

First Vision: Christ Amid the Seven Candlesticks

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Revelation 1:9–20

The first great vision in Revelation is one of many, but the drama of this first vision surfaces repeatedly throughout the book. Our text is Revelation 1:9–20, specifically verses 12–13: “And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.”

Understanding John’s Visions

John tells us in verses 9 and 10 that he had a vision on the island of Patmos. He “was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” when he heard a voice and turned to see who was speaking to him. This is more than just a description of the spiritual frame of mind John was in on this Lord’s Day, which, incidentally, is the first reference in Scripture to the Christian Sabbath as the *Lord’s Day* (cf. Mark 2:28). Note that it is the *Lord’s Day*, and not the *Day of the Lord*. Some scholars wrongly say John is being carried forward in a vision to the Day of Judgment. Not so—John is relating what he sees on a particular Lord’s Day, the first day of the week. In exile on the island of Patmos, John’s thoughts turn to his brothers and sisters in Christ to whom he had ministered on the mainland. As John prays about these people, something remarkable happens to him. He is taken up in

the Spirit, lifted out of the realm of time and space so that he may see heavenly things.

Let me illustrate this. Nearly all of us have been in an airplane. We fly over a large city, seeing people below who move like little matchsticks and cars that scurry about like ladybugs. How small everything looks from the heights above!

This is similar to what John experienced. On earth, in time and space, we do not know what the future will bring. But John says God lifted him up out of the realm of time and space to see a heavenly vision of the church, represented as candlesticks or lampstands. In that vision, God shows John the whole sweep of church history. God shows him everything from beginning to end. God doesn't have to wonder what lies around the next corner; He already knows. He sees everything at a glance. "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). This is what John experiences while "in the Spirit on the Lord's day." He is lifted up out of himself, out of the realm of time and space, and given an unforgettable view of the church, the world, and reality. The Book of Revelation is exciting because it lets us see this same view. John sees things as God sees them, and we see them through John.

In the first vision, John says, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last...what thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia.... And I turned to see the voice that spake with me." John had often heard the voice of the Lord Jesus when Christ was among the twelve on earth. But this voice is so very different. It is a great voice, much like that of a trumpet. It is a strange voice, yet there is something recognizable about it. When John turns around to see the voice, he says, "Being turned, I saw

seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks was one like unto the Son of man.”

John offers us a *word picture* here, not an artist’s impression. Some people have tried to paint this description of Christ, and the results have been absurd. You cannot and should not try to produce a picture of Christ in any way.¹

God was wise to send His Son in human flesh before the age of the camera, videotape, and internet. He came before it was possible for us to make a permanent record of His physical appearance. We are not meant to have such information. Whatever else you do, do not think about Christ’s physical appearance. John wants to tell us *who* Jesus is, not *what* He looks like. So this vision is not to be understood literally. How can you paint a head that is white like wool, as white as snow, with eyes as flames of fire? How can you paint a face shining like the noonday sun? Or feet that burn as brass in a furnace? A hand great enough to hold seven stars? A mouth out of which goes a two-edged sword? We are meant to understand this vision scripturally and spiritually so that we know who and what our Lord Jesus Christ is.

So let us examine this word picture of Christ, looking at it in three ways: (1) the identity of Christ in verses 12–16; (2) the impact Christ has on John in verses 17–18; and (3) the interpretation of this vision in verses 19–20.

Christ’s Identity Established

John’s vision includes a description of Christ’s clothing, His head, hair, eyes, feet, voice, right hand, mouth, and face. But again, we should resist the temptation of probing these features in detail, for if we did so, we would lose the overall effect of this vision. We need first to regard it as a

1. See Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 35.

whole to see just whom it is that John saw. Bearing this in mind, here is what John sees:

1. *Christ as the Son of man.* John says, “I saw...one like unto the Son of man” (v. 13). *The Son of man* was one of our Lord’s favorite titles for Himself. The New Testament refers eighty-one times to the Son of man, and in all but a few places our Lord is speaking about Himself. Liberals have misunderstood Jesus’ use of the term, saying He was trying to impress people that He was only human. Indeed, some evangelicals have also made that mistake. They say “Son of God” refers to Christ’s deity, while “Son of man” refers exclusively to His humanity; but this is not the true meaning of “Son of man.” When our Lord uses this title, it is loaded with messianic connotations from the Old Testament, where the title is introduced in Daniel 7:13–14.

