

Christ's Role in the Church Today

Revelation 1:4-17

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As we prepare for the Lord's Table, I want us to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ. Always the favorite theme for any preacher is to look at Christ and no more appropriate time to do that than a time when we come to the Lord's Table.

I want you to open your Bible to the first chapter of Revelation, if you will, as we have a brief meditation before we come to the Lord's Table. 1 Revelation, chapter 1. "I suppose that some people think that the Book of Revelation is limited to discussions about the future. There are many who avoid the Book of Revelation because of the mysteries they find there, which seem to them in many cases as somewhat unsolvable riddles. And that's a tragedy because there is a promise at the beginning of the Book of Revelation, in verse 3, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and heed the things which are written in it for the time is near." This book promises a blessing to the reader. And one reason that it carries such immense blessing is because it is a book about Jesus Christ. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ. And really, from beginning to end, although there are themes and subthemes and plots and subplots, the overall essence of this book is to present in dramatic visionary form the glory and the majesty of Jesus Christ. And certainly for us, as we come to the Lord's table contemplating his wondrous work on our behalf on the cross, we need to look fully into His glory, and I want us to do that by looking at this first chapter.

In verse 4 of chapter 1, John to the seven churches that are in Asia writes, "Grace to you in peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven fold Holy Spirit, literally, who is before His throne, and from Jesus Christ," and here we are introduced to Jesus Christ though he has been mentioned already twice in the prior few verses. And we are given not only a mention of Jesus Christ, but an introduction of His character.

First of all, Jesus Christ is called the Faithful Witness. Understanding who Jesus Christ is involves understanding that He is the Witness of God, that is to say He gives testimony as to who God is. He is the most Faithful Witness to God because He is God incarnate. In 1 Hebrews, familiar words, it says that "He is the radiance of God's Glory and the exact representation of His nature." So that God has spoken to us in His Son. He is God incarnate. He is God revealed. He is the faithful or true witness to the character of God. Not only is that true in His nature, but it is true as well in His Word. For everything that Jesus said, everything that Jesus spoke, everything that Jesus revealed through the Spirit in Scripture is a true and accurate representation of the Word of God. So, Jesus, this crucified Christ, the one whom I suppose most of the western world would understand died for us is not just one who died, just a man on a cross, but, in fact, the true and pure and trustworthy and accurate representation of the very nature of God and the very truth of God.

Secondly, He is identified as the first born of the dead. Of all those who have ever died, He is the first-born. It doesn't mean he was the first one resurrected because there were resurrections prior to

His resurrection. There were several that He did in His own lifetime when He raised people from the dead. There were saints raised from the dead at the time of His death on the cross when the graves were open and the dead saints came forward. That is not to say that He was the first chronologically, but it is to say that of all who have been raised, He is the Primary One. Prototikos means the chief one, the primary one, the heir, the who receives the full inheritance. And what it's telling us is that Jesus Christ risen from the dead is the one who will receive the full inheritance of all that God possesses. He is the Heir of God. And, of course, we are joined as with Christ and He shares this inheritance with us.

Who is Jesus Christ? He is the faithful representation of the Nature of God. He is the faithful proclaimer of the Word of God. He is of all who have been raised from the dead, the chief one who is to inherit all that God possesses because it His by right since He Himself is God, a very God as well.

The John tells us He is the Ruler of the Kings of the Earth. And here he describes Jesus Christ as the Sovereign over all earthly monarchs. He is the one who is sovereign in the earth. He is sovereign over all His creation. He is then the faithful representation of God and the true expression of all of God's Word and Will. He is the chief one of all who have risen from the dead and eventually all will rise, the resurrection of the just and the unjust, and of all who is risen, He is the one who inherits all that belongs to God by right and shares it with us. And he is the sovereign ruler, the king over all other kings.

Then John says, "He is the one who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood." He is the savior. He is the one who, by virtue of His blood, that meaning his sacrificial death, has released us from our sins. So, He is the revelation of God. He is the heir of God. He is the sovereign Lord over all, and He is the savior who has given his life for us.

Verse 6 says, "By virtue of that work, He has made us into a Kingdom." We are all subject to His glorious spiritual kingdom of salvation. He is further made us priests to His God and Father. What does that mean? He's given us access. Remember only one priest, the high priest, one time a year could go into the Holy of Holies, the presence of God on the Day of Atonement. But Jesus Christ has opened the way for all of us into the presence of God and made us all into priests. So he has made us subject in an eternal and spiritual kingdom of salvation and He has made us priests who have immediate and complete access into the presence of Our God and Father and His.

