”) to the emergent schooling, therapeutic, and marketing metaphors employed by the controller of age-graded growth par excellence, the public high school.”⁸⁹ By focusing on the intellect – while intentionally neglecting passion – the Religious Education movement helped create a church that used the language of culture, promoted the goals of the same culture, and proclaimed a message of goodness and self-actualization instead of one of redemption. The result is that not only did the Religious Education movement create an inarticulate church, it also raised suspicion toward those

⁸⁸ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishers, 2004), 38-40.

⁸⁹ William R. Meyers, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry: Two Congregations in America* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 178-179. Myers highlights four effects the Religious Education approach had on faith formation: 1) Churches began to equate theological language with “managerial” (middle class cultural) language. 2) The use of growth as a metaphor for understanding the ushering in of God's kingdom tended to equate American middle-class existence with membership in God's kingdom. 3) The liberal emphasis on the goodness of humanity created a “we-are-good” enclave mentality which manifests itself in the conviction that “our class is good, our race is good, our church is good, our God is good,” 4) Finally, the pursuit of the “historical Jesus” subjected the church to the rigors of theological scholarship but also rendered sin and redemption obsolete.

who speak in a biblical or theological manner.⁹⁰ Dean argues that, in attempting to strengthen the church, the Religious Education movement ironically helped usher in a passionless Christianity that has nothing to die for:

Passionless Christians lead sensible lives, not subversive ones; we are benignly ‘nice’ instead of dangerously loving. We become a race of amputees, cutting off passion – that divinely appointed impetus toward the Other – in order to fit in with all the other limbless Christians incapable of reaching out.⁹¹

By producing “nice” Christians, the church has helped to reinforce the Moralistic Therapeutic Deistic worldview while at the same time neutering the vitality that leads to sacrificial lives.⁹²

What can break the system? Who can create passion? The simple answer is God! The message of the scriptures is that God suffers for his people and calls his servants to suffer with him for the sake of the world.⁹³ Walter Brueggemann argues that education in ancient Israel was an education in suffering, as the faith “produced adults who know so well who they are and what is commanded that they value and celebrate their oddity in the face of every seductive and powerful imperial alternative.”⁹⁴ Israel understood its identity as God’s people, which both empowered the Israelites (passion) as well as challenged them (perspective). To help foster both passion and perspective, the older generation mentored the younger by telling and re-telling the story to help develop “zeal

⁹⁰ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 41.

⁹¹ Dean, 52.

⁹² Chanon Ross, “Jesus Isn’t Cool: Challenging Youth Ministry.” *Christian Century* 122, no. 18 (September 6, 2005), 22-25. Ross’ article offers a helpful perspective, from a youth minister, on the importance of leading a counter-cultural youth ministry.

⁹³ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 149-166.

⁹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Passion and Perspective: Two Dimensions of Education in the Bible.” *Theology Today* 42, no. 2 (July 1985), 173.

and imagination.”⁹⁵ Such mentoring, grounded in the biblical narrative, helps the community develop a “counter-reality” that allows it to stand up to the dominant and dominating narrative.⁹⁶

I asked the student whose mother abused him how he was able to overcome the pain of what happened. He said his father and many members of his church helped him see himself and the world through the love of Jesus. They taught him that Christians suffer but are still called to love. They encouraged him to work during the summers for a Christian organization that served Native Americans afflicted with poverty. Their mentorship helped foster a robust faith within him.

Mentors are crucial in such faith formation. In her essay: “Give Me Mentors: Pedagogies of Spiritual Accompaniment,” Anne Streaty Wimberly suggests that significant mentorships are the key to spiritual accompaniment and faith formation. Wimberly states that “youth long for meaningful and authentic relationships in which they are seen and heard as valuable people, where their questions about faith and life are considered in the presence of listeners who take them seriously.”⁹⁷ Roger Nishioka and Melva Lowry, in their essay, “Building Intentional, Demanding, Mutual Relationships for the Mentoring of Youth,” argue that “the church needs to do more than try to understand the world of adolescents, it must engage them beyond the norms of their everyday life.” The purpose of this engagement is to facilitate the kind of “steadfast, ecstatic, intimate, communal, transcendent experiences the Holy Spirit uses to awaken young people’s awe,

