

The First and the Last

The Comfort of the Triune God in Revelation

Melvin Tinker

If you're looking for 'comfort in trying times,' you may not imagine turning to a mysterious book (Revelation) and an intricate doctrine (the Trinity) to find it. But Melvin Tinker focuses on the clarities rather than the perplexities of Revelation, holding that we are not meant to de-code the book but that the book is given so we can de-code our world. He never allows us to sink into some hermeneutical morass! He zeroes in on the Trinity in Revelation in a way that drives doctrine into life, carries theology into worship (where it belongs), and turns creed toward perseverance. I think chapter 6 (on Revelation 13) should be required reading for all Christians. Let Tinker show you that a throne (the centre that holds) makes all the difference in your world.

Dale Ralph Davis

Retired former Minister in Residence, First Presbyterian Church, South Carolina and Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

Melvin Tinker has a particular knack for writing several books in one—in this case, a commentary on the book of Revelation, a treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity, and a call for Christians to understand our “trying times” and remain faithful to our soon-coming-Lord. Laden with vital biblical truth, rich theological insight, astute cultural acumen and potent historical example, this is a book that will bless both pastors and their people, young and old alike.

Robert S. Smith,

Lecturer in Theology and Ethics, Sydney Missionary & Bible College, Australia

Melvin Tinker ably provides the reader a timely and encouraging meditation on the book of Revelation. This is a terrific engagement with the book of Revelation, conversant with the best of scholarship, and written to help the Christian understand the times in the light of Holy Writ. This is the kind of book we need: deeply immersed in the Scriptures, and brought to bear upon life in the world today.”

Brad Green,

Professor of Theological Studies, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee; Professor of Philosophy and Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; Author, *The Gospel and the Mind*

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Introduction

INCREASINGLY WITHIN CHURCH CIRCLES THERE ARE TWO common reactions to two words. The first word is ‘theology’. This tends to produce a big yawn — what has theology got to do with anything contemporary? In the day of the immediate, the impressive and the inspirational, theology simply seems out of place. It is often associated with the distant, the dry and the dull. Certainly, there may be some who get a buzz out of debating the attributes of God and all those ‘omni’ words — omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, but what have these to do with my struggle with cancer, the threatening nature of climate change and issue of mass migration? In a desperate attempt to be relevant and engage with these kinds of questions, some church ministers have been tempted to replace, or at last supplement, the Bible with other things — mindfulness, ‘Gaia theory’ and the environment, or various political ideologies.

It has not always been the case. Once the minister was viewed as a 'physician of the soul' and the Bible as the most practical book on earth, like a doctor's black bag, with medicine to meet the requirements of needy people.

This was especially so with that often maligned group of Christians known as the Puritans. One of their number, William Ames, described theology in very practical terms, as 'the doctrine of living unto God'.¹ Theology was for living, enabling God's people to live in God's world, God's way. This meant that it was vital to see the world as God sees it, as it really is, cutting through all the falsehoods and fabrications which would construe things differently in a man-centred way.

Similarly, the great 'Sweet Dropper', Richard Sibbes of Cambridge, depicted the church as a common hospital, such that theology in his hands was 'essentially Christ shaped comfort for a weary, needy, broken people'.² Is there anything more relevant to a sick person than having access to a treatment which can cure them? Likewise, there is nothing more relevant to a sick world and hurting, bewildered Christians, than theology. The source of theology is the whole of the Bible, which, as J.I. Packer reminds us, is a 'doctrinal book'.³ This is where we find truth about ourselves, the world and God which is vital for genuine human flourishing, 'whereas fallen man sees himself as the centre of the universe, the Bible shows us God as central, and depicts all creatures, man included, in their proper perspective — as existing through God and for God.'⁴

The second word is apocalypse. The reaction to this is often one of bewilderment. In common parlance it has become a metaphor for some impending end of the world scenario, a doomsday. Even when it is rightly understood as a term which describes a literary genre and more specifically the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation, this only adds to people's sense of angst. When Christians turn to it, it is so unlike anything else in the New Testament (with the exception of Jesus' teaching in Mark 13 and parallels). It appears to be more of a dream than a progressive story.⁵ Knowing that it has been a treasure trove which has been plundered for all sorts of 'end of time' teaching ranging from the cautious to the audacious, the believer may well be tempted to give it a miss and retreat to more familiar territory like 1 Peter. That would be a mistake.