This is who Jesus Christ is. Not just a crucifix. Not just someone hanging on a cross. Not just the one who died for us, but the one who is the full expression of God and a faithful witness to all that God is by incarnation and proclamation. The one who of all who will ever rise from the dead, and all will, as the chief one who is the heir of God by divine right. The one who is the sovereign of sovereigns, King of Kings, and Lord over all Lords, the one who by love sacrificially gave Himself for us to release us from sin. The one who has brought us into His Kingdom and made us subjects. The one who has opened the way, ripped the veil from top to bottom and given us complete and full access to our God and Father and His. Little wonder the verse end, "To Him be the Glory and the Dominion forever and ever. Amen."

This is the summation of the introduction to Jesus Christ with which the Book of Revelation begins. That is who Jesus Christ is.

And all of that came to glorious fruition in His death. It was in His death that His testimony about God reached its apex. It was in His death that He became the first born from the dead. It was in his death that He conquered sin and hell and Satan and all things and took His rightful place at the right hand of God as the King. It was in His death that He released us from our sins. It was through His death that He brought us into His kingdom. It was by His death that the veil was ripped and we have access to God. All of that focuses on that apex of Christ's earthly work, His death.

Then in verse 7, John moves from what happened in the past to what will happen in the future. "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him even those who pierce Him. And all the tribes of the Earth will mourn over Him, even so. Amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega. Says the Lord God, who is and who was, and who is to come the Almighty." John moves from what Christ did in the past to what Christ will do in the future when He will come.

Then in verse 9, this is where I want to draw you for a little meditation before we partake of the Lord's Table. John has the first vision of Christ in the Book of Revelation. It is the Christ who was on the cross. It is the Christ who is to come. But here starting in verse 9 is the vision of Christ in the present tense. We're not looking at Christ here as to what he did on the cross. We're not looking to Christ as to what He will do when He comes in the future with clouds. We're looking in versus 9 to the end of chapter at Christ in the present. What is He doing right now? By virtue of His cross, He became the head of His church. And these versus demonstrate magnificently to us His current present work in the church.

Let's pick it up at verse 9. And we'll just deal with it in a brief way. "I John, your brother and fellow partaker, in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos." Some of you were there with me when I was there. When an incredible experience it is to sit on that small rock in the middle of the Mediterranean and realize that John was there receiving this immense revelation from God, not but two millennia ago. He was on the island called Patmos. He was there because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. He was there because Patmos was a penal colony, and prisoners were sent there for exile. And he was one of those prisoners exiled for the preaching of the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And there he was on Patmos. It was a Sunday on Patmos when this vision came.

Verse 10 says, "I was in the spirit." He was tuned into the spirit. It means more than that. It doesn't mean he was thinking spiritual thoughts. He means the Spirit of God catapulted him into a vision. It was on a Sunday, on the Lord's day and he receive the vision from the Holy Spirit. What is a vision? Well, it is a spiritual miracle by which the apostles and the prophets of old were transported into another dimension. Out of the time/space world as we know it, out of the three dimensional world to see things in God's World. John was given such a vision. It is not a dream. It is not fantasy. It is not an imaginary experience. It is the reality of another dimension. It isn't physical, three-dimensional reality as we know it, but it is reality in the spiritual world.

He heard in this spiritual vision that he was given, he heard behind him a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet. "In the stillness of the moment, as a trumpet blast came this voice, this penetrating, commanding voice. And the voice said," verse 11, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." Those seven churches were located in seven towns in the province, the Roman province of Asia Minor. Today that's modern Turkey. The ruins of many of those towns are still there for you to see. Those seven towns were the centered towns and seven postal districts. There were seven

postal districts in Asia Minor, modern Turkey, and each of them sort of had a county seat town, and those are those towns. And once the church at Ephesus was founded, then the Christians there went into the other six regional towns, regional centers, and planted the other six churches. Those churches had been growing for some years by the time of John. And John had been ministering in that area to those churches, so he knew them well. They are seven actual historical churches in seven places. But they really are representative also of all churches. They are representative of churches throughout all of church history until Jesus comes back to Earth to take His church to be with Him.