⁹⁵ Brueggemann, 172.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁹⁷ Anne S. Wimberly, “Give Me Mentors: Pedagogies of Spiritual Accompaniment.” In *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education – If We Let It: Reflections from the Lilly Endowment’s High School Theology Program Seminar*, edited by Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), 81.

invite their wonder, and inspire their reach toward God and others through acts of costly love that both anchor the formation of faith and ground the transformation of the emerging ego.”⁹⁸ The mentoring relationship is crucial for the formation of young people.⁹⁹

In many ways, John is a mentor to the seven churches of Revelation. John is a “partner in the trouble” and invites them to join the trouble. Of course, John does not want them to suffer but rather to endure when suffering occurs. John can mentor these churches because he intimately knows them. He is aware that the Ephesians have great works but a lack of love and that the Philadelphians are being persecuted. John is not afraid to speak a hard word against the Laodiceans because he loves them. John is even able to stoke their imaginations to see the ways in which both God and Satan are working in this world. John is a faithful witness because the revelation that he received and handed to the churches is a word meant to inspire passion as it forms, informs, and reforms their communities – the very thing mentors do.

Emerging adults need faithful mentors with the vision to teach them that suffering is part of a flourishing faith. Mentors can help emerging adults see “that it was for the joy

⁹⁸ Roger Nishioka and Melva Lowry. “Building Intentional, Demanding, Mutual Relationships for the Mentoring of Youth.” In *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, edited by Dean K. Thompson and D. Cameron Murchison (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2018), 24.

⁹⁹ Sharon D. Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 193-194. Parks argues that mentoring is crucial to the formation of young people. Parks writes, “When we pause to look back over our lives, hopefully we can all recall a person or persons who gave of their time, experiences, and talents during a crucial point in our development that we still lean on today. Such a person or persons saw something that we were not yet able to see for ourselves and created the environment so that other distractions did not hinder what it was God gave them to instill inside. From these relationships grew courage, creativity, self-awareness, and most importantly faith. These relationships created space for creativity, enlarged our community and networks, and gave definition to dreams hidden in the gray area of the mind. So whether we can fully articulate the relationship or immediately recognize a key interaction or two with the person, it is clear that mentorship is crucial in helping our young people grow and develop to shape the church and the world for the glory of God.”

set before him” that Christ “endured the cross, disregarded its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God” (Heb 12:3). Young people will respond to this because they inherently know the equation: “True love inspires sacrifice. True love is ‘to die for.’ Anything less is not true love.”¹⁰⁰ When the church teaches emerging adults the gospel, emerging adults will roar with the lamb.

¹⁰⁰ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 65.

Conclusion

Growing up in today's world is intense. With the expansion of globalization, young people are exposed to a disparity of wealth, a loss of privacy, the demands of curating an identity on social networks, and many other pressures that can impede a flourishing life. It is little wonder that emerging adults take longer to transition into adulthood as financial outlays are greater and it takes more time to reach milestones that signal adulthood: a job, home ownership, marriage, children, etc. Making matters more difficult is the pressure placed on emerging adults from those people in older generations who were able to achieve such milestones in an age when the intense pressures of globalization were not as apparent.

Thankfully, even though emerging adults feel the weight of adulthood, many are learning how to navigate this world. As The Who's song says, "The kids are alright." In some real ways, emerging adults are alright even if it takes longer for them to grow into adulthood. In fact, Jeffery Arnett argues emerging adults are doing quite well adjusting to the world they live in. "The evidence shows emerging adults overall to be highly contented with themselves and their lives, and remarkably optimistic."¹ Arnett goes on to show that they have "high hopes in a grim world" as they believe they will be able to have a "good and satisfying life for themselves even as the world deteriorates around them."² In other words, young people are more resilient and less fragile than many make them out to be.

¹ Jeffery J, Arnett, "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers? Myths and Reality About Emerging Adults." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, no. 1 (2007), 25.

² Arnett, 25.

