

Session 4
Formation and transformation in our times and places –
Revelation 6-7
May 2016

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “Two pounds of wheat for a day’s wages, and six pounds of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,

and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?”

¹⁻⁷ After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.”

Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,
from the tribe of Asher 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,
from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,
from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000 were sealed.

⁸⁻¹⁷ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

“Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!”

Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.
'Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on them,'
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;
'he will lead them to springs of living water.'
'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'”

Introduction

PP1-7 – children becomes adults, formation and transformation

PP8 – Alexander and Eugene Peterson

Writers portray Alexander son of King Philip II of Macedon, known in history as **Alexander the Great (356-323BC)**, as an extraordinary person, more like a god than a human in everyone’s eyes – especially his own.

His biographers tell us that the young Alexander heard, read, and came to love the broad range of Greek literature: tragic and comic plays, histories, philosophical essays, and poems. These stories of heroes and gods (Zeus, Achilles etc.) profoundly shaped him.

It mattered tremendously to Alexander to know what his ancestors had done, and how he could live up to and then go beyond their glorious achievements. His inherited place in the world and his proper role in it, then, were explicable to him only through the lens of literature’s stories; these stories were key to Alexander’s constructing his personal identity and status.¹

Alexander’s great “pothos” (desire, longing, yearning) was to “go beyond”. This developed from his reading, his imagining about the great figures of the past who inspired him with a deep longing to win even greater glory than they; he would be inconsolable if he could not “go beyond” them.²

Eugene Peterson is a leading Christian pastor, biblical scholar and theologian. He is the author of *The Message*, and greatly admired as a Christian leader. In his autobiography, *The Pastor*, Peterson writes about the impact of his mother’s story-telling. As a child, he came to love the OT stories of David, the baby brother in his family, the “family runt”, the one anointed by Samuel, the one God chose to become king. Concerning his mother’s narration of the stories of David, Peterson writes: “But I didn’t forget. Throughout my childhood, in my mother’s telling of the story, I became David. I was always David. I’m *still* David.”³

I should have entitled this session, “Formation, *reformation* or *counter-formation*, and transformation in our times and places”.

Those who seek to be formed in Christ, and to have Christ formed in them, Paul’s yearning for God’s people in the churches of Galatia for example – “until Christ’s life becomes visible in your lives”, “until you take the shape of Christ”⁴ he writes – will need to be *counter-formed*. Transformation, by God’s grace, is best thought of as the result of this work of determined, ongoing counter-formation, in which *we must act*, as well as be *acted upon* by the gracious, renewing power of God.⁵

The stories in which our lives are embedded – the imagination they inspire, the heroes they portray, the future they anticipate, the person they make me want to be – these are decisive for formation and counter-formation.

Gorman contends that Revelation consist of words and images from God, to form and transform its readers; this is not mere in-formation, rather counter-formation.⁶

Revelation “is not primarily a book to be dissected but to be lived; that is the nature of resistance literature. Christian resistance, like warfare, is not passive but active. It consists of the formation of communities and individuals who pledge allegiance to God alone; live in nonviolent love towards friends and enemies alike; leave vengeance to God but bear witness to God’s coming judgment and salvation; create, by God’s Spirit, mini-cultures of life as alternatives to Empire’s culture of death; and invite all who desire life with God to repent and worship God and the Lamb.”⁷

Scriptures – Revelation 6-7

These chapters present the first in a series of visions of judgement and salvation, from Revelation 6-20. The judgement visions, presented in recurring groups of seven scenes, make up half of the book. They are extensive and important for John’s purposes.

Why do visions of judgement such as these feature so prominently? It “is not to instill fear but to provide a wake-up call for those who are sleeping, not merely through life, but through empire.”⁸

These visions are to counter-form a church which is complacent about the idolatries and evils of world empire; lacks vision and imagination regarding the future for faithful witnesses of Christ, for those who come under God’s judgement, and for the world God loves so much; and so is not living in the present with joyful and determined hope, faith and love.

PP9

In **Revelation 6-20** we have the following sequence of judgements:

6:1-8:1 – seven seals

8:2-11:19 – seven angels with trumpets

12:1-14:20 – seven signs and visions

15:1-16:21 – seven angels with bowls

17:1-19:21 – seven visions of judgement

19:11-22:5 – seven scenes of the end

Consider briefly some aspects of Revelation 6, during which six seals are opened. The climax of history draws nigh!

6:1 – the Lamb opens the seals; not the dragon or the beast. These judgement scenes of terror are not independent of heaven or the throne of God. False empires do not determine history. God does. They do not have the final word. God does. They do not decide the future. God does.

