

Revelation Wasn't Written for Conspiracy Theorists

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[0 : 0 0] All right, good morning, everybody. My name is Anthony, and I am happy to serve as one of the pastors here at the table. We are studying the book of Revelation because there's no better topic than the end of the world. Amen? Amen.

And we are studying Revelation as a book about dissident discipleship in an unjust world. If you live in an unjust world, raise your hand. That's all of us.

And if you need to be dissident against that unjust world, raise your hand. Again, that's all of us. We're reading this book as a theological political guide on how to be dissident, disagreeing disciples in a world that is inherently unjust.

And in a moment, we'll talk about the variety of ways that Revelation has been taught throughout the centuries and the way that we are particularly looking at it. Now, in my opinion, and the thing is, it's just my opinion, but this opinion seems to move along decade by decade.

But it feels like there's never been a better time to be a dissident disciple. It feels like every day and every week and every year, it just gets more and more necessary to be dissident, to be moving against the rulers and the powers and the authorities of this age as they attempt to consolidate their power to inflict the most amount of harm against the most amount of people so that a very minimal amount of the quote-unquote right kinds of people can rule and be in charge and be wealthy and have all the power.

[1 : 5 0] Over the past few days, there was a new national security directive. So it's a little bit different than an executive order. It is a national security directive signed by our president that serves to, quote, disrupt any individuals or groups that foment political violence, including before they result in violent political acts.

Anybody remember the movie Minority Report? Minority Report is about this technology that prevents crime before it happens. Okay, so there's this national security directive that's serving to disrupt groups that foment political violence, including before they result in political acts.

And this is what they are looking for in how to prevent political violence. You can go ahead and put this slide up. Anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, anti-Christianity, support for the overthrow of the United States government, extremism, and somebody who's not those of us in this room get to decide what extremism is, on migration, or race, or gender, or hostility towards those who hold traditional American views on family, or traditional American views on religion, or hostility towards those who hold traditional American views on morality.

Now, you could almost take those bullet points, and Junio could have used them as a, we are a church that. The United States requires a national strategy to investigate and disrupt networks, entities, and organizations that foment political violence, so that law enforcement can intervene in criminal conspiracies before they result in violent political acts.

Now, I look at this list, and again, who gets to decide what it is to be anti-American? If I have a Bible verse on my t-shirt that says, I am not a citizen of this world, I am a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, is that anti-American?

[3 : 48] If I say that the sorts of economies that, you know, extract wealth from the poor, and give it to the wealthiest 1%, therefore I am anti-capitalist, does that count?

If I say there is a large, vast group of churches that take on the name of Jesus and weaponize it to bring on their own political ends, does that mean I am anti-Christian?

If I say that the rulers and the powers and the authorities of this world will not last, and that I do not have any need to have allegiance to this government, does that mean I support this overthrow?

If I say that my neighbor, whether or not they're documented, deserves my love, am I extremist on migration? You get the idea. Now, if revelation is meant to disciple us, if revelation is not meant to be about speculation about the future, it's not meant to be used as like a tarot deck about what's going to happen next week or next year, but if revelation is meant to disciple us, form us into disciples of Jesus, then we shouldn't be surprised if someone confuses us as anti-American.

Now, this sort of pattern and this sort of language pointed at folks who don't agree with the literal party line and what it means to be a good American, what it means to be a good citizen of a nation, has been used throughout the centuries.

[5 : 15] Here's how the early Christians were described by the Roman Empire in the first, second, and third centuries of the Common Era. They were, the Christians, they were a new and mischievous superstition.

They were held, falsely, to be culpable for the fire in AD 64 in Rome. They were a group that had degraded and shameful practices.

They held to a foreign and deadly superstition. Christians evidenced anti-social tendencies. They were condemned for the odium generis humanae, which is Latin for the hatred of the human race.

