

Dabney Ecclesiology Lectures

Fall 2006

Lectures #3-4

A Biblical-Theological Vision of the Church from Revelation 21-22

Hermeneutical background

Reading the text as symbolic architecture

Statistics, stories, and structures – 3 ways to describe a people

What does it mean to be an American citizen? What does it mean to
be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven?

Has God left us without a heavenly blueprint in the new covenant? Is
there a “law of temple” for new covenant?

Is this vision a *place* or a *people*?

A great deal of the Bible is taken up with describing symbolic
architectural structures; ultimately these are all descriptions of the

people of God

These symbolic structures here are both present and future (the already/not yet dynamic); features of the church “now” and the church “not yet” are blended; this is part and parcel of the NT’s inaugurated eschatology

These symbolic structures are both indictative and imperative, promise and precept, what we are and what should strive to become

This is the capstone of numerous biblical themes, an intertextual matrix/collage of images drawn together and recombined into one new image; this kaleidoscope vision cannot be understood apart from the canon of which it is a part – we need to look for and explore connections with the rest of Scripture

How do we know this is vision describes the church?

Mixed metaphors

City/New Jerusalem

Temple/Most Holy Place

Bride

Garden imagery

Core covenant promise/Immanuel promise

New creation language in the OT

Reading the text properly requires something of a poetic imagination; we must train our imaginations in the images, types, symbols, and figures of Scripture (though undoubtedly, the literature and music of Christendom can help, as it grew out of the biblical tradition and unlocks many of these poetic pictures for us so that we can “break the code”)

Key features of John’s vision

New creation/new heavens and earth

Mountain of God (pyramid shape; cf. Heb. 12)

Cube shape (Temple/Most Holy Place)

Light (cf. Mt. 5)

Walls

Gates

Foundation stones

Gems

Pearls

Garden/Edenic imagery

Tree of Life

River of life

Applications

The fundamental structure of the Christian life: Be who you are! Be who you will be!

Ecclesiology and Ethcis

Eschatology and ethics

Key question: Are we fulfilling these symbolic pictures in our community life together? Are we living as the new temple-city-bride-mountain-garden-priesthood-tree-river-humanity? Do we measure up to the dimensions and descriptions given here?

Specific applications of the vision to church life:

Note: We have to be careful in making applcations. Jesus did not reveal this vision to John simply so that we can tranlate into theological or ethical prose. The vision itself has to make its impression on us *as a vision*. If Jesus could have said it any other way, he would have done so. The *visionary form* matters. We must learn to inhabit these pictures and symbols, not simply make a mental translation of them into more familiar categories. To recast the vision in more common language is reductionistic; we lose

something if we break the vision down into its constituent parts because in a symbolic text like this, the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. Strictly speaking, John did not see a number of images, but *one image*. We must deal with the vision as a literary, artistic, and theological unity. We must seek to grasp it *as a whole*, even if we also analyze its constituent parts.

Temple/City – the church *as temple* gathers for worship in heaven; *as city*, she scatters for service in the wider culture (the city on a hill of Mt. 5 – this is the city on the mountain)

City/Garden – the church combines the best features of both agrarian life (respect for family, tradition, community) and city life (diversity-in-unity, cultural maturation and beauty, care for the marginal, openness to the new); the church is both an alternative *polis* and the *telos* of the old creation; we are the city and the garden of God, so we should show forth the beauty of God comprehensively

Contrast with Babylon and the harlot in Rev. 17-19; the new Jerusalem is made from the spoils of Babylon (Jesus is plundering the strong man's house to build his own)

New covenant worship/liturgy (mountain top people – access to heaven, cubed people -- priestly community)

Descending down out of heaven = conclusion of the heavenly liturgy in the book of Revelation, the benediction/commissioning aspect of the service, as we are sent into the world to serve and spread the gifts of the kingdom (“the liturgy after the liturgy”)

The city-temple is suspended between heaven and earth, just like Jesus as he was “lifted up” on the cross; in Christ, the church becomes a bridge between heaven and earth

The church serves the world best when she worships faithfully; we act as priests on behalf of the nations, and invite the nations to forsake their idolatries and join the worship of the living God; nothing has the power to transform and heal as much as “the divine service”

Service/healing (mercy ministry, discipleship – the church exists for the sake of outsiders, for the sake of the nations; we cannot

grow to maturity unless we are learning to serve and heal others by giving our lives sacrificially for them)

Light of the world (“star light” – cf. Phil. 2:12; light = truth and goodness shining into the darkness; in the old covenant, the light of the shekinah glory inside the temple could not be seen by the outside world, but the new city-temple has walls like glass so the light shines out into the world; the church is to make the *shekinah*-glory of God visible)

Evangelism/open gates on all sides (hospitality, mission, catholicity, diversity)

Walls (ethical separation from the world, commitment to truth, hard edges to “push back” against the world; protection against sin and error)

Descending out of heaven (a colony of heaven on earth, living counter-culturally, heavenizing earth)

River of life (the Holy Spirit flows out of the church as the new Eden; the Holy Spirit makes the bride and her works beautiful; you

stepped into the river of the Spirit at your baptism – now go with the flow!! Don't quench the Spirit's flow!!)

Tree(s) of life (one tree or a whole forest/orchard?; always in season = always bearing the fruit of the Spirit; the fruit is also the holy food of the gospel, the Lord's Supper, the fulfillment of the sacramental meal offered to Adam and Eve in Eden; trees are central to the biblical story – Gen. 2-3, Ps. 1, the cross, etc.; Tolkien's use of tree imagery)