PP10

6:1-8 – the four horses (white-war, red-bloodshed, black-famine, pale green, corpse coloured-death), ride out at the command of the four living creatures, who are most likely an exalted order of angelic beings, throne guardians who lead the heavenly hosts in worship and adoration of God. It is possible that they also represent the entire animate creation.⁹

These four seals, opened by the Lamb and not independent of God's sovereign rule, are nevertheless *the consequences* of destructive, unjust, world empire. War, bloodshed, famine and the like are human evils, "direct consequences of the structure of domination and oppression and the agonies of history that the empire causes and suffers by its very idolatry and lawlessness."¹⁰ God and the Lamb are not like the Roman Caesars. They are not violent or cruel in their governance.

6:2, 4 (twice), 8 – divine passives "was given" or "were given" are important. God is sovereign, not the Roman Caesar or any other world ruler. The future is in God's hands. The same divine passives are used in 8:2 of God giving trumpets to seven angels, or in 8:3 of much incense being given to an angel at the altar to add to the prayers of the saints. God gives.

6:9-11 – the martyred witnesses are safe in the LORD's presence. They are waiting. They join with the psalmists and prophets of OT Scripture who also called out "How long, O LORD?" They are told to rest (wait) a little longer. They are given white robes. Justice will be done. Among them is Antipas of Pergamum (2:13), one who is known to John's readers. More witnesses will be martyred. More times of persecution are coming. God's people need to be ready, resilient and faithful.

6:12-17 – when the sixth seal is opened, John sees terrifying destruction. He looks down on the chaos as the earth quakes and then falls apart. It is the day of God's wrath, the wrath of the Lamb, and all the great ones of the earth hide in terror as they come under judgement.

The text draws on images from Exodus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Nahum, and Haggai, among others. Mounce reflects that God's wrath is the "response of [God's] holiness to persistent and impenitent wickedness." He draws from T. F. Torrance who eloquently wrote the following:

PP11-12

The wrath of the Lamb! Who ever heard of a lamb being angry? What a terrible thought – the gentlest of all God's creatures angry. It is the wrath of love, the wrath of sacrificial love which, having done the absolute utmost for us and our salvation, tells us as nothing else could the certainty with which evil awaits its doom at the hand of God. The great men of this earth, the dictators, the decorated playthings of the devil, the mighty authorities of mankind may take counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed, saying: "Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh" (Ps. 2:3-4).

No man survives the laughter of God, but more terrible than God's laughter is the wrath of God's Lamb, the consuming passion of His holy love that wills to destroy all that is unloving and untrue. That is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah that is also the Lamb of Calvary. Before His power all the arrogant evil of the world shall soon become as dust under the chariot wheels of time, and the Lord God omnipotent shall reign forever and ever. Thank God that when the day of His wrath comes upon us, it is the wrath of the Lamb, for even in wrath God remains love.¹¹

6:17 – the chapter closes with cowering, terrified people, including world rulers, calling out: "Who can withstand the wrath of God and the Lamb? Who can stand?" Revelation 7 is God's answer to that question.

PP13

Revelation 7 envisions two eras of the church: **7:1-8, as those who are persecuted on earth; 7:9-17, as those who are triumphant in heaven.**

7:1-8 – John looks down to the earth.

7:2 – an angel from the east brings the seal of the "living" God. The true God is not like the dead idols. The seal (signet ring, authority, identity,

protection), placed on the forehead, is the name of the Lamb and the Lamb's Father (14:1, 22:4, also see Exodus 12:23, Ezekiel 9:4). Those who belong to the beast are also marked (authority, identity) on their right hands or foreheads (13:16-17, 14:11, 16:2, 19:20).

17:4 – John hears the number “144,000” who are sealed from the tribes of Israel. They will be preserved “through” not “from” tribulation. This is a complete number. The church is continuous with Israel and with God's covenants and promises throughout history.

7:9-17 – John looks before him, in heaven, around the throne.

A great multitude! Beyond counting! From all nations! They wear white robes signifying victory. They hold palm branches signifying festive joy.

Who are these people? They are those who have been saved from tribulation. This is the future of the church! Now sheltered, they will never again be hungry; never again be thirsty or persecuted. The Lamb will be their shepherd. The Lamb-Shepherd will lead his people to springs of living water. This is the church triumphant.

PP14 – Kraybill comments:

When John wrote Revelation, the human-made structure with the largest seating capacity in the Mediterranean world was the Circus Maximus, in a valley directly below Domitian's palace at Rome. Accommodating an audience of at least two hundred seventy thousand, one-quarter of the population of Rome, this circus was the grandest venue for state ceremonies and religious festivals. It was a racetrack, where chariot teams vied for glory. When the race was over, a presiding magistrate presented the victorious charioteer with a palm branch and a wreath, followed by monetary prizes. In the courts of heaven, John of Patmos sees a celebration that is far bigger than any event in the Circus Maximus.¹²

The victory of the faithful followers of the Lamb, will be greater than anything ever imagined in Roman empire times. This is the hope of the church. This is the reward of the faithful.