They were called a certain sacrilegious religion which believed in a single God. Christians are actually called atheists because their view on monotheism, and Jews were called this as well, was so against the pantheon of gods that you might as well just be an atheist.

They collect from the scum of the populace, ignorant, and credulous folk, and make them fellow conspirators. The Christians that were gathering the slaves and the children abandoned on the roadside, and the women and the prostitutes and everyone, and putting them together in these ecclesias, these churches.

[6 : 29] They're collecting the scum and making them fellow conspirators. They love each other almost before being acquainted. They are united by a religion of debauchery.

What's the debauchery? They call one another sister and brother. Now, you've got to put yourself in a first century Roman mindset, where you don't assume, we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men or humans are created equal.

That was not the Roman mindset. There are clear, classes, castes of people, and that the fact that you could call a slave a brother or a sister, that you could call a child or a non-property-owning, a non-Roman citizen, a sibling, that's debauchery.

These wicked people greedily drink his Christos, Christ's blood, and they unite themselves together by this sacrifice, and bind each other mutually to silence by complicity in the crime.

So communion, which we will partake in just a little bit, well, the rumors were getting out that they were eating actual, like, cannibalistic blood and flesh. And so, these Christians need to be dealt with, which meant persecuted, kicked out of the economy, or killed.

[7 : 42] So, the book of Revelation is speaking into a world where this was the view that was taking hold in the Roman Empire, that the Christians were this new and mischievous superstition, and that they were anti-Rome, they were anti-people, they were anti-the gods, and they had to be dealt with.

And so, the author of Revelation, John the Revelator, is writing this set of letters, and visions, and ideas, to consolidate a sense of hope, a sense of expectation, about what we're going to do in a culture that is growing more, and more, and more, against a people known by love.

Now, throughout history, there's been a variety of ways of how to read the book of Revelation. Over the past two weeks, Pastor Tanetta has introduced us to some of the big ideas, and big concepts.

Here are some of the ways that Revelation has typically been understood. One, is the preterist view. And so, the preterist view means that Revelation is written by first century people, about first century topics, only.

And so, it is sort of like a time capsule of ideas about the past. It's interesting to learn about the past, and what Christians back then dealt with, and then maybe we can extract some ideas for us today.

[9 : 02] That's the preterist point of view. The, uh, historicist point of view, is that Revelation was written as a sketch of church history from beginning to end.

And so, you can actually go, if you go do like a Google image search for like, the seven church eras in Revelation, we're going to talk about the seven letters this morning. You'll see how letter one deals with the early church, and letter two deals with the, you know, medieval church, and letter seven deals with the, uh, modern church.

Now, a big problem with this point of view is it's very American or Western-centric, and it ignores everything else that's going on in, say, Africa or Asia, or any other non-Western view of Christianity.

Uh, so, that's problematic. The view that most of us were sort of baptized in, just being in American culture, whether or not you grew up in the church, is the futurist view. That the book of Revelation is totally about the future.

That John sat down, saw the churches that were being persecuted by this growing hatred in the empire against Christians. He said, you know what those first century Christians need? They need to know what's going to happen 20 centuries from now.

[10 : 04] Okay? That's the futurist point of view. Now, a less cynical sort of point is that it's about the consummation of the kingdom of God. It's about the end of evil, and therefore, our job as readers, or exegists, of the book of Revelation is to be, you know, to make speculations, to figure out, okay, the beast represents this, and the prophet represents this, and this heir represents this, and then, you know, you open up the newspaper, and you see that Russia is making this attack against this nation, so that must line up with this prophecy, so on, et cetera.

That's the futurist point of view. And then there is the idealist point of view. The idea that Revelation is timeless images and truths about God and church and God's plan of the world.

Now, I tend towards this idealist point of view. Ideal not meaning like, this is the one perfect way, but the reason why centuries of Christians have always thought, well, the book of Revelation is about us right now.

It was about the future, and the future is now. The reason why that's the case is that the book of Revelation is presenting these timeless images. There is always a Babylon. There is always a beast.