Though the kids are alright, one wonders what it means to have “high hopes in a grim world.” It is encouraging to think of young adults as optimistic about their personal future. It is also frightening to think that their “high hopes” are based on their individual ability to flourish within their private aspirations while the rest of the world falls apart. This is too narrow a view of life, that one misses scripture’s grand vision of the whole of humanity flourishing. It appears that we are asking the wrong question. Instead of the therapeutic question: “How will I have my best life?” the better question is, “Who is the Lord of the world?”³ This apocalyptic shift not only offers a word for those facing a milieu in which the righteous suffer and the wicked thrive, but it calls on the community of faith to engage this world for the sake of the neighbor instead of succumbing to or ignoring the evils of this world. High hopes in a grim world must not simply be having one’s best life now while everything is falling apart. Rather, what is called for – in a grim world – is people of faith enduring because they know the truth that Christ is Lord and makes all things new.

In a time ruled by the therapeutic question, the church should be the one place that asks the apocalyptic question. Unfortunately, most churches inadvertently promote a therapeutic worldview that mimics cultural mantras. This is in part caused by the Religious Education movement of the early 20th century which set aside the language of faith in favor of the language of the marketplace. Of course, there were other forces influencing the church; once the church abandoned the language of faith, however, it abandoned the only real power it ever had had to effect change – the power of the word.

³ Bauckham, *Theology*, 8.

For the church to break free from its therapeutic worldview, a strong word must come from outside to speak to the church and reclaim it. John's revelation provides such a word from Christ, who proclaims an apocalyptic "no" to mass consumption, toleration without love, and the idea of personal happiness at all costs. The word from Christ also declares an eschatological "yes" that breaks into a world created by God, redeemed by Christ, and continually made new by the Holy Spirit. Michael Gorman explains the importance of providing such an alternative vision: "When our vision is corrected by the Lamb and our focus is on him, we seek next to disengage our minds, hearts, and bodies from all that promises life but delivers death. We need to resist the seduction of normalcy and of civil religion and engage the world in new ways and on new terms."⁴ The vision the church has to offer is the one Christ voices in Nazareth, one of good news delivered to the poor, release of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, setting-free of prisoners, and proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).

The task is a matter of proclamation, a mission of preaching that occurs through intentional mentorship, faith formation, and witnessing to the truth. The church must learn how to become a place where young people hear a message that truly matters.⁵ However, because emerging adults distrust religious organizations and are loath to enter church doors, much of today's proclamation must occur outside the church. This is where evangelists, in the form of mentors, are needed to accompany young adults on their journeys and to offer a passionate word that pulls them in to a life that follows Christ.

⁴ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 190.

⁵ Kara E. Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016). Powell and her team at the Fuller Youth Institute suggest six key practices to better engage young people with the hope of keeping them engaged in the church: unlock key leadership, empathize with today's young people, take Jesus' message seriously, fuel a warm community, prioritize young people, and be the best neighbors.

Passion is needed because young people are drawn to it. As Kendra Creasy Dean argues, “If the church is going to make sense to adolescents, then our ministry must be predicated on passion – the Passion of Christ, the passion of youth, and the passionate faith that is made possible when these two things come together.”⁶ Elsewhere, Dean writes, “So this is where we begin: with a passionate God, and with young people searching for passionate love, hoping against hope that their search is not in vain.”⁷ The gospel is a message of God’s passion for the world. The early church witnessed the passion of Christ and carried it to the ends of the earth. Mentors need to know the gospel so that they can passionately share it.

Mentors must also demonstrate passion for emerging adults by spending time with them. The familiar adage applies in this context: Talk is cheap, but time is expensive. By spending time engaging, encouraging, challenging, and confronting emerging adults, mentors can demonstrate the love of Christ. In doing this, mentors will help the church see young adults not as fragile people who need to be fixed or as glorified saviors of the future, but rather as people Christ has redeemed and continues to sanctify.⁸ Mentors can also help young people see the church as a place where the redemptive story of God is proclaimed and lived out.

⁶ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 22.

⁷ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 26.

⁸ James Fowler, “Adolescence in the Trinitarian Praxis of God,” Presented at the 1996 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 13-14. Fowler argues that too often the church either glorifies young people or sees them as damaged and falling apart. To correct this, mentoring is needed: “Unless we have genuine sustained and personal relationships with youth, we can fall for these distorting caricatures. And unless we have a robust faith in a God whose providence extends to and actively works in and among us in this period, we could give up on them, and on ourselves. We could give up on the holy story of God's creation, God's loving governance, and God's liberating and redemptive power acting in history and nature.”