It really is the case that, 'The Book of Revelation is the most remarkable text you will ever read.'⁶ It is also the most comforting and challenging. Once we have mastered some basic principles of interpretation, overcoming our understandable 'imageophobia' (I have just made up that word!), the Book of the Apocalypse in its own distinctive way does all those things which the rest of the Bible does, showing that God is central to everything. We are to joyfully embrace that perspective.

If, in the words of Ames, theology is the 'doctrine of living unto God', the Book of Revelation is theology par excellence. In his own distinctive way, John serves up for God's tested and tempted people a vision of Reality

which is second to none, firing our imagination as well as strengthening our faith. John can rightly be said to be a minister of reality, witnessing in a remarkable way to what is in Christ — hidden from the world but revealed to the church.⁷ ‘The main purpose of the book of Revelation,’ according to William Hendriksen, ‘is to comfort the militant Church in its struggle against evil.’⁸ It mainly does this by drawing our hearts to the one true God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As we shall see, the doctrine of the Trinity in the Apocalypse is not only the most highly developed in the whole of the Bible, it brackets human history, undergirds reality and provides the bedrock for Christian hope. The God who is the ‘Alpha and Omega’, the Lamb who is the ‘First and the Last’ and the sevenfold Spirit who mediates God’s revelation and presence to his people, provides all that is necessary to ensure that whatever Christians might have to endure in the world, they, like their Saviour, are victorious (3:21; 19:14). Here is a vision of God, transcendent and yet near, almighty and yet tender, ruling and rescuing. This is the God of the Christian faith.

What follows is a series of expositions which tease out the theological and pastoral aspects of the Book of Revelation. This involves setting the passages in their original context in order to enable us to engage with the contemporary scene of Christians living in the West. We shall discover that many of the pressures the first Christians faced are very similar to the ones we are facing today. What is more, the comfort John’s visions provide

for his first readers come home to us with an amazing immediacy. John's world, the world of the Apocalypse, is very much our world and his God our God, in all his triune majesty.

I would like to thank Mark Lanier for the use of his remarkable library in Houston, which enabled me to dig deeper into the background of the Apocalypse. Thanks also to Shirley Godbold and Philip Tinker for checking the manuscript and making all the necessary corrections. Last, but not least, there is my heartfelt gratitude to my wife Heather, for her constant encouragement and support.

Soli Deo Gloria

Melvin Tinker
The Lanier Theological Library

I. Getting Real: the Trinity and the Apocalypse

Christians are always more culturally short-sighted than they realise. They are often unable to tell, for instance, where their Christian principles leave off and their cultural perspectives begin. Many fail to ask themselves the important question: ‘Where are we coming from and what is our own context?’¹

So writes the Christian social critic, Os Guinness. This is nothing new. It was a problem faced by the early Christians. Indeed, it was a pressing issue directly addressed by the risen and ascended Jesus Christ in the letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor as found in the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

Let’s take one example of a church which was selling out to the surrounding culture rather than standing out from it: the church at Laodicea.

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' (3:14-22)

This is a church which, to put it bluntly, had become useless. The key to understanding the nature of Jesus rebuke lies in the imagery being used associated with the plumbing system of this ancient city. In the Lycus valley where Laodicea was situated, there were two other New Testament towns, Colossae and Hierapolis. Colossae enjoyed water which was fresh and cold and therefore useful as drinking water. Hierapolis, on the other hand, had water which was warm and medicinal; it was a spa

town, having hot springs in which people bathed to improve their health. Its water was also useful. Laodicea, however, had to draw its water from a long distance by stone pipes. This left thick carbonate deposits in the pipes and not surprisingly Laodicean water had become proverbial for its obnoxious taste. In effect, the Lord Jesus was saying to this church: 'I wish that you were like the water of Colossae — cold and useful. Or like the water of Hierapolis — hot and useful, but you are neither. You have become like the water your citizens drink — lukewarm, indigestible and so useless, indeed worse than useless; think of how your stomach retches when you sip that disgusting mix piped into your town. That is how I feel when I look at the way you are conducting yourselves. You make me want to throw up.' That is the unsanitised version of 3:16!²

What was it about these Christians which provoked such a violent reaction from the risen and ascended Lord? Had they denied the faith? Not openly. Had they sold out to sexual licence like the church in Thyatira? Not really. We see those things mentioned in some of the other letters, but not in this instance. What, then, was their problem? We are told in 3:17, 'For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.' The church had simply begun to mirror the city of which it was a part. Instead of countering the surrounding culture and so transforming it, it had surrendered to the culture and had therefore been captured by it. Put simply, the church had become worldly.