There is always an empire that bathes itself in violence that is going to move against the church. And the mistake that futurists make today, or that futurists made in the past, is they think that that is the one interpretation that is going to consummate in the end of the world.

[11 : 36] As opposed to an idealist point of view that says, yes, it's about the future, and it's about today, and it's about the past. And a hundred years from now, somebody can read the book of Revelation and also understand it to be about their today, and their yesterday, and their future.

Does that make sense? So that's how the lens that we are looking at this with. The idealist sort of takes all four of these views, or the three preceding it, and says, yes, and.

Yes, John is addressing first century topics to a first century church. Yes, there is some notion of like, you can see a history of the church that deals with empire and violence and how the church responds to it.

Yes, there is a futurist aspect which we do long for and hope for and work towards the consummation of the kingdom of God and new Jerusalem, a place where justice can make its home, and there's no one final moment that we get to point to as speculators and say, it's about 2025 and that's it.

All right? Am I making sense? Am I clear? All right. Now, there can be a cynical view with this idealist point of view that basically says history is doomed to repeat itself over and over.

[12 : 44] That it's just an endless cycle of violence and redemption and then collapse and violence and redemption and collapse over and over and over again until the heat death of the universe.

And what Christians dare to believe is that history actually has a direction. It has a trajectory. It is an arrow moving forward in space-time and it's going somewhere.

And what Christians hope to believe is that one day God will set all things right. and there is always a challenge to that hope-filled perspective.

There is always a challenge to daring to voice out loud, someday God will set things right because there are always Babylon's and empires and monsters and beasts that want to say, no, give up that hope.

hope. So the dissident discipleship that Revelation is moving us into is that of hopefulness. And I feel like the table needs to make this a t-shirt so we can all wear it at some point.

[13 : 49] As I have said many times at this point, hope is not magic. Hope is, how do we finish this? Anybody know? I need to say it more often. Hope is work.

Hope is work. Hope is work. Somebody, somebody over there said it. Hope is not magic. Hope is work. Hope is gritty. Hope is not the thing with feathers. Hope is the sewer rat.

Anybody remember that poem? Yes. It's, you know, it's matted and bloody and it's seen it through a few things and it's snorted some coke lines and like it's been through some stuff, right? That's not my line.

It's the poem's line, okay? Hope is not magic. Hope is work. And so when we say that we Christians are people of hope, that does not mean that we are hoping for escape, that we just sort of sit back and let the world burn.

That's escapism. That's the futurist perspective. No, hope is saying, no, we believe that God's spirit is active and moving in this world and so we put ourselves and our bodies and our money and our time and our communities on the line for the protection of those who can't do it themselves, for the protection of those who are also already paying for the price and for the hope that God is going to show up and bring forth a new dawn, a new day.

[15 : 06] Very briefly, an outline of the book of Revelation, very, very, very briefly, an outline of the book of Revelation. You have chapter one, which Pastor Tanetta covered two weeks ago, this opening vision, introducing us to John the Revelator on the island of Patmos, a political exile.

people who say that the Bible is not political. Why do you think these people were exiled? Chapter one, an opening vision. Chapters two and three are these letters to the seven churches.

Chapters four through 20, which we're, you know, greatly summarizing here, heaven versus Babylon, and in the last two chapters, New Jerusalem. And a mistake that readers of Revelation can make is to sort of separate chapters two and three, the letters to the seven churches, from the rest of the book.

Well, there's the letters portion, and then there's the future portion, and the letters portion, well, that's the churches that are long dead and gone, so we're going to ignore that, and I want to get to the interesting prophetic bits, so let's go there.

But, all the things that we're going to mention today in chapters two and three, these letters to the seven churches, they find their fulfillment in the rest of the book. And I'll show you what that means in just a few moments.