John of Patmos was a mentor to the churches in Asia Minor. John was a credible witness because he suffered for the faith and encouraged others to join him in spite of and in the midst of the trouble. John's invitation was a personal one as he intimately knew the situation of each church and was willing to confront them for their sin as well as commend them for their good deeds. Even more, John used the language of the scriptures to strengthen the community as he called believers to follow Christ into a life of adventure.⁹ The church today could do well in emulating John.

As a thought experiment, what would happen if John of Patmos were taken out of the first century and set before an emerging adult for a conversation? Let's call this student Jordan of Portland.¹⁰ How might this conversation go? Would John be able to speak a word to Jordan that was convincing? Though this might seem like a futile conversation, it might be one of the most essential conversations facing today's church because the church's very existence depends on the ancient scriptures being used to create and sustain the faith of people of every age. So, let's turn our attention to John and Jordan's chat.

⁹ Beate Kowalski, "Trade and Economy: Reflections on Social Ethics in the Revelation of John," in *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, edited by Adela Yarbro Collins (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2017). Kowalski analyzes the ethical vocabulary used in Revelation to argue that social ethics have a high significance throughout the book of Revelation.

¹⁰ Elizabeth M. Morgan, "Contemporary Issues in Sexual Orientation and Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood," *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 1 (2013), 52. I have intentionally kept Jordan's gender ambiguous. Elizabeth Morgan recognizes the complexity and multidimensional nature of sexual identity development among both heterosexual and sexual-minority emerging adults. Today's church must understand the complexities and multidimensional nature of gender and sexual identity if it wants emerging adults to take the church seriously. The church may need to speak a contrary word on matters of gender and sexual identity; however, it must do so from a position of understanding and compassion.

A Whimsical Conversation

A college student named Jordan walked into a tattoo parlor in Portland, Oregon. A tattoo wasn't the goal, but rather a job. Jordan had recently completed an internship with a prominent advertising agency. Jordan's time was so successful that a job offer was in place following graduation. But Jordan had doubts about making a career in corporate America. As a gifted artist, this student was intrigued by the idea that tattoos create indelible art on people. With a deep breath, Jordan entered the shop where the owner was a legend within the industry.

As the door closed, Jordan heard a person in the back say: "Give me a few minutes. I'm almost finished. Take a seat!" Jordan didn't mind the delay as it provided a moment to see if any friends were going to a party later that evening. Jordan was a bit wary of attending the party because the person throwing the party would be one of the only familiar faces there, and the idea of spending the evening with a group of strangers did not sound fun. Thankfully, some friends texted that they were going and would come by at 8:00. Jordan sent them a quick text and then waited for John.

After a few minutes, John came out of the backroom. John was older than Jordan expected. It was clear that he had lived a hard life. His body was covered with tattoos, his hair was disheveled, and he was missing a couple of incisors. John stretched out his hand and Jordan shook it.

Sitting down, John said: "Let's get to it. Why do you want to be a tattoo artist?"

Being nervous, Jordan blurted out, "Because I want to do something meaningful with my life."

John wanted to roll his eyes and thought, here was another entitled young person wanting to have a purpose-driven life handed to them. "Is there any other reason?" he asked.

"I recently completed an internship at a marketing firm, and I'm not sure about the ethics of the business."

"Ethics?" asked John.

"I didn't like selling items that weren't needed to people who couldn't afford them. It felt dirty."

"Why is this a problem? If you don't sell stuff, then you can't live."

“My parents say the same thing. I know I need money to live. But it seems that my whole life has been programmed to make money. I went to school to get a job to make money in order to be happy. How can you be happy when you sell shoes to people who already have thirty unused pairs in their closet?”

“So, you have a soul,” said John.

“I’m assuming you’re not out to make fun of me? It’s not good for the environment to produce such excess.”

“I wasn’t mocking you. I agree with you. My problem with consumerism isn’t just that it hurts the environment. It also exploits the poor. Take your phone, for instance. To make it go faster, the mineral coltan is used.”

“What’s wrong with coltan?” asked Jordan.