So John turns around in verse 12 and he sees the voice that was speaking with him. "And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands." As soon as he turns around in this vision, he sees seven golden lampstands. They would've been long poles rising from a bed, some kind of a flat bed, a foundation, a footing, up into the air and on the top another flat piece, and on top of the flat piece would've been a golden oil lamp burning. He sees these seven golden lampstands. At the bottom of verse 20, it tells us the vision is explained by the Lord, the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

So he's going to write this Book of Revelation, and he's going to have to copy it over six times to send it to all of these seven churches. The Lord wants all seven churches to have the Book of Revelation because in it is going to be a letter to each one of those recorded in chapters 2 and 3. And the seven lampstands represent these seven churches. More than that, those seven lampstands represent all churches because the seven churches are representative of all kinds of churches, all types of churches in all of church history. So he turns around and he sees the voice that was speaking and he sees this voice in the middle of seven golden lampstands. This is the image.

Now let's look at verse 13. "And in the middle of the lampstands One," literally, "like the Son of Man." So he turns around and he sees the Son of Man, a gospel name for Jesus Christ. He sees Christ in the middle of the lampstands. This is Christ in His church. The vision is a depiction of Christ in His church. Later on, we get visions of the second coming, visions of the things to come, but here is a vision of the present ministry of Christ in His church.

This is what I want you to see this morning. As you think about the Glory of Christ, as you look to the cross back, and as you look to the second coming in the future, I want you also to understand the Christ that is presently in His church. He's in this church. He's in all of those that are His true churches where His true saints dwell. So John then is going to get a vision of Christ presently ministering in His church.

Now, how is He described? Very important to understand the description. He says he was, in verse 13, "clothed in a robe reaching to the feet," a foot length. All the way down, almost to the ground. "And girded across His chest with a golden sash," literally. Now, John would've immediately understood that imagery. If you ask the question, well, what is that robe intending to convey? You could say, well, prophets in the Old Testament wore robes, and kings wore robes, so it could be a reference to the prophetic ministry of Christ. Could be a reference to the kingly ministry of Jesus Christ. But the golden sash really gives it away. If you go back into Exodus 28, Exodus 38, Exodus 39, you will find a high priest there described as having a robe to his feet and a golden sash across his chest. This is the garb of the priest, the garb of the high priest, whose responsibility it was to intercede for the people, to go before God on their behalf. That's what a priest did. A priest under the old covenant terms was an intermediary. A priest lifted up the prayers of the people, brought the sins

of the people before God that they might be forgiven. He had the responsibility to gather up the people and bring them before the Lord. He alone could go into God's presence on behalf of the people, and he had special access, you remember, into the Holy of Holies into the very presence of God on behalf of the people. That's what a priest does. A priest intercedes for his people. He carries their burdens and their problems and their needs and their sins into the presence of God, and that is the garb that Jesus wears because that's what He's currently doing in His church. On the cross, as a Savior, He gained the right to be the High Priest for His people.

No matter what's going on in your life, no matter what's going on in my life, wherever there is the true church, Christ is interceding on behalf of that church. All of the struggles, all of the pains, the suffering, the sorrow, the anxiety, He understand. He is an all-points, tempted like as we are. He has been touched with all the feelings of our infirmities. He knows what we suffer. He is a sympathetic and merciful High Priest who takes all of our anxieties and all of our cares and all of our struggles and all of our weaknesses and brings them before God on our behalf. Not only that, He intercedes for us against the accusations of the accuser of the brethren, Satan, who is night and day before the face of God, accusing us and Christ is our advocate. He is there saying who will lay any charge to God's elect, interceding against the accusations of Satan. He is there, again, interceding for us on behalf of our sins and our failures and inequities. He does this intercession as an act of keeping us, guarding us. You remember that all that the Father gives the Son, the Son receives all that He receives, He keeps all that He keeps, He raises and none are lost, that's because He continually intercedes on our behalf. No accusation will ever stand against us. No condemnation will ever succeed for our High Priest takes our case before the throne of a merciful and forgiving God and pleads for our complete forgiveness on the basis of His own sacrificial substitutionary death in our place. He is our great High Priest. And He will bring us to glory. And He will never allow any accusation against us to stand, and He will never lose any of us. That's what He's doing currently.

And when we come to worship Him at the table, we don't just want to remember the past, we want to remember the present and what He is right now doing for us. Even when you sin, He is continually interceding for you. He is faithful and just to forgive you your sin. He has you on his heart.