[16 : 15] So we're going to focus in on these seven letters this morning. Here's a map of modern-day Turkey, which was the Asia Minor, the Asian Empire of Rome, and here, the first letter goes to Ephesus, and then it moves clockwise around in a circle to these seven churches planted in Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey.

Now, it was actually very common that if an apostle, if a leader, somebody who was a benefactor of a church or a community was going to send a letter, it very rarely just went to one place.

They often became circular letters. You actually see this in the book of Ephesians. We have some ancient manuscripts, and most of them say this is a letter to the church of Ephesus by Paul and Silas and so on, and et cetera.

So we have those, but we also have other copies of the same book of Ephesians, but the heading or the first line has been changed. This is a letter to the church of Pergamos or Thyatira or Sardis, and then the rest of the book of Ephesians happens.

So the book of Ephesians is an example in your New Testament of a circular letter. We just, for convenience's sake, call it the book of Ephesians, but it was actually passed around to a bunch of different churches, and there's some uncertainty or unclear to me about which one had it first.

[17 : 36] Here, we have a circle of churches, and John, the revelator, is sending seven letters or maybe one letter in seven or seven letters in one that are going to each of these churches.

As an example, we're going to look at just the first one, a letter to the church of Ephesus, and this will serve as sort of the template or the boilerplate for the other six letters. So if you have a Bible, you can join me in Revelation chapter 2.

The words will be on the screen this morning. So, first, this is Revelation 2. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

And to be clear, we're talking about Jesus here. These are the words of Jesus. Now, you can, as an interpreter, you can decide, is this literally Jesus saying this? Is this John as an apostle, as a church planter, putting words in Jesus' mouth, which today feels a little suspicious or sacrilegious.

To an ancient person, a very common thing to do. These are the words of him who holds the seven stars, Jesus. I know your works. Now, some translations, they're going to say deeds.

[18 : 54] We've talked about this once or twice before. The NIV in particular is very suspicious towards the English word works. And this is basically a strain of anti-Catholic thought that shows up in Protestant Bibles because Protestants, well, we don't believe in works.

We believe in faith alone. Okay? But the same word that gets translated as works is used here. Jesus is saying in a positive sense, I know your works, this is a good thing, your toil and your endurance, and I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers.

You have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them to be false. Verse 3, I also know that you are enduring and bearing up for the sake of my name and that you have not grown weary.

But, I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had first. Or some translations, you have left behind or abandoned your first love. Remember then, from where you have fallen, repent and do the works that you did at first.

If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. Yet, this is to your credit. You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, we'll talk about that word in a moment, which I also hate.

[20 : 16] Verse 7, let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, we'll talk about that word in a second, I will give them permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

Alright, so this is the letter to the Ephesians. We don't have time this morning to do all seven letters. We don't have time this year to do all seven letters. But this serves as sort of a template or a boilerplate for what the other seven letters look like.

And if you go to the next slide, you'll see sort of a table of what these letters all have in common. Every single letter is addressed to a church, begins with some attributes of Jesus, has some positives in most cases, has some negatives in most cases, has a call to action, and then has a word for the one or the people who conquer.

Alright, so all the letters have this in common. Alright, so go back to the previous slide, thank you. So, for Ephesians at the Ephesus church, Jesus holds the seven stars, walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Seven is this number of perfection. It's a huge number in the book of Revelation. When you read about the seven spirits of God, the seven lampstands, it's talking about this group of churches, okay?

[21 : 32] Positives, I know your works, you toil, you have endured. I know Jesus' name said negatives, you have abandoned your first love. The call to action is to repent, to turn around, change your mind, do something different, and then the one who conquers will have the tree of life in paradise.

Now, under the conquer column, all of these promises, tree of life, crown of life, white stone, new name, we'll get to the next slide in a second. All of these promises are then addressed in the last two chapters of Revelation, okay?

In biblical studies, this would be called a chiastic structure where you have the beginning of the book starts with these seven promises and then the end of the book gives out those seven promises, okay?

