

One New Book for the Preacher

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Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb Into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

The discussion of the “missional church” has already fostered a broad diversity of publications whose use of the term “missional” makes clear that the term is rapidly becoming problematic. It is by now a popular cliché that is used for such a spectrum of themes that any discussion of it requires a basic clarification of terms. One of the more theologically centered outcomes of the emergence of the term, however, is the growing engagement with “missional hermeneutics.” Pioneered by David Bosch in the first third of his magisterial *Transforming Mission* dealing with the biblical foundations of mission, this approach to Scripture builds on the basic assumption that the apostolic mission strategy was the formation of witnessing congregations, and that the scriptural witness in its diverse forms continues that process of formation for faithful missional witness. To interpret Scripture in such a way requires, however, a rather significant re-orientation of biblical scholarship. There is, thankfully, a growing number of biblical scholars who are contributing to an emerging literature on the missional interpretation of Scripture. Among those is Michael Gorman, a Protestant Professor of Sacred Scripture on the faculty of St. Mary’s Seminary and University in Baltimore. His recently published book on the interpretation of the book of Revelation is truly an exegetical and hermeneutical goldmine for the biblical preacher and teacher who wants to equip her congregation for faithful witness as a sent-out community.

The basic hermeneutical question which serves missional formation can be formulated along these lines: How did this text continue the formation of a community for its missional vocation then, and how does it do that today in a particular context? Gorman’s exposition of the Revelation in its theological setting *then*, leading on to the exploration of its relevance for our communities in our late or post Christendom setting *today*, is a reliable and provocative resource for that process. The book is not a commentary, nor does it replace the work of the exegete who needs to work with the text directly in order to preach or to teach it. But the book illumines the message of the Revelation for its original context, traces the major themes whose trajectories continue to be major challenges for the church, and paves the way for exegesis and exposition in sermon and lesson today. It lays out the issues and questions with which the exegete should grapple when translating the book’s message into a contemporary context. In doing this, Gorman makes some bold moves that will challenge both the preacher and the listening community.

These bold moves constitute Gorman’s truly prophetic and provocative engagement with the challenge of what I call “reductionist revisions of the gospel and of the theology and practice of the church,” which are the outcomes of the centuries of the western Christendom tradition. The author focuses his polemic upon the reductionism of the Christian church to a civil region in partnership, if not in subservience, to the

social and political orders in which it located. His interpretation of both the seven letters and the visions of heavenly worship results in a persuasive articulation and rejection of the cultural captivities which have so pervasively shaped the Christian movement in the West. His exegetically grounded exposition of the problem of accommodation as over-accommodation or, to use the missiological lingo, over-contextualization of the church and its message is blunt, cutting, germane – and must be affirmed. This incisive prophetic polemic addresses the ways in which the church has allowed itself to be enlisted in the defense of the nationalisms and idolatries of cultural identity – and thus displaced the Lamb from the throne.

For the Reformed theologian reading this interpretive guidebook, there are some obvious challenges. We are wary of approaches that might tend to withdraw the church from active engagement with its political and social context. That is clearly not what Gorman is contending with his argument for “uncivil worship and witness.” Quite the opposite: it is hard to contest the finding that the message of Revelation must lead us to ask some threatening questions. Do we not need seriously to entertain the removal of all flags from sanctuaries and patriotic hymns from songbooks, the foregoing of all invocations that “God [should] bless America” at the end of political addresses or in the singing of the noted national religious anthem? Is it not necessary now to wonder about pastoral prayers at the luncheon meetings of highly secularized service clubs? Should the government’s continuing provision for military chaplains as well as chaplains for legislative bodies not be a theme that the Christian church should raise for the sake of its own integrity? The list of questionable accommodations becomes ever longer the more we become aware of what the centuries of Christendom generated and what is now questionable as it disintegrates. What Gorman lays out as the prophetic implications of the Revelation’s meaning for the posture and action of the church within the world is entirely arguable from the text as he expounds it. His exposition of the Book of Revelation can challenge us to read it as a profound and incisive challenge of many of the assumptions that govern our churchly reality in the West today.