“The problem is that the world’s biggest deposits of coltan are mined along the equator in Africa. It happens in part of the Congo where children are exploited just so our phones will work faster.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I think the global economic system is like prostitution. Honestly, it might seem like no one is getting hurt, but the prostitute is doing all the work, taking all the risk, and keeps little of the money. It is sick. I think that is how most economic systems work. The ones doing all the physical effort get little for their work. That’s why I’m committed to running a small business that takes care of both the customer and the employees.

“I hadn’t thought about it that way,” said Jordan. “But how can anyone do anything about it? I can fix something in front of me, but it seems like there is no way to stop the entire system.”

“Who said anything about stopping it,” said John. “Your job in life isn’t to fix the world. That’s God’s job. Your job is to resist the things of the world that are contrary to God.”

“It’s surprising to me to hear a guy in a tattoo shop talk about God, but that makes sense to me,” says Jordan. “Do you think God cares about how things work down here?”

“I do,” said John.

“I’m not so sure. When my grandparents take me to church, it’s so boring and doesn’t have anything to do with my life. I often wonder if God simply

created everything and lets us go through life. If we do no harm, then we will be happy.”

John paused for a moment and then asked, “Are you happy?”

“What do you mean?” Jordan responded.

“You said that you weren’t completely happy in your internship. You also said that being a nice person leads to happiness. You appear to be a nice person. Shouldn’t you be happy?”

This question struck a nerve in Jordan. “Well, I am happy most of the time. Or at least I have lots of things that make me happy. I have quite a bit of privilege and plenty of opportunities. I treat people well.”

“I didn’t ask if you were a nice person with nice things,” pushed John. “I asked if you are happy.”

“Well that’s the problem. I’m not unhappy, but I’m also not happy. I’m more, “Bleh,” than anything else. To be honest, that makes me anxious because I should be happy.”

“It’s okay not to be happy,” said John. “Honestly, I’m unhappy fairly often. I am getting to be old. There is much in this world that makes me upset. It rains too much here in Portland, and everything costs too much. But maybe you’re unhappy because you have the wrong idea about God.”

“God? What do you mean?”

“You said earlier that church is boring. But that might be because you haven’t encountered God. God is love. God made this world but also loves this world. This love drove him to send Jesus to suffer for humanity. Jesus spoke out against the leaders in Jerusalem who used their position to exploit the people. Jesus was executed on a cross because of his passion for people. But then after Jesus was raised from the dead, his followers were so moved by what Jesus did that they literally gave their entire lives to spread this message. Some were even killed for it. When you encounter that love, it causes you to love!”

“Interesting, I’m starting to like getting to know a Christian tattoo artist,” Jordan exclaimed. “I haven’t ever heard it put that way.”

“Unfortunately,” said John, “churches teach people about God as a concept instead of as someone to know.”

“You’re right!”

“You don’t learn about someone by only studying them. You learn by being with them. To know God, you need to be formed by God. I don’t mean doing a google search to find information about God. Rather, I mean being in a relationship with them. You need to go where God goes and do what God does.”

“Is that how you learned about God?”

“Yes. I was invited to follow Jesus. I didn’t know what that would lead to. Some days it was fun. Other days, I hated it. I made mistakes, but I’ve come to know him. I learned from Jesus that he is a light that shines in darkness and a meal that truly satisfies. He is a door that opens to a grand adventure and a love that is greater than hatred.”

“That’s pretty amazing. But it makes me wonder, if Jesus is so loving then why does he get so disgusted with the LGBTQ community?”

John laughed, “You don’t hold back do you?”

“Nope!” smiled Jordan.

“Well, a lot of Christians struggle with this question. In nature, it requires a man and woman to make babies. One aspect of marriage is reproduction. This is something Christians should affirm because otherwise sex can be reduced to being only about pleasure. We also know that some men like men and some women like women and they regard this as part of their nature. Churches struggle to hold these two things together, but at least we can be thankful for those that are not afraid to talk about this tension. They do this because they genuinely care for the LGBTQ community and because they believe God cares deeply for the LGBTQ community every bit as much as he cares for all people.”

“I’m not convinced by your answer. It seems that Christians try to impose their beliefs on everyone.”

“You make a lot of generalizations about Christians,” said John. “It’s true that some Christians have dominated and oppressed others, but it is also true that they’ve worked to liberate people. When I was young, no one cared much about the poor except for Christians. Christians have built hospitals and schools, fought for civil rights, and a woman’s right to vote.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jordan said. “But Christians can be so simplistic about helping others.”