So everything that's promised is given in the end of the book. Smyrna, Jesus has some attributes, first and last, dead came to life, I know your affliction and poverty, one of two that does not have any negatives, so the call to action is not repentance, but to be faithful, keep doing what you're doing, you'll have a crown of life.

Pergamum, Jesus has the sharp two-edged sword, we'll talk about that in a couple weeks, what that means, the positives of you hold fast, and you hold to the teaching of Balaam, the Nicolaitans, and Jezebel, therefore you have to repent.

[22 : 49] Next slide, Thyatira, Jesus has attributes of eyes like flame, whose feet are like burnished bronze. Positives, I know your works, love, faith, service, but you tolerate Jezebel, we'll talk about her in a moment, your call to action is to hold fast, you'll have authority over nations.

Sardis, Jesus, is the seven spirits of God, the seven stars. Now the positive, there isn't really a positive at all, I know your works and your works are this, you're dead. Ha ha! Therefore, the call to action is wake up.

By the way, I saw this tweet or a thread that said, man, the choice for churches today is either to be holy or to be woke. And I responded, because I spend too much time online, I responded, Jesus never calls us to be holy, it is not a command that Jesus ever says, but Jesus tells his people to stay awake dozens of times, okay?

I know your works, your works are that you're dead, so wake up, stay woke, strengthen what remains, and then you will be clothed in white robes.

Philadelphia, a positive only church, I know your works, you kept my words, you've not denied my name, therefore hold fast, keep doing what you're doing, you'll be made a pillar in the temple, I'll write the name of God on you.

[24 : 10] Well, Adesia, Jesus is the origin of God's creation, again, negatives only, I know your works and your works are that you are neither cold nor hot nor lukewarm. Laodicea was in between the hot springs of Hierapolis and the aqueducts of a city south of them, and by the time I got to Laodicea, you had useless water that you could not bathe in or drink.

So the call to action is to repent, and then you will have a place with me on my throne. Now, let's talk about some of these key words. The Nicolaitans, the Nicolaitans, a combination of two words, Nico, or the Greek goddess Nike, where we get the brand name Nike, and the laity, or people, all right?

So, literally, the people of the conquering, the people of victory, the people of overcoming. You are following, this is a condemnation that Jesus gives to the churches, you're following the ways of the victorious people, the people of conquering.

And conquering, and victory, and overcoming is actually a major theme in the, sorry, nerdy biblical studies word, Johannine literature.

So, Gospel of John, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, John, Revelation. Unclear if it's the same author or not, but definitely the same school of authors influenced by the same thought or theology, and it's a major theme.

[25 : 34] So, you see this show up in 1st John, chapter 5, verse 4. Whoever has been born of God overcomes, Nika, the world. And this is the victory, Nike, that has overcome, Nike, Sasa, the world, our faith.

So, there's two kinds of overcoming that John, or Revelation, or the Johannine school is contrasting. There is the victory that comes through faith, through Pistis, to trust, to believe what some translators call allegiance, through allegiance to the way of Jesus.

If you want to overcome, if you want to be victorious, you do it through faith, through allegiance to the way of Jesus, not to the way of Babylon. Contrast that to the Nicolaitans, the people of the conquering, the people of the victory.

Some school of thought that says, if you want to be victorious, you do it through violence. You do it through domination. You do it through oppression. If you are going to be oppressed, then you've got to oppress right back to get your way.

And Jesus, in these letters, saying, don't follow that school. Be an overcomer in a completely new and different way. You see this again in Revelation chapter 12.

[26 : 51] John writes, they overcame the martyrs, the witnesses, those who are pouring out their blood, their life, for Jesus. They overcame him, the beast, because of two things.

The blood of the Lamb, which again, this is irony here. The death, the sacrifice, the killing of the Lamb, Jesus, the crucifixion. That's how you are victorious.

And through the word of testimony. If you want to be victorious against the way of Babylon, you don't do it through the Nicolaitans, through the conquering people.