At the crucifixion trial in Mark 14, when Christ identifies Himself as the Son of man, the reaction of the high priest is stunning. Scripture says after tearing his clothes, the priest asks, “What need we any further witnesses? Ye have heard the blasphemy: what think ye?” (vv. 63–64a). Everyone present then condemns Jesus to death (v. 64b). Calling Himself the Son of man, Jesus thereby declares Himself to be the Son of God. He is saying, “Yes, I am the Christ; I am the Son of the blessed God. And I tell you something else; I am the Son of man prophesied by Daniel. I am the Son of man who will come in the clouds of God’s divine and heavenly glory.”

Notice that John says, “I saw One *like* unto the Son of man.” John knew the Lord intimately here on earth. John was called the disciple whom Jesus loved, implying a special relationship between John the man and Jesus the man. They were close friends. John was part of the inner circle of disciples. But when John says as he gazes into heaven, “I saw one *like* unto the Son of man,” in effect, he is saying: “There is both something familiar and yet

different about the One I see. He has changed beyond all recognition, yet I recognize Him.” That is what John means when he says the person he sees is “like unto the Son of man.” He says, “I see Jesus, but oh, He is so exalted, so magnificent, so glorious, that I can scarcely believe my eyes.”

If we are believers, we too will be changed in glory. We will have new bodies like Christ’s glorified body. We will have souls made perfect in holiness. We will see Jesus as He is, and we will be like Him! We will be gloriously changed, yet we will still be ourselves, and those who are with us in heaven will recognize us.

2. *Christ as the great high priest.* When John turns to see the voice, he sees in the midst of seven candlesticks one like the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot and girt about the chest with a golden sash. His head and hair are as white as wool, or, snow. John sees our Lord Jesus Christ, glorified and exalted, wearing the vestments of a high priest.

How wonderful it is to know that our exalted, glorious, majestic Savior is also our great high priest, “that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” (Heb. 5:14). As the propitiation for our sins, He presents His crucified body to the Father as a perpetual memorial that He has fully satisfied for all our sins with His precious blood. As our Advocate with the Father, He ever lives to make intercession for us, pleading the merits of His shed blood.

Moreover, Christ is walking in the midst of the candlesticks, which are symbols of His churches. That is hinted at already in Matthew 5:15, where Jesus says, “Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.” Christ has kindled these lights and placed them on the candlesticks, and He continues to tend the lamps, trimming their wicks, refueling them with the oil

of the Spirit so they will continue to burn brightly. What John sees is the exalted and heavenly Christ in relationship to His church on earth, caring for her and upholding her so that her light continues to shine in the darkness of this world.

As He walks among the churches, Christ's head and hair are white with holiness and purity (cf. Dan. 7:9). His holiness is the perfect holiness of the living God: "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). By contrast, we read about fallen man's want of holiness in Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

Note the two extremes. Man's depravity and sin is one extreme, staining him with guilt that is as scarlet, red like crimson. Sin is not just a stain on the surface of our lives; it has penetrated the very fabric of our nature. It cannot be eradicated because it is part of our being as the offspring of fallen Adam. Yet Scripture promises us that though our sin is red as crimson, we can be washed in the blood of Christ and become as white as snow. Total depravity gives way to perfect holiness. Our sins are covered by the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ, and in God's eyes we are accounted as He is, without spot or blemish.

What a wonder that is! Recently, I was visiting a family when a young lady tipped over a glass containing a red beverage onto a white carpet. The women of the home sprang into action, using various cleansing solutions and a ton of energy to rub out the stains. Despite their best efforