

Babylon, come out of her!

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When I was on an early morning paper round at the age of 13, I remember seeing a large pile of old books thrown out for the rubbish collection. On the top was a Bible. I casually opened it and my eyes fell on the phrase 'a sharp threshing instrument having teeth; thou shalt thresh the mountains' (Isaiah 41:15).

And there in the margin was a note - in shorthand. Being at an impressionable age and living in the cold-war spy era, I was certain I had found a cryptic message!

I took my find to a shorthand typist who lived nearby. She interpreted the message for me: 'This verse was fulfilled in 1914 by the new weapon, the tank'. Needless to say I felt totally let down at such an interpretation! A short time ago, a thin, rather intense-looking young man approached me and hastily pushed into my hand a poorly printed leaflet before bustling off into the crowd. The headline boldly proclaimed, 'Proof - Ian Paisley is the Antichrist'. There followed an intricate and ingenious effort to explain the numerical value of the letters of Paisley's name, statements he had made and the power he had over others - all purporting to prove that this controversial Ulsterman was the Antichrist.

Who's Antichrist?

Over the years I have had numerous such tracts and leaflets passed to me, claiming revelation about the prophetic symbolism of Scripture. During the last World War Hitler was the Antichrist, Germany the beast. Following the war, Russia became the beast. Later still, during the tragedy of the Vietnam conflict the United States became the beast.

Individuals have scored highly too. When John F. Kennedy ran for the presidency of the USA, tracts circulated proclaiming him as the Antichrist laying great stress on his Roman Catholic background. More lurid presentations followed concerning Henry Kissinger, whose political prominence and Jewish origins, as well as his Russian background,

provided superb qualifications for a slot somewhere in the prophetic programme!

It is unfortunate that Bible prophecy has been subjected over the years to interpretations ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. And one of the most misinterpreted and misused prophetic statements is that call of God to his people in the end-time Babylonian era: 'Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins and lest you receive of her plagues' (Rev 18:4).

What's 'Babylon'?

The name 'mystery Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth' (Rev 17:5) invites the attention of those eager to traverse the minefield of prophetic interpretation. It is therefore with caution that we turn our attention to it in this article.

It is the awareness of Babylon's eschatological significance that demands we hear its call. The early church undoubtedly saw in these scriptures reference to imperial Rome, whereas for the Reformers it spoke of the Roman Catholic Church. More recently, the World Council of Churches has been a popular candidate in some circles. None of those interpretations can be seen as final. Babylon cannot be confined into such a narrow historical context.

In the book of Revelation 'mystery Babylon the great' stands in opposition to the heavenly Jerusalem. The final generation of time is to witness Babylon in the fullness of her luxuries, glory, corruption and degeneracy. Her downfall will spark great jubilation among the saints of God and pave the way for the coming down from heaven of that other great city - the heavenly Jerusalem, filled with God's glory, a place of purity, praise and power.

Broad Front

To understand the great call of God from heaven to 'come out from amongst her' we must see eschatological Babylon, then, on a broader front than the early Roman Empire, whose splendour has already passed away.

Neither can we confine its interpretation to a single religious system, philosophy or ideology.

Babylon, in the vision of John, is the sum total of all that is man-centred and man-controlled rather than Christ-centred and Christ-governed. It is all that is opposed to God. Babylon to John is religious, political and social wickedness, in all its manifestations, holding sway over the nations of the earth.

In describing Babylon as the 'mother of harlots' he means that she is the source of all manner of unfaithfulness and every manifestation of spiritual uncleanness and idolatry. This is the final picture of the worldwide spiritual power that will rule the nations preceding the return of Christ; a global spiritual empire at enmity with the kingdom of God; an empire in which commerce, religion, politics, humanism and social attitude all merge together in total opposition to God's purposes.

Every Generation

Every generation has its manifestation of this great mystery Babylon. The call to 'come out from amongst her' is the call to Christians in every generation to separate themselves from what she represents in her conflict with God. The significance for us is that in the final generation we will see this visible opposition to God on a scale never known before. We will recognise this era by the characteristics that John himself outlines: emphasis on the temporal, the sensual, religious mixture and unholy alliances. Recognition of these features will save us from being deceived.