“What do you mean?” said John.

“I learned in one of my classes about toxic charity and how much it enables poverty. It seems like the church wants to give food to a homeless person but doesn’t want to go after the root cause of poverty.”

“A little bit ago you talked about fixing systems. Now I know where you got it. You’re right to go after systemic issues,” said John. “However, when a person stands before you who needs food and shelter, they don’t have the luxury of waiting for your activism work. At some point, you have to make things happen in the here-and-now even as you work for lasting change that happens in the future.”

“I can agree with that,”

Realizing they haven’t spoken about tattoos, John changes the conversation. “I guess we went down a rabbit hole of theology and social change. Let’s get back on track with our job issue. Do you want to learn about tattoos?”

Jordan perked up. “Yes, please!”

“There are three things you need to know about a tattoo: design, tools, and caring for the tattoo.”

“What do you mean by design?”

“The design includes, the art work, color, size, and placement. The design matters because it’s what someone wants to say to the world. When a person is sad, they might want art to remind them of a loved one or art to encourage them to endure the pain. Does that make sense?”

“It sure does,” answered Jordan. “Are there tattoos that you don’t like doing?”

“Absolutely,” laughed John. “I hate doing four-leaf clovers and Chinese symbols for people who don’t speak Chinese. These are so retarded!”

Jordan is taken back and says, “John, you really shouldn’t use that word. It is offensive.”

“Really. Are you the politically-correct police?”

“I have a hard time when people use that derogatory word. My cousin has special needs, and using that word can be hurtful to her.”

John ponders this for a moment and says, “You’re right. I am sorry I offended you.”

“I’m not offended. I just think we should all be better with our language.”

“Then we’re on the same page. Thanks for helping me think about that word.”

“John, why don’t you like shamrocks and Chinese symbols?”

“A tattoo is permanent and is meant to say something. Drawing shamrocks or anything else that does not have meaning is...” John paused for a moment, “...it’s meaningless. That’s why I let the new tattoo artists do that kind of work.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“No, don’t misunderstand me. It’s good for new artists to practice on the mindless stuff. That’s how you get good at the craft. You can’t be good at something without first struggling through the basics.”

“That’s what I most fear in being a tattoo artist,” said Jordan. “I don’t want to be that tattoo artist who spells a name wrong or messes up the design.”

“You probably will. We all do,” explained John. “That’s how you get better. It’s part of the struggle. God works in the struggle – even in the mistakes.”

Jordan really liked hearing that and felt comfortable sharing a senior portfolio with John. John liked the art and made an immediate job offer. “Can you start on Wednesday?”

“Absolutely! I look forward to it.”

“Me too,” said John.

As Jordan left the shop, a glance to the phone screen showed they had been talking for almost an hour. Even more, Jordan’s mind was now filled with many questions from their conversation. Jordan did not know if being a tattoo artist would be a lifelong career. But it wasn’t about a career at that moment. It was a joy to find someone to talk with and be treated with respect. This bright-eyed student looked forward to spending more time with John and learning more from him (and maybe teaching him a thing or two as well).

Clearly, this was a fabricated encounter. But it is meant to demonstrate that conversations can occur between people from different generations and faith experiences. In this encounter, Jordan, a product of the MTD worldview, is anxious. Jordan clearly wants a purposeful life but is struggling between making money to live and the ecological damage that results from mass consumption. In addition, Jordan has misconceptions about church and sees it as an outdated institution that tries to repress people.

John is a witness. John confronts the oppressive nature of today's consumeristic world while also challenging some of Jordan's views of work, religion, and life. John's witness to Jesus is winsome and inviting. John is interested in formation and not simply in providing religious information to Jordan. John is not perfect. He has limitations and makes mistakes. This is helpful for Jordan who worries about making mistakes as a tattoo artist. John has lived life and offers wisdom to Jordan. This might be one of the most important aspects to a mentoring relationship.

Finally, it is important to note that this conversation occurs outside the church. Emerging adults are not attending church. The church must leave the safe confines of their buildings and learn to witness on the streets of everyday life. If the church has the courage to do this with the love of Christ, faith will flourish. So let the Lamb loose and listen to him roar!

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Biography

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