The second part of this image unfolds another aspect of Christ, and while we are greatly comforted at His intercessory work and should be, there is a bit less comforting indication in verse 14. "His head and His hair were white, like white wool, like snow." That's the symbol not only of age and, therefore, wisdom, but primarily in the Bible a symbol of purity. You remember that Isaiah says, "Though your sins be a scarlet, they shall be as wool. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as white as snow." White snow and wool was the symbol of purity, the symbol of holiness. And here we see not only the wisdom of God, but primarily the holiness of God. We could say, I suppose, the holy wisdom of God in Christ. As Christ moves in His church, John sees one who is pure, one who is absolutely holy, without spot, with blemish. "And His eyes," he says, "Were like a flame of fire." They're like lasers. Laser penetration. As He moves in holiness through His omniscience penetrates into every single life. He knows. He sees every inequity. He sees it all.

And then John further describes Him in this capacity. Verse 15, as having feet like "burnished bronze." That is referring to having feet as shining brass. Shining brass. It can even refer to them as if they had been fired recently and were still white hot, because it says, "When it has been caused to glow in a furnace." It could be that that simply refers to some time prior when they were fired in a furnace to make them shining brass that they were. But it seems to mean they still have the burning hot glow of having recently come out of the furnace. Here then is the Holy Lord of the church with an

omniscient penetrating gaze looking into every life and seeing the sin that is there, and when appropriate, moving in, chastening judgment against that sin with feet of glowing white hot brass.

While we are comforted about His intercession, we ought to be fearful in a holy and healthy sense about the fact that He moves through His church with holy purity, penetrating to the very deepest recesses of the lives of His people, searching out their sin; and if they're not willing to confess it, He moves against them in judgment. It's not a damning judgment, it's a purging judgment. It's like, you remember in Isaiah's situation where he confessed his sin and the angel took a coal from off the altar that was white hot and placed it on his tongue and burned his mouth. This is a cleansing, that is a purging. And the Lord purges and penetrates His church and cleanses His church. He's doing that in His true church.

Then thirdly, in verse 15 at the last part of the verse, it says, "And His voice was like the sound of many waters." John could've been referring to something like the tremendous smash and crash and the din of Niagara where water rolls over a precipice and smashes on the rocks below and makes a deafening sound. More likely, he may have been reflecting on the very sounds with which he was very familiar on the island of Patmos because Patmos is a rock, literally a rock jutting up out of the Mediterranean being slapped incessantly on all sides by the sea and storms can literally make the sound deafening. It's like a place of quite sandy beaches by any means. And John hears this voice and it sounds like the smashing surf in the midst of a storm. And it indicates to us that the Lord is not only interceding in His church, He's not only purifying His church, but He's commanding His church. He moves in His church with authority and He brings to bear commands in His church. He's not making quiet suggestions. He's not any longer speaking in a still, small voice. He is speaking commandingly in His church. And the commands that He speaks come through His Word, which is Scripture. He is bringing His people under the authority of His word.

That's why He says to His preachers, "Preach the Word, the in seasons and the out of season." Don't ever deviate from that. "These things," Paul said in Timothy, "Command and teach." Titus, you remember, was told by Paul to speak with authority and let no man evade that authority. Christ is in His church interceding. He's in His church purging. He's in His church commanding through His word.

Verse 16, "In his right hand," in this image, "He had seven stars." Down to verse 20, Jesus also explains that, in the middle of the verse, the seven stars or the seven umbrellas, better to translate it messengers. It's representative of the messengers of the seven churches. Apparently, each of those seven churches in Asia Minor had sent an elder or a pastor as a representative to come to Patmos to receive the copy of revelation which was designed for them. They were to take it back to their church along with the specific letter, of course, which would be read. They had come as messengers from those churches, and they were there with John. And when John looked at the vision, he sees the seven messengers in the hand of the Lord. What's that saying? Christ controls His church. That's very encouraging today when there's so many ministers who fall into apostasy and error and aberration and heresy. So many churches that fall in apostate path and abandon the truth. God still has His true ministers. He still has His true church in the midst of the untrue church.

And the unconverted church and the apostate church and the heretical church and the aberrant church and the unsafe church is massive. It's very large. As I was doing that debate last week on infant baptism, the recognition struck me that the western world is literally filled with people who have been baptized with a Christian infant baptism. Everybody who's come out of a Catholic country with

strong Catholic influences may well have had an infant baptism because it was a part of sort of national activity. That would be true of Protestant Europe. The world is filled with "baptized pagans" who are nominally in word a part of Christianity by virtue of an infant right. There are churches filled with these people who are not God's people, who are not the true church. They're led by ministers who are not in His hand at all, but are really emissaries of Satan. But the true church, the church of Jesus Christ that preaches the truth has true leadership and they're in His control. The Lord has his true churches and His true leaders. He is controlling His church. He is bringing the true leadership, the truth to his people.