You do it through sacrifice and mercy and by the word of testimony, by saying, this is what God has done. And speaking of testimony, we're going to take a break and Brother Antonio, my brother from another mother, has a word of testimony for us this morning.

Thank you. Hello. Perfect.

[27 : 54] Thank you. I'd love to share a testimony. I'm going to start out by sharing a quote about testimony. I think it's really helpful to sort of give a context for really understanding how God works and moves in our lives.

It's from a sermon I heard from a pastor from a church in California. And he says, I just want to put this one tool in your hand. If you will use it, you will stay encouraged every day of your life and you will have an important key for the renewing of your mind.

God. The tool is the testimony. That everything be tied to a reminder of God's supernatural interventions. Your God history needs to become a string of monuments that become reference points for the rest of your life.

And so, the power of testimony is not about a formulaic God that sort of grants our wishes or a God who always shows up in the same way. But instead, it's a tool to remind us of a God who has intervened in our lives in the past and a God who will be faithful to show up in the future.

And so, personally, and sorry if I get emotional, it was a really beautiful week for me. So, in terms of background, I have an older sister, Antoinette, who's 10 years older than me. And in her mid-20s, she was diagnosed with kidney disease.

[29 : 15] and it's progressively got worse. And by her early 30s, she was on dialysis. And so, for the past, I think, 10 plus years, she's been on dialysis, which has been hard, of course, to be young and you can't travel.

You know, our family had prayed a lot about it. And this week, she got a kidney transplant. And so, yeah, it was just a really beautiful moment.

to see God be faithful in her life and to have doctors and a donor, especially as a black woman, that's a real miracle. And so, yeah, I just want to do a quick prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

Jesus, we thank you for your faithfulness. We thank you that you have shown up in my family's life. And there are so many stories in this room of similar interventions.

And God, in moments where empires rage and the world feels hopeless sometimes, remind us of your faithfulness. Remind us of how you've shown up in the past and let that be a seed of hope, a seed where we know you will show up in the future.

[30 : 26] And we don't know what that looks like. We don't know when it will happen, but we know that you will be good and that your goodness and your mercy will pursue us all the days of our lives. In Jesus' name, we pray.

Amen. Those, Jesus speaks out against those who are following the way of the Nicolaitans, the people of the conquering.

And instead, we are called to be the people of the word of testimony, of the people of the blood of the Lamb, that we too are called to conquer, but in a way that's subversive and dissident to the way of Rome.

Now, the other couple words used here are that of Jezebel and Balaam. Jezebel and Balaam. And these basically serve as slurs. Anybody here ever been told that they have the spirit of Jezebel?

All right? Yeah, that's right. That's right. Another t-shirt that we could have, right? Now, typically, in a modern context, if you're told that you have the spirit of Jezebel, it's because you're one of those like newfangled ladies that believes in like women's rights and stuff like that, right?

[31 : 52] Again, things will put us on some list somewhere. In a first century and before context, Jezebel and Balaam were these historical slurs that were referencing Israel's history about these two folks that pulled Israel away from Yahweh worship, away from the worship of their God and towards the worship of foreign deities or idols.

So, the way this works is like, if I call you a Benedict Arnold, what am I calling you? A traitor. Right. If I say that you have drunk the Kool-Aid, what am I saying?

Yeah, you are in a cult. You have cult-like devotion. What about Maverick? If I say you're a Maverick, what does that mean? Loose cannon. Yeah, stubborn independence.

Anybody know where the word Maverick comes from? Not Top Gun. For the live stream, somebody guessed Top Gun.

That was my first thought as well, it was not Top Gun. It comes from a 19th century cattle rancher named Samuel Maverick who refused to brand his cattle because he knew it caused them pain.

[33 : 04] I know, it's so sweet. Which caused like real havoc in like the fields of Wyoming because if you're not branding your cattle, how are you supposed to know?