When teaching the end of Christendom, I caution my students that it is not appropriate for us to place ourselves on some pedestal of spiritual purity and point back with righteous judgment to the compromises and captivities our predecessors acceded to over the centuries since Constantine. I suggest that it is important to learn to read, receive, and assess this complex legacy dialectically. We cannot assert that God has been absent from the history of Christendom –not even absent from the somewhat ambivalent story of Constantine’s spiritual journey. We cannot claim that the Gospel has not been heard, believed, and passed along in the centuries of our so-called Christian history – and often by the agency of “established Christianity.” We cannot act as though the Holy Spirit disappeared from the arena of western world history sometime between Constantine’s vision and the establishment of the claims of papal authority as a soteriological necessity – only to return to earth in the particular Christian movement which we just founded, in alleged direct succession to the New Testament. Our history is a dialectical mixture of divine faithfulness and human unfaithfulness in and through which God has been graciously willing to continue to be present, heard, and active. The Gospel has been proclaimed and responded to in churches with flags in them, and royal chaplains have at times been witnesses of great integrity and courage. We receive this complex legacy both gratefully and critically. We struggle

with how to do this with integrity. But we are challenged by the clear message of Revelation to recognize how fateful our concessions have been. The encounter with the responsible reading of Revelation must clearly result in a call for repentance and a profound desire for our own conversion to our unpolluted vocation.

Gorman's book can help the preacher and teacher to prepare her or his missional congregation to acknowledge and understand the constant reality of our own ambiguity. We are communities of forgiven sinners. We live with the diversity of immature milk-fed faith and mature meat-eating faith. We see through glasses darkly. We are admonished, if we think that we are strong Christians, to be especially considerate and supportive of those whom we regard as weak. The New Testament is very candid about the human frailty of the called and sent community – as is clearly seen in the seven letters in the Revelation. The warnings and the imperatives in the New Testament documents seem to make clear that, from the outset, the church has struggled with diverse challenges to its faithfulness. For the churches in which the Revelation of St. John was originally read out, the issue was growing public hostility toward the church. The programmatic persecution of the Christian movement was becoming a recurring political strategy of the empire. Throughout the apocalyptic visions, the underlying theme is the confidence that Christ will have the final and decisive victory, and that the saints are being equipped by God's Spirit to endure. That endurance is central to the church's visible witness, more and more a witness of martyrdom.

But with the coming of Christendom after Constantine, the situation changed. Instead of being a marginal movement without power in society, the Christian church under royal patronage became a privileged part of the power structures that defined emerging Christendom. One can argue that the New Testament appears to be oriented largely towards the minority, resident alien church rather than the institutional church with political and social clout. Does the New Testament prepare the church for how it should carry out its witness in a radically changed political reality? Does Christian faithfulness change when the church's place in society changes from being marginal to being central? What kind of churchly conduct is "worthy of the Gospel" when the church is the favored religious institution in society. The account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is clearly realistic preparation for the church's encounter with the seductions of power and wealth. But, as Gorman makes plain, the Revelation can, in fact, contribute powerfully to the formation of a witnessing congregation whose loyalty is solely to the Lamb upon the throne and which, because of that loyalty, can experience ever new forms of hostility. For the Revelation to work that way in the community, it must be read and interpreted as the Word that "equips the saints for the work of ministry" now, in their ambivalent and often threatening contexts. And it must be read as a radical questioning of the assumptions we still make about our special place in the public square.

Those assumptions are subject to review and revision. Now, as Christendom fades away, we find ourselves in situations more comparable to the pre-Constantinian reality of the Christian movement than to the intervening centuries of privilege and protection. The Book of Revelation is re-emerging as highly relevant preparation for witness in a world whose reaction to the gospel ranges from diffidence to rejection to active opposition. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the last book in the New Testament confronts us today with the call to our repentance of our Christendom compromises and our conversion to radical obedience in a progressively more hostile

world. If we do not yet experience that hostility in our particular setting, then there certainly are many faith communities around the globe today for which that harsh reality is their daily experience. Perhaps we need to read Revelation together with those sisters and brothers in order to have our own understanding of our context and its challenges refined and sharpened.

How, then, should the congregational formation enacted by the Revelation relate to the challenge of the late or post-Christendom church in the West? It is certainly relevant, as just noted, to the situation of Christian minorities experiencing repression and even persecution in many parts of the world today. We are, however, focused upon the North Atlantic mission field in which cultural Christianity is alive and well. Does the Revelation of St. John require that the Christian church retreat from the world into enclaves of counter-cultural witness? Can it guide us toward faithful witness in the ambiguous world into which we are sent? These are crucial questions for the community that wants to be faithful to its missional vocation. Dr. Gorman's book provides enormously important guidance for this struggle, as it fosters serious work with the Revelation in congregations and classrooms. It is also a catalyst for passionate discourse, if not argument, on how we should go about it. It provides much needed guidance for how to engage the challenges at the end of Christendom in ways that are "worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."