



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The War of the Lamb
(*Peace and War*, pp. 18-26)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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The War of the Lamb

The Book of Revelation cross-examines the claims of divine blessing upon the civil order, especially when it is violent and economically exploitative. The War of the Lamb is a call to arms, to wage war with what at first glance seems to be no weapons at all – the words of faithful testimony.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:14-22

Responsive Reading[†]

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding God's throne and the four living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, singing,

"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Reflection

From its startling vision of Jesus personally leading the armies of heaven into battle (19:11-16) to its threat of divine war against members of the *church* (2:16), the Book of Revelation is a book of war. No wonder it gets mixed reviews from Christians! Some employ its violent imagery to promote their personal or national crusades to subjugate evil, while others are so embarrassed by its easily misinterpreted images that they ignore the book entirely.

Can we tune our ears to "listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" through Revelation's amazing visions? "Far from renouncing Jesus' call to a peculiar life of non-violent witness as the counter-cultural sign of God's presence in the world and passionate love for it," Maier suggests, Revelation urges us to:

- ▶ *follow the slain Lamb.* It joins Old Testament holy war visions of a warring God with the unlikely image of the conquering Lord as a "Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered" (5:5-6; 6:15-17; 12:11; 14:4-5; 19:6-8). The Lamb and his followers wield one weapon: their faithful witness to the true story of God's purposes (19:15; see 2:16 and 12:11). "Holy war waged by word of testimony takes up the violent imagery belonging to the tradition of apocalyptic warfare and transforms it in a way that finally renounces violence as the means by which God's purposes are achieved," Maier writes. This "brings us face to face with the Apocalypse's ethical demand on Christians to follow on the way of Jesus in loud and faithful witness before all that opposes God's purposes in the world."
- ▶ *resist civil religion.* Five of the seven churches that receive letters – including Laodicea – are criticized for faithlessness (2:1-3:22).



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Neither persecuted nor suffering, the self-assured Laodiceans are profiting from the 'peace' won by the empire's brutality. To be wealthy, they've looked away from the state's oppression of subject peoples and accepted its official story on peace. Revelation's "frontal assault on Roman impiety and tyranny," Maier says, can "wake Christians from a comfortable culturally-accommodating sleep to embrace lives of bold witness and vigilant discipleship. As the most subversive political writing in the New Testament it has inspired generations of Christians to cross-examine the glowing progress reports of civil government and to be suspicious when Caesar invokes divine blessing upon his order."

► *embrace a counter-cultural identity.* The War of the Lamb is waged through worship of Jesus Christ, the Empire's victim. This is no private or merely religious affair, for "heavenly-minded praise of God in Revelation always has earthly goods in view." In a final vision, "the kings of the earth," the worst economic and military exploiters, bring "their wealth as offering to the holy city Jerusalem (21:24, 26) ... [and] are caught up in God's project of healing the nations (22:2)," notes Maier. "John takes worship to the streets and demands an audience, tempted to be too accommodating and uncritical of the socio-political order around it, that it give public testimony to the Lamb who calls the unjust to account and renounces the violent with his more costly way of love."

Study Questions

1. Who is writing to the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:15-22)? What is the church's failing? What healing is offered?
2. How are churches "tempted to be too accommodating and uncritical of the socio-political order" today?
3. How does the vision of Jesus in battle (Revelation 19:11-16) transform the view of God as a holy warrior (Isaiah 63:1-6)?
4. Revelation brims with songs of heavenly worship (4:8-11; 5:8-14; 7:15-17; 11:15-18; 12:10-12; 14:2-3; 15:2-4; 19:1-8; 22:3). What hymns do you sing that borrow from its rich imagery?

Departing Hymn: "O Hear Them Marching, Marching" (verses 1, 3, and 4)

O hear them marching, marching, the legions of good will,
the men of peace who seek not to bomb and maim and kill;
they march not to their conquest with battle flags unfurled;
but with their gentle spirit they shall subdue the world.

The men of war oppose them, and seek to bar the way,
the powers of darkness striving to thwart the coming day;
but, led by unseen forces, their hosts are marching still,
to build for future ages the kingdom of good will.

A mighty Captain leads them, the valiant Prince of Peace;
they shall possess the future, and ancient wrongs shall
cease;

O men of good will, marching to bloodless victory,
we join your hosts in building the kingdom that shall be.

Marion F. Ham (1867-1956)

Suggested Tunes: ST. THEODULPH or LANCASHIRE

†adapted from Revelation 5:11-14

The War of the Lamb

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Revelation 7:9-17
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss pacifism in Revelation
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To explore how Revelation transforms holy war imagery in order to renounce violence.
2. To read Revelation from the perspective of a Laodicean Christian – who rather than being persecuted by an empire, is too comfortable with its understanding of “peace.”
3. To consider how Christians today are tempted to be too accommodating and uncritical of the social and political order.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Peace and War (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn, “O Hear Them Marching, Marching,” locate either of the familiar tunes ST. THEODULPH or LANCASHIRE in your hymnal.