People accused him of doing this so that he could just claim anybody's unbranded cattle but historical records sort of show that's not the case. He just really believed in not harming animals other than the fact that they got slaughtered for meat but that's a different question.

And so he got labeled a maverick for having this stubborn refusal to do what everybody else was doing. So in the same way, a Jezebel or a Balaam, there are these historical slurs about a Jezebel, somebody who, she was a queen of the northern kingdom of Israel and she lured people away from Yahweh worship towards Baal worship or Baal worship to worship foreign deities.

Balaam was this prophet for hire in the book of Numbers who was hired to curse Israel and is later accredited with luring Israel towards sexual immorality and idolatry.

Now, keep in mind, when the book of Revelation or your New Testaments in general bring up sexual immorality and idolatry, they are very tightly related.

[34 : 16] because of America's sort of puritanical views on sex, we tend to see the word sexual immorality and almost have this like voice in our head that's like, yeah, that's talking about like going to third base with your girlfriend or something, right?

But that's not what a biblical author was thinking about. If they're talking about sexual immorality, especially when it's tied in with idolatry, it's probably talking about paying money to an already wealthy priest to have sex with an enslaved person in a temple brothel so that you could convince some god to bless your crops or your commerce or whatever, okay?

Not the puritanical views on sex that we have today, something very, very different. So, the question I think we have for us today as we move into some application is who or what are our modern day Nicolaitans and Jezebels and Balaams?

who are the people who are calling us towards a kind of conquering, a kind of victory, a kind of overcoming that actually has nothing to do with the way of Jesus?

Who is calling us towards using our bodies or our money or our time to tie ourselves to an economy or a form of militarism or patriotism that has nothing to do with the kingdom of God?

[35 : 40] these are the questions. What ideas tempt me and tempt you and tempt a church to seek after violent victory and the blending of our bodies and our wallets with the powers of the world?

And perhaps an exercise that would do us some good to all spend some time on is what would a letter to the table church sound like? Who is Jesus to us?

What would earn us praise? What would Jesus say? Well done, I see your works and it's this. And what would earn us criticism? What is our call to action?

Is it to hold fast? Is it to repent? Is it a mix? What does it mean for the table church to overcome, to be victorious, to conquer in a Jesus-like way in this city, at this time, at this moment?

And what is the hope that we are clinging to? What is it that we think Jesus might be promising us? Here is my attempt at a letter to the table church.

[36 : 55] These are the words of the one who is wounded for love, who calls you by name, who knows the pain that brought you here. I know your works, how you've created sanctuary for the spiritually homeless, how you've deconstructed toxic theology, and how you've learned to name harm and speak truth.

I see the courage it took to leave behind the faith that wounded you, to risk to build something new. You have endured much. But I have this against you.

In your necessary work of tearing down false idols, you've become afraid to encounter the living God. your deconstruction has been brave, but where is your reconstruction?

You speak beautifully of justice and community, but when did you last allow yourself to be undone by mystery, to be surprised by grace? Your cynicism, though well earned through pain, has become a wall that keeps out not just harmful religion, but transformative encounter.

You've learned to critique worship, but forgotten how to surrender in it. You analyze the scripture, but resist letting it analyze you. You've become so good at spotting spiritual manipulation, you've lost the ability to be spiritually moved.

[38 : 13] I understand why you keep God at arm's length, the religious leaders who hurt you, who claim to speak for me, but in protecting yourselves from false intimacy, you've also closed yourselves off from true encounter.

Your community gathers beautifully around shared wounds, but do you also gather around shared wonder? Remember, it is possible to be both critically thinking and spiritually surrendered.

You can question everything and still fall on your knees. You can deconstruct harmful theology while still being constructed by divine love. To everyone who conquers, who risk vulnerability with the divine again, who dares to be beginners in prayer, who allows their hearts to be tender toward the mystery, I will grant them to drink from springs of living water that never disappoint.

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Amen.
Thank you.