And then another thing, quickly, it says, "Out of His mouth can a sharp two-edged sword." Out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. What does that refer to? Later in chapter 2, he tells us what it refers to. In verse 16, he says, "I'll make war with you with the sword of my mouth." What is this war about? Well, he's talking to the church at Pergamos and they had allowed satanic doctrine to come in. they had allowed false prophets to come in. They had allowed the Nicolaitans who had a false system to come in. There was lots of error. And the Lord says, "I will come with a sword and I'm going to fight." What is the sword? It is a symbol of the protection of His church. He protects His true children from damning error. "I'm going to come with my sword and I'm going to use my sword against those who propagate error." That, to say, the church is always in a sense dividing. It's always dividing. You have the church, and then it drifts into heresy and the true church is divided off. And then you have a church and it begins to wander into heresy again, and it's divided off again. And that's why there's so many denominations nowadays because there's been so many fractures. As the Lord took the sword and cut off a true remnant from the false. He protects His church, and aren't we glad for that, that He is the Guardian. As much as we would want to be the guardians of the church, we can only do that on a very frail level. We work very hard to carry the sword of the truth so we can make the truth clear and people don't fall into error, but the Lord is far more capable in protection His true believing people. He does that with a sharp two-edged sword, and I really believe He wields that sword and cuts the true church off, that which apostatizes.

And then in verse 16, "His face was like the sun shining in its strength." John said, "I looked at His face and it was looking at the sun at noon on a clear day." And what does this refer to? The blazing glory of Christ's face permeating the whole environment where the church, as the seven lampstands were, indicates that Christ reflects His glory through His church. He reflects His glory through His church. We are the Glory of Christ in this world. We let our light so shine that men may see our good works and thereby see His Glory. We have this glory, this treasure in earthen vessels, as Paul said. So, here is Christ in His true church, interceding, purifying, commanding, controlling, protecting and reflecting His glory.

When we think about Jesus Christ, let's not just get caught up in thinking about history. And so many of us as Christian do. We think about the Christ of the cross in the past, nor should we get caught up in only thinking about the Christ of the future who will come in glory. We need to look at Him as the Christ of the present who is alive at Grace Community Church, who is moving here among us, interceding for all of His true children, purging and purifying with penetrating Holy gaze and bringing appropriate chastening. And here He is commanding through the power of His Word and here He is controlling through godly faithful elders who lead and care for the church then reflecting His glory through all of you as the very life which He has planted in you. That spiritual life that now dwells in you through salvation is radiated out of you so that others may see and believe. That's the Christ of the present tense.

As we come to His table, we must remember that by the cross, He gained the right to all of this in our behalf. John says, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man." The vision was terrifying. He fell over, literally, in a faint out of fear. He was terrified at what he had seen. "And the Lord laid His right hand upon me," John said, "And said, 'Don't be afraid.'" Don't be afraid. It's a formidable thing. Don't be afraid. Do you understand that my intercession is for you? Do you understand that my purification is for you? Do you understand that my commanding is to bring you into line with the Word of God so that you may be blessed? Do you understand that my controlling is so that you might have the right leadership and my protection is to preserve from error? And do you understand that this blazing kind of glory is to reflect through you? It was a terrifying scene, but nothing to be afraid of. Don't be afraid. I'm interceding. You won't be lost. I'm purifying you. You won't fall into some iniquity that will bring about condemnation. I'm giving you the truth. I'm giving you the word. I'm giving you the leadership you need. I'm protecting you from error and I'm reflecting my glory. Don't be afraid. Just rejoice. What a tremendous vision this is. This is the Christ that we honor today as we come to His table.

Join me in prayer. Father, we come to you recognizing the Glory and the Majesty of Jesus Christ, not only the Christ of the past who died on the cross, the Christ of the future who will come in glory but the Christ of the present who is our High Priest, our Purifier, our Commander, our Teacher, our Protector, and the source of our glory. And we are here to honor Christ, the One who by His blood released us from our sins. We want to honor Him. And you have told us to honor Him by this simple service, the taking of a piece of bread that is a symbol of His body which was given for us on the cross as He died in our place. And drinking the cup which is a symbol of His blood that shed for us as a full and complete atonement for sin. Father, you said don't do this unless you've examined yourself. And so, Our God, we would look into our own hearts and ask that you would remove any sin that is there. Anything that displeases you. Anything that dishonors you. We want it to be set aside. We want to be cleansed and made pure. Work that work in every heart to be made pure. Work that work in every heart. We want to be cleansed and made pure.

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