

Part 1

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO STUDY THE REVELATION

A WORD FROM DR. WALTHER

It is very important for the success of this study that the leader believe in the task at hand. This means specifically that you begin with some conviction that the Revelation can be understood, that this understanding need not be far-fetched, and that you and your group will reach such an understanding. Work through the whole *Revelation* Resource Book so that you will have confidence from the outset that this program will indeed effect a reasonable understanding of this much-misunderstood part of Scripture.

There are a number of good commentaries that are helpful collateral reading and study resources for your preparation. It is well to recognize, however, that these books do not necessarily—indeed they are unlikely to—agree on many details of interpretation. Where you find differences from the Resource Book, present the different opinions that seem most commendable to you, or decide which interpretation most closely fits into the interpretive stance of our text and present that view with some conviction. This does not mean, of course, that you will cut off differing views that arise in the group discussions.

In that connection, a word of warning: some extreme ideas are almost certain to surface from time to time in your group. These may be picked "out of the air"

(i.e., on radio programs) with disturbing regularity. Here patience is the key. It is important not to lock in the end from the beginning, and many questions are resolved by the cumulative study of the biblical text. Do not allow one or more of the group to monopolize the discussions—as someone is almost sure to try with Revelation.

As to commentaries, one of the most useful is that by George B. Caird in the Harper series.¹ His views are balanced and are presented with a minimum of technical jargon. Most church libraries have the Layman's Bible Commentary series; the volume on Revelation by Julian P. Love is helpful though brief. If you can find John W. Bowman's *The First Christian Drama* (out of print)² it will help you understand the theatrical aspects of Revelation. D. T. Niles' *As Seeing the Invisible*³ is an excellent aid for pin-pointing the modern relevance of the biblical text (again, the book is out of print, but it may be in a library). Beware of trying to follow too many aids; you may get confused and your leading will be diffuse.

Other books will be mentioned throughout the Leader's Guide. Members of the group may bring books to you for evaluation, for much has been written about the Revelation. Unfortunately, a lot of it is not helpful and some is counterproductive. You may often have a sense of the value of a book, even before reading it, by the reputation of the author and the reliability of the publisher. Members of the group should ordinarily not be encouraged to use secondary sources unless it is clear that they can do so in addition to the primary task of mastering the biblical passages as assigned in the Resource Book.

With regard to **apocalyptic**, the background of your group dictates how much help you need to provide. *Kerygma: The Bible in Depth* gives a good basis for further study in this genre. Resist the temptation to dwell on the history and technical details of the literature. Some may want to spend a little time on Daniel, particularly if they are still thinking of that book as a "major prophet." A concordance may lead you to a Daniel in Ezekiel 14:14,20; 28:3; but this person is probably a Ugaritic *Danel* rather than our Daniel. It is useful to broaden the

¹ *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Harper & Row, 1966).

² Westminster Press, 1968.

³ Harper & Brothers, 1961.

horizon of the group by looking briefly at a passage in Zechariah, perhaps from 4, 5, and 6:1-8.⁴

It is useful to illustrate how we use metaphors and allusions today. Thus there are the Russian bear and the American eagle. There are the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey. We speak of the four winds and the four corners of the earth. The black/white, darkness/light, bad/good pairs have figured in our racial problems. Seven is a lucky number; thirteen is unlucky. New York City is "the Big Apple." Australia is "down under." "A regular Jonah" is a jinx. "Zillions" is somewhere beyond millions. Red light means stop; green light means go. A "greenhorn" is a novice; the opposite may be "red hot."

It is not necessary to spend much time on **literary considerations**. In any case, the most important matter is the emphasis on references to the Old Testament. Persons who are comparatively unfamiliar with that part of the Bible should be reassured that they need not be left behind in this study. Most Bibles have some system of cross references, so all readers may find effective help.⁵

The **ways of approaching interpretation** are quite important. In the Resource Book we begin our understanding with careful analysis of the original setting of the book. This is introduced in considerable detail in Parts 2 and 3 and is developed all the way through the study. If we do not establish with some certainty what it meant, our effort to find what it means is susceptible to subjective prejudice and irresponsible interpretation.

One should not be in a hurry to arrive at a modern application. Such shortcutting almost surely leads to superficial interpretation. Precisely because the Revelation is couched in vision, symbol, metaphor, and allusion, it is easy for the reader to draw quick conclusions about contemporary relevance. The leader must not stifle creative imagination, but it is also the leader's responsibility to keep the interpretative process under control.