So what?

We are formed in keeping with our vision for life – for a *good* life – in keeping with the way we imagine our lives will flourish. Our longings, hopes and dreams inspire and motivate both daily practices and life-long habits in keeping with that vision, with that imagined future, even when the going gets tough.

PP15

Vinoth Ramachandra, in his book *Gods that Fail*, powerfully reminds us that **when we give to any aspect of God's creation or to human works the worship that is due to God alone, we “call up invisible forces that eventually dominate us. When what is meant to be a servant is treated as a master, it quickly becomes a tyrant.”** He contends:

Having surrendered our hearts, individually and collectively, to idols, we become enslaved by demons. Such demons always demand human sacrifices. The cult of idolatry leads to the sacrifice of the weak and apparently useless members of society (from foetuses to other ethnic groups, to the infirm or the mentally handicapped), to the destruction of the earth's ecosystems and the abdication of human responsibility for the planet.¹³

Ramachandra continues:

Consequently, it is not surprising that those who worship technology eventually develop machine-like personalities: emotionally under-developed, shallow in their relationships, driven by a desire to control and quantify every human situation, unable to appreciate beauty and value in anything outside the artificial.

Those who worship sex, on the other hand, are incapable of trust and commitment in their human relationships and hide a lonely existence behind a mask of superficial “adulthood”. A society in which sex is an idol is one that reaps huge social costs: for it leads to the abuse of women, the breakup of marriages and family life, and the exploitation of the weak and vulnerable by the huge pornography industry. Those who worship power live in a constant climate of suspicion, insecurity and fear.¹⁴

Counter-formation begins with an alternative worship, and subsequently with alternative loves, desires, longings and passions.

When we worship God and love those things God declares to be true (not deceitful, not hypocritical, not false), good (not evil), and beautiful (not ugly), then our lives will be counter-formed in God’s image.

PP16

In writing about the formation of virtuous human life, N. T. Wright has developed what he calls a Virtuous Circle. The five elements of Wright’s virtuous circle are Scripture, Stories, Examples, Community, and Practices.

- **Scripture** – the practice of reading scripture, studying scripture, singing scripture – generally soaking oneself in scripture as an individual and a community – has been seen from the earliest days of Christianity as central to the formation of Christian character.
- **Stories** – Scripture, then, is habit-forming and character-forming. But scripture trains us to listen to and learn from stories of all kinds, inside the sacred text and outside, and to discern patterns and meanings within them. And stories of all sorts form and shape the character of those who read them.

- **Examples** – people who embody the virtues and practices of which the scriptures speak.
- **Community** – faith, hope, love, and the ninefold fruit are things which demand to be practiced, learned, and made habitual together.
- **Practices** – the *practices* of the community are all-important. The very fact that we call them by that name gives a hint: these are the things through which the community *practices* the habits of mind and heart which develop corporate virtues. We may contrast practices with programmes. Practices are the patterns of relationship and choice that we work with over and over. Programmes can support such practices or replace them; they can enhance such practices or threaten them.

All the while, Wright acknowledges that we are dependent on the grace of God, and that “the key to virtue lies ... in the transformation of the mind. The point is not that the practices are wrong, or inadequate, but that our conscious mind and heart need to understand, ponder, and consciously choose the patterns of life which these practices are supposed to produce in us and through us.”¹⁵

But in the face of powerful world empire, such counter-formation will require perseverance, resilience, deep thought, reflection, confession, accountability, a robust daily walk with God and a community of prayerful, loving, tough support. This is what lasting transformation will require.

- **Example** – what are you known for?
- **Community** – what are the virtues to be developed? What is your church community known for?
- **Practices** – what are some key practices that are non-negotiable? What are the practices of your community?

Endnotes

¹ Martin, T. R. and Blackwell, C. W. *Alexander the Great: The Story of an Ancient Life*. P. 6

² Ibid P.47

³ Peterson, E. *The Pastor*. P. 31-32

⁴ Galatians 4:19

⁵ Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12-13)

⁶ Gorman, M. *Reading Revelation responsibly: Uncivil worship and witness, following the Lamb into the new creation*. Loc 2092

⁷ Gorman, Loc 4366

⁸ Gorman, Loc 3407

⁹ See Mounce

¹⁰ Richard (Apocalypse, 86) referenced in Gorman, Loc 3366.

¹¹ Torrance, T. F. *The Apocalypse Today*. P. 58-59

¹² Kraybill Loc 2079-84

¹³ Ramachandra, V. Loc 2199

¹⁴ Ibid Loc 2250

¹⁵ Wright, N. T. Loc 4460