2005

Pascal on Reading Revelation

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PASCAL ON READING REVELATION

Some students love the Book of Revelation, some hate it, but most approach it with the mindset described by Pascal:

We never keep to the present ... [W]e dream of times that are not and blindly flee the only one that is. The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out of sight because it distresses us .... We try to give it the support of the future, and think how we are going to arrange things over which we have no control for a time we can never be sure of reaching. Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future .... Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so. (Pensées [trans. A. J. Krailsheimer; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995], 43)

To help students gain a better appreciation for the medium of Revelation and its message, I have them discuss in groups the ways in which Pascal's words apply to their own personal experience of reading the book.

A key theme that emerges is the tendency to use the book to feel some sense of control over our futures by providing a map for coming events. Recent best-sellers like the Left Behind novels tend to value Revelation chiefly as a source of detailed knowledge of the future, communicated through a secret code of symbols that only the correct interpretive scheme can unlock. Borrowing Pascal's language, reading Revelation in this way may keep us "always planning how we shall one day be in Christ's presence sometime in the future," but not actually being in God's presence in the present moment.

I offer three different strategies to help students avoid a futuristic fixation when they read Revelation. (1) Have students read through the book as a whole. This will make it more difficult to pick out a few symbols and speculate obsessively on their "true" meaning. If time permits, one may read aloud the entire book in class, without pausing for rest or for discussion. This perhaps recreates the way the original auditors experienced the seer's work. An alternative is to have students stage their own similar reading outside class or to listen to a "books on tape" version of Revelation. In either case, an interesting follow-up exercise is to assign a
short paper describing the student's response to this experience of the work. (2) Assign a simple research paper in which students choose one or more symbols and report to the class on the many different ways in which the symbol(s) have been interpreted. Especially with the resources available in the Internet, there should be no shortage of interesting material. The fact that most of it will be outlandish is not a problem. (An additional resource is the brief history of interpretation in D. Guthrie, The Relevance of John's Apocalypse [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987].) When students see for themselves that throughout history there have been literally dozens of calculations for the date of the second coming and interpretations of the real identity of "the whore of Babylon" or "the beast," and that it is impossible for all of these interpretations to be correct, many see the possibility that none of them are correct. In this way, they become more wary and are less likely to believe that the latest deciphering (unlike all the mistaken interpretations of the past centuries) is finally "the" correct one. (3) Have students re-read the text, this time imagining themselves as first-century believers undergoing persecution by the Romans. A short paper might have them consider the value of Revelation in such a context and how they might respond to the various symbols.

After reviewing their findings and a survey of historical trends in interpreting Revelation, I ask the class to reflect on the difference between the elaborate schemes and debates of dispensational theology and the simple affirmation that the future is in God's hands, not ours, as found in such texts as Acts 1:7 ("It is not for you to know the times and the seasons"), the Apostles' Creed ("I believe in ... the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.") and the Nicene Creed ("And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.").

Roger Newell