The converse, however, is that if the text is not related to the life of the church today, its interpretation is incomplete. Considerable interest may be maintained

⁴ Much of the detail in this section on **Apocalypse** is based on the editorial help of Donald E. Gowan. His book *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Fortress Press, 1986) may be consulted with profit.

⁵ See Resource Book, Part 1, footnote 3.

at the level of academic inquiry, but this is less than our study together intends to accomplish.

The approach of the Resource Book may receive some negative reaction if there is anyone in the group who has been influenced by the views of Hal Lindsay. You should be aware that *The Late Great Planet Earth* and other such books fall generally within the "futurist" approach. Lindsay and others make the deductive judgment, then, that these are indeed the "last times."⁶ Again, patience is the best counsel. We are trying to find out what the Bible says, not how it agrees with our opinions. If you meet this problem, perhaps you can keep all minds open and conversation calm until it becomes apparent (perhaps not until Part 3) that the seven churches of the Revelation were real congregations with real problems, which were addressed by John's visions. There is a kind of spiritual arrogance about thinking that the Revelation is directed only to our age, and there may be smug satisfaction in thinking that the "end of the world" will prove this position true.

Since there is so much in Revelation that cries for explanation, it is important to use an inductive method as consistently as possible and to withstand the temptation to lecture on details that are likely to sidetrack the ongoing study. This introductory part appears not to present much for the reader to do other than to study the Resource Book. Note, however, the instruction on page 8 to read the entire Revelation quickly, preferably "at one sitting." It is important at the outset to involve the group in the biblical text itself. Resist any move to deal with specific passages at this point except as they contribute to overall impressions of the whole text.

The Revelation should prove to be an exciting book for your group. If you find it so, you will be an exciting leader.

⁶ In *There's a New World Coming* (Harvest House Publishers, 1984) he proposes that "John was put into a 'divine time machine' and transported nineteen centuries into the future."

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

It is intended that this session will enable the participants to:

1. Become familiar with other members of the group.
2. Express their impressions of and questions about Revelation.
3. List several facts about Revelation.
4. Identify the preferred approach for interpreting Revelation.

Resources That May Be Necessary

List of passages from Revelation for the Opening Prayer

Thin markers, 5"x7" cards, masking tape, 8 1/2"x11" sheets of white paper

Newsprint, markers

Resource Books

Copies of books for research such as *Understanding the New Testament*, *The Illustrated Bible Handbook* (Abingdon Bible Handbook), *Jesus Through Many Eyes*, *Introducing the New Testament*, Bible dictionaries, commentaries on Revelation, and study Bibles

Prepared worksheets

Session Strategy

Opening Prayer

A Note from Don Griggs:

Each session plan includes directions and resources for an opening prayer. While the session may be opened with a brief prayer by the leader, it is important that the prayers reflect the aspirations and affirmations of the people. These activities have been developed in such a way that the participants' prayers are prompted by one or more portions of Scripture. As persons engage in a dialogue with Scripture it is possible that they may be open to hear God speak

through these powerful words of faith and that they may be able to express some of their own deep thoughts and sincere feelings.

For some sessions the prayers are prompted by specific passages in one or more chapters of the Revelation. In other sessions the particular chapter(s) from Revelation do not include passages that seemed fruitful for prompting our prayers. In those sessions, passages from other books of the Bible are selected that are related to the theme of Revelation that is explored in that session.

There are seven guidelines that are helpful to keep in mind when planning and leading the opening prayer activities. (Even though in Revelation seven is the perfect, complete number, one should not presume that this set of guidelines is perfect or complete.)

- a. The praying activities that are presented are suggestions. The leader should feel free to revise, adapt, delete, or add to the activities that are outlined.
- b. In many of the sessions the praying activities will proceed more effectively and efficiently if worksheets are prepared ahead of time so that participants have in their hands the suggested passages and directions to follow. This also makes it possible for persons to use the praying activities at other times as part of their personal devotions.
- c. For some persons the praying activities may be a little different from those they have used in previous Bible studies. This may cause some anxiety in the first few sessions. However, the praying activities share some characteristics with the other teaching activities suggested in the session plans. After several sessions the participants are likely to become more comfortable with this inductive style of being involved with the Bible.
- d. Provide time (a minute or two) for the group members to think or to write their prayer ideas in preparation for the prayer time. When inviting persons to share their prayers do not just go around the table or the circle. Allow for a random response, back and forth across the group, so that those who choose not to share their prayers will feel comfortable about remaining silent.
- e. One of the most important factors affecting the success of leading and doing these praying activities is the conviction of the leader that this is an important part of the session plan. The leader needs to introduce and lead

the activities with confidence that what is planned will work and will contribute significantly to the spiritual nurture of those involved.