1. See through what is TEMPORAL and Live for what is ETERNAL. Babylon was preoccupied with the pursuit of the temporal rather than the eternal. The objective of her inhabitants was the possession of worldly luxury. They were trapped in a secular society devoted to the god of materialism. The moral values of compassion, mercy, kindness and justice had all been sacrificed on the altars of profit, commerce and wealth.

Economic Crisis

The present worldwide economic inequity only serves to spotlight afresh the widespread manifestation of the spirit of Babylon. The Third World countries, in their existing poverty, are breaking under the pressure of exorbitant interest rates imposed upon them by wealthier nations. At the same time they frequently suffer under the heel of corrupt government officials who skim the national coffers to fill their Swiss bank accounts. Such times of corruption, injustice and despair become the breeding ground for violent revolution, so that the cruelty and aggression that also characterised John's vision of Babylon are fed by its own secularised, materialistic motivation.

Spiritual Desert

Eschatological Babylon does not only express herself in the global injustices of our time. It comes right down to the attitude with which we approach our own daily living. Many Christians today have sacrificed their spiritual well being for the pursuit of material gain. They have moved house for a better job with higher pay, in order to achieve more in a material sense, with little regard for the spiritual well being of their families. They have often ended up in a worldly wilderness, suffering deep family stress.

Many have blunted the edge of their prayer life, forsaken their commitment to the Word of God because it was too demanding, dropped out of regular fellowship with God's people, lost their zeal for God and ended up as jaded pew-fillers, worn out in their constant pursuit of wealth.

Re-alignment

The money, prestige, social climbing and material possessions are all part of an age that the Word of God says is 'passing away' (1 Cor 7:30). The voice of God to all those enmeshed in this spirit of Babylon cries, 'Come out from amongst her, my people'. It is a call to re-align ourselves with what is eternal rather than what is temporal.

It is to this that we have been born of the Spirit. 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who, according to his abundant mercy, has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible (imperishable) and undefiled, and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you' (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Here is a call for you to rediscover your roots in God before it is too late. To return to the former place of prayer, his Word, purity of life, worship, fellowship with his people, and to hone afresh a sharp edge of zeal to your life. It is the plea of the Spirit that we, as his people, pursue those values and relationships that have eternal significance rather than the fading luxuries of this temporal age.

2. Don't focus on the SENSUAL but Pursue what is SPIRITUAL. Babylon represents not only society but perverse society. All the vices of ancient Rome, its successes, its abuses, its sensual orgies reach their fullness in the morally corrupted society of the end times.

Moral Rot

The moral perversities that provoked the judgments of Almighty God upon Sodom and Gomorrah are not only legally protected in our own times but are rapidly becoming socially acceptable. Biblical morality is considered out-moded or 'the legacy of a hypocritical Victorian ethic'. Pressure is on to portray the moral absolutes of God's Word as outdated and no longer applicable in our 'enlightened' generation.

Our newspapers, TV programmes, theatre productions, music, product advertising and vacation brochures are all geared to the promoting of the sensual, appealing to our emotions in a way calculated to arouse desires for self-gratification. We are constantly bombarded with the lewd and targeted with the idea that what is sensually pleasurable is unquestionably right; that what is dangerously exciting is good; that what is stolen is sweeter; that we should demand our share of the action in this permissive age.

Carnally Minded

The Bible nowhere says that the sensual is not pleasurable. It does, however, condemn that which is purely sensual as opposed to the spiritual.

Paul's great statement in the book of Romans concerning the flesh warring against the Spirit is indicative of his viewpoint as to the sensual life and the Christian's relation to it: 'Those who live according to the flesh set their mind on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you' (Romans 8:5-9).

In the opening chapters of the same letter Paul depicts God's view of the sensual life not as pleasurable, good, fulfilling and gratifying, but as unclean, vile, shameful, debasing, unrighteous, wicked and deceitful. The final verdict on the practice of all these things is 'the righteous judgment of God, that those who practise such things are worthy of death' (Romans 1:32).

Living God's Way

The call of God to his church in our own era is to 'come out from amongst her, my people'. Our lives are to be lived on a different level from the accepted social norms of our time.