Begin with a Story

Harry Maier describes a group of Christians who’ve heard the call to counter-cultural identity in the Book of Revelation: “On Good Friday they gather, near the Anglican Cathedral in downtown Vancouver, a monument from another age, nestled between high-rise apartment buildings, exclusive shops, and corporate centers of commerce. Just a few of them, never very many, but enough for passersby to notice the youngsters and seniors, the moms and dads, the singles and couples dressed for the march – some in suits and dresses as though for church, others casually. From all corners of the city they come, usually the same ones, but each year there are a few new faces. Lately TV cameras and newspaper reporters have been showing up. One or two curious ones stop to see what is going on; others, embarrassed, hurry by. One of the organizers calls the gathering to attention, welcomes them and explains the route. She and a couple others pick up the heavy wooden cross constructed for the ‘crosswalk’ and lead the group across the street to their first stop, the headquarters of a national bank. They pray for wisdom in the uses of the world’s resources, for forgiveness for greed, for courage to speak up for those who pay for the beauty and majesty of the shining buildings in whose shadows they stand. Their route takes them to the Vancouver Stock Exchange, the city’s courts, the jail, to trendy shopping streets – wherever decision and image makers gather. Along the way a few are singing, ‘Worthy, worthy, worthy is the Lamb.’ The notes rise, blending with the sounds of traffic and streets coming alive below. The sun reflects gold off the glass towering above. Steel shakes off the cold from the night and sparkles. As though these girders and glass reflected a Jerusalem. As though city walls were warming themselves with song.” [Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation After Christendom* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002), p. 207.]

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will grant us ears to “listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” in the amazing visions in the Book of Revelation.

Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Revelation 3:14 and 3:15-22 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Explore members' reactions to the holy war imagery in Revelation. Many Christians don't know what to do with this eccentric, culminating book of Scripture, which has been interpreted in so many strange ways. They ignore the book and allow "end of the world" prophets to twist its texts. This is an opportunity to recover the powerful message of Revelation for those of us who live too comfortably in an emerging economic and military empire in North America.

Study Questions

1. The risen Jesus Christ is the author, here identified as the one who is obedient in responding to God's promises (the "Amen" and "true and faithful witness") and the origin of God's creation and new creation (see Colossians 1:18 for the same word "origin" describes Christ). The Laodiceans are self-deceived and slothful (in the original sense of being unconcerned and neglectful about their true good). Their healing would be to welcome Christ into their church, where he invites them to "eat with me and me with you." (They'll eat and share the Lord's life, of course – the slaughtered lamb of Passover, the bread and wine of his supper.)
2. Encourage members to list issues that congregations fail to address, both locally and nationally, such as poverty, government priorities, racial stratification, regressive taxation, state lotteries, marriage and family issues, abortion, pornography, international aid, environmental issues, the response to terrorism, etc. Avoid drawing up a politically "left" or "right" list, for these are blinders to critically examining society from a Christian perspective.
3. On Yahweh's garments is the blood of enemies trampled in the winepress (Isaiah 63:1-6). Yet, reading the vision in 19:11-16 "in the context of Revelation as a whole reveals that the robe dipped in blood (19:13) is not that of enemies, but Jesus' own (5:9; 12:11) shed on account of his life of faithful witness (1:5; 3:14)," Maier writes. "Likewise, those who ride after him and similarly conquer are those who have given up their lives in faithful witness (7:14-17; 12:11; 14:4-5). When we look to see the weapon that he and his army wields, it is nothing other than a two-edged sword issuing forth from his mouth (19:15; see 2:16) – the bold and vocal witness before enemies in faithfulness to God's purposes (see also 12:11)."
4. To "prime the pump" of memory, assign members to gather the images of heavenly worship from each passage in Revelation (casting crowns before the throne, receiving white garments, being washed in the Lamb's blood, singing "Worthy is the Lamb," and so on).

Many hymns employ this imagery. "Come, Thou Almighty King" attributed to Charles Wesley (based on Revelation 19:6), Matthew Bridges' "Crown Him with Many Crowns" (19:12), and Robert Lowry's "Shall We Gather at the River?" (22:1) are my favorites. Revival songs include Elisha Hoffman's "Are You Washed in the Blood?" and Lewis Ford's "There is Power in the Blood" (7:14). Members might mention Isaac Watts' "Come Let Us Join Our Cheerful Songs" (5:11), Charles Wesley's "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" (5:11), William W. How's "For All the Saints" (14:13), or James Black's "When the Roll is Called up Yonder" (20:12). Do not forget Christmas hymns – e.g., Benjamin Hanby's "Who is He in Yonder Stall?" (17:14) and Philip Nicolai's "O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright" (22:16) – or African-American spirituals such as "Down by the Riverside" (22:1), "Going to Shout All over God's Heaven," "In that Great Gittin' Up Morning," "John Saw (the Holy Number) (7:4)," "Ride On, King Jesus" (19:11), and "When the Saints Go Marching In" (7:4, 9).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.