- f. Don't be afraid of silence. Silence is important; it gives persons time to think and reflect. The burden of the silence should be on the participants, not on the leader. If the leader always fills the silence, the members of the group soon get the impression that they are not expected to share their prayers.
- g. In the praying activities the leader is responsible for setting the stage, giving the directions, and bringing closure. However, it is also important for the leader to participate along with the others. It is best for the leader to not always be the first or the last one to share.

A prayer for this session:

The book of Revelation was addressed to people who were suffering great oppression and the threat of death if they made public their faith in Jesus Christ. The following passages from the Revelation are prayers or affirmations addressed to God. Duplicate the list and distribute to the group, or write them on a sheet of newsprint for all to see.

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|--------------|
| a. 4: 8b | f. 7:12 | k. 16: 7b |
| b. 4:11 | g. 11:15b | l. 19: 1b-2a |
| c. 5:12b | h. 11:17 | m. 19: 5b |
| d. 5:13b | i. 15: 3b | n. 19: 6b-7a |
| e. 7:10b | j. 15:4 | o. 22:21 |

Each person is to select one of these passages. It is acceptable for two or more persons to select the same passage. When all have found their passages, take turns reading them as statements of a litany prayer. After each statement is read the whole group responds, "*Praise be to you, O God.*" When a number have shared their verses and you have decided to conclude the litany, invite everyone to pray, "*Praise be to you, O God, because you are the beginning and the end of the whole world, and of our lives. Amen.*"

Setting the Stage

The word *revelation* comes from two Greek words. One means *to undo*; the other means *veil*. Part of the purpose of this first session is to help the group

members become acquainted, to undo or remove the veil that keeps them, as Ann Weems⁷ suggests, "...strangers who have known each other for twenty years."

Distribute 5" x 7" cards and markers, with these instructions:

- a. Write your name in block letters on the card.
- b. Identify a little known fact about yourself. Write it on the card under your name.

Examples: I'm the youngest of seven children; my hobby is collecting antique kitchen articles; I have always had a secret longing to be a pilot.

- c. Attach your *revelation* name tag to your chest with masking tape.

When the name tags are ready, invite the group to mingle for approximately five minutes to discover the little known facts about each other. If there are less than ten, have the group members share their revelations verbally.

This get acquainted activity could be continued for several sessions, if it proves to be enjoyable. Add one new *revelation* to the cards each week as the group members arrive.

or

Since understanding the Revelation depends on uncovering the meaning of symbols, begin by having the group make symbols that reveal facts about themselves. Provide them with 8 1/2" x 11" sheets of paper, assorted markers, and the following instructions:

- a. Write your name in the center of the paper in block letters.
- b. In each of the corners of the paper draw a symbol that "reveals" something about you. Don't worry about your ability as an artist. One of the nice things about symbols is that they nearly always need to be interpreted!
- c. Share your symbols with three other people.

When the small sharing groups have had an opportunity to interpret the symbols they used, reassemble. Point out that to understand the Revelation, we must learn how to interpret the symbols we encounter there.

⁷ Ann Weems' poem "Touch in Church" from *Reaching for Rainbows* (Westminster Press, 1980), p. 35.

Collect the papers and hang them in a prominent place in the room. They may be used to continue the community building process during the next several sessions.

Exploring the Scripture

Note: Because this is the first session in our study of *Revelation: Visions for the Church in Crisis*, it is unlikely the participants have had an opportunity to study Part 1, "Introduction: How to Study the Revelation." The plans for Session 1 are designed with that in mind. Both Parts 1 and 2 should be read in preparation for the next session. Future session plans assume that the appropriate pages in the Resource Book and the assigned passages of Scripture have been read ahead of time.

1. Nineteen centuries ago a faithful Christian believer who wanted to give warning, encouragement, and hope to Christians who were suffering or were about to suffer persecution, wrote a letter to seven churches. This letter expressed judgment and despair, victory and hope. It was an affirmation of faith in God's power and love. Undoubtedly, the churches that received this letter understood the message it contained and were strengthened by it. Since then, however, this letter "has been much misunderstood and distorted..." People come to the study of the Revelation with a wide variety of feelings. Invite the group to respond to the following questions. At this point accept what is said without commenting. Record the impressions and questions for future reference.
 - a. What are some impressions you have of Revelation from previous experiences or from hearing people talk about Revelation?
 - b. What are some questions you have about Revelation?