Our marriages, family life, job attitudes, reading material, TV viewing and practised lifestyle should be in accord with what is acceptable to the Spirit of God. We are to live in agreement with the principles of God's Word, as children of the kingdom practising the principles of the kingdom, according to the moral absolutes of God's own nature.

We Can Do It

This is not a hard thing for us who are born again; it is a faith walk. We are already equipped to live this way. 'His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust' (2 Peter 1: 3-4).

It is time for the church to be seen as a holy people, separate from the spiritual Babylon of our day that is dedicated to sensual gratification. We are dedicated instead to the exaltation of Jesus Christ as supreme ruler, King of kings and Lord of lords.

3. Pull away from RELIGIOUS MIXTURE and Aim for PURITY OF FELLOWSHIP, Babylon was not irreligious; it was filled with a mixture of religious beliefs and practices.

It had multiple gods; religious philosophy abounded. It was luxurious in its religious rituals and appointments. Everything to do with religion had the touch of Babylonian luxury.

We cannot confine our interpretation of the idolatrous religion of Babylon to the Roman Catholic Church any more than to that of compromised and apostate* Protestant institutionalism. Anything that does not hold to the Word of God as the final authority of faith and life, that denies in its preaching or practice the great doctrines of Scripture, or builds to itself an empirical* structure separating Christians behind walls of exclusivism as a protective attitude, is part of this abhorrent religious mixture, apostate from God.

Misplaced Loyalty

It is a tragedy that so many Christians today remain silent even when confronted by bishops and priests who deny the virgin birth, the atoning death, the resurrection, the ascension and the return of our Lord. Often out of deceived thinking and misplaced loyalty they continue to support such men as their spiritual leaders. It is time we heeded the voice of God, 'Come out from amongst her, my people, lest you share in her sins and lest you

receive of her judgments'. For all that is of this religious mixture is going to fail.

It is time we separated ourselves from an apostate, compromised mixture of Christianity and paganism and stood on clear ground for what is right, true and pure in our faith.

It is imperative that we re-affirm our commitment to the Word of God. That we jettison our view of Christianity as an institutional religion and see it instead as a life in union with God, lived at a corporate level as the community of the King. That we stop seeing ourselves as those who 'go to church' and start seeing ourselves as 'the church', and realise that this church is to be corporately holy, pure and clear.

It is time that those called to the ministry came clear in their church life and in their relationships and spoke out strongly and truthfully the Word of God - Only this is authentic Christian Faith.

4. AVOID INSTITUTIONAL ALLIANCES and Reach out for COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS It is no surprise to discover in Revelation that 'mystery Babylon' allied herself with the beast that ascended out of the bottomless pit.

The alliances between the religious and political powers at the end time will demonstrate the fact that they are essentially of one and the same spirit - opposed to God. The consequence of their alliance will be a further focussing of opposition against God's children. The religious tolerance shown by Babylon towards all that is corrupt, debased and idolatrous always shows itself in intolerance to whatever is pure, clean and true to the Word of God.

Combination

It is not merely the godless ideologies of our times such as communism and atheism, nor man-centred humanism, nor mixturised religion that pose the greatest threat to the church of God. It is the combination of all that is secular, sensual, temporal and wedded to the spirit of this age in its enmity against God that is our opponent.

Our strength, when confronted with such a formidable force, must be in our faith and relationship with God and in our fellowship with each other, our being visibly allied with those who share the same overcoming faith.

Living In Covenant

The alliance of an apostate ecclesiastical system with a corrupt political world can only be countered by true covenant relationships between God's children, joined by the unbreakable bonds of their union in the Spirit.

We must not stick at saying that we are in the new covenant, or even at sharing bread and wine to express that new covenant, but must go on to live as a covenant people, in true fellowship.

This demands loyalty, truthfulness and love in our life together. It is time, if this is ever to be our experience, to come out from whatever is committed to the temporal, to the mixture of faith, to the sensual and to wrong alliances.

Praise Explosion

The impact of such a covenant community sharing common life in Christ, filled with his Spirit, moving in praise and the power of God, will cause large numbers in every nation to turn to Christ. This covenant community will comprise men and women through whose faith God's Spirit enters our generation and displays his power as never before, and they will explode with praise at the overthrow of that great 'mystery Babylon' and welcome the returning King to rule in his church - Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem coming down to earth at last!