You will probably conclude by agreeing that the Revelation is a difficult book that causes us to raise many questions. This course is going to help eliminate much of the confusion and answer many of the questions that have been raised.

and/or

Distribute the Resource Books and have the group turn to pages iii-iv and read the author's outline of Revelation. When they have finished, invite them to share things they have noticed about the content of Revelation from the outline. Some observations may include: it has 22 chapters; numbers

seem to play an important part; seven churches are mentioned; part of the story takes place in heaven; etc.

Accept all observations. Then have them turn to page 2 of Part 1, and skim the five paragraphs under "The Almost Lost Book." In what way, if any, does the information in these paragraphs reflect feelings they have brought to this study?

2. In order to understand the Revelation better, gather general information about the book before individual verses or chapters are studied. Locate a number of resources that provide information about the book. Appropriate ones include *Understanding the New Testament*, pages 339-342; *Illustrated Bible Handbook*, pages 357-367 (*Abingdon Bible Handbook*, pages 342-348); *New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, page 801; *Jesus Through Many Eyes*, pages 112-115; *Introducing the New Testament*, pages 445-448; *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, pages 868-869. Bible commentaries on the Revelation also provide information. Study Bibles have additional help.

Form small groups of three or four persons. Distribute the different books you have located so that each small group has one or more and a copy of these directions:

Using the resources you have received, see what your group can discover in response to these questions:

- a. What is the nature of the book of Revelation? What type of literature is it?
- b. Who is the author of the book?
- c. What are the circumstances under which the book was written?
- d. What are some of the distinguishing characteristics of the book?

Be prepared to share your discoveries with the other groups.

After about ten minutes have the groups report what they have discovered.

or

Write questions a, b, and d listed above on a chalkboard or newsprint. Have the group read "An Apocalypse" and "Some Literary Considerations" in the Resource Book to locate answers. Allow about ten minutes and discuss the information that is gathered. Provide information from your own

background reading about the circumstances under which the book was written, using some of the sources listed above.

or

Present a mini-lecture that includes information suggested above.

3. According to Dr. Walther, "There are a number of ways apocalyptic literature has been approached. Because of (its) particular characteristics..., these ways differ significantly and yield widely differing interpretations." It is helpful to examine some of these approaches and evaluate "the problems posed by each and the results each will yield in understanding the text."

Divide into four groups. Each group is to examine one of these approaches (preterit, continuing historical, futurist, and spiritual) described in the first five paragraphs of "Ways of Approaching Interpretation" in the Resource Book on pages 7-8. Additional information is found in the *Illustrated Bible Handbook* on pages 362-363 (*Abingdon Bible Handbook*, pages 348-349). In *IBH* the preterit approach is called the contemporary-historical view, and the spiritual approach is titled the mythic-symbolic view. Ask each group to list on newsprint the approach it represents and:

- a. the problems posed by the method
- b. the understanding or result that may be achieved by the method

After seven to ten minutes, invite the groups to display their newsprint charts. Conclude by summarizing the final two paragraphs in "Ways of Approaching Interpretation" and the final two paragraphs in *Illustrated Bible Handbook* under the heading, "Interpretation of the Visions," pages 362-363 (*Abingdon Bible Handbook* page 349).

or

Divide into pairs. Provide each pair with a copy of the chart "Approaches to Interpretation" on page 14. Information found on pages 7-8 in the Resource Book and pages 362-363 of *Illustrated Bible Handbook* (*Abingdon Bible Handbook*, pages 348-349) will help in completing the chart.

When the charts are completed, ask the groups to compare the information that was gained and address any questions that arose from the exercise.

Closing

1. Remind the group to review the content of Part 1 and read Part 2 as well as the suggested passages from Revelation in preparation for the next session. If you have not already done so, emphasize that thorough preparation, regular attendance, and active participation are crucial for the success of this learning experience.
2. Invite the group to write out their own one sentence prayers and/or affirmations of praise on slips of paper. Collect the slips in a basket, mix them up, and ask the participants to take one and read it as a part of the group prayer. Use the response, "*Praise be to you, O God*" after each sentence prayer is read.

Looking Ahead to Session 2

Skim the next session. Beginning with Part 2, "Setting the Stage" suggests an activity entitled "Meet the Author." If you decide to use it, reproduce the script and distribute it now to four people who are to take part in this "interview."

Supplementary Reading for Session 1

The Revelation of St. John the Divine, pp. 1-8

Approaches to Interpretation

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Problems posed by this method</i>	<i>Understanding/results achieved by this method</i>
-----------------	--------------------------------------	--

Preterit
(Contemporary historical)

Continuing
Historical

Futurist

Spiritual
(Mythic/
symbolic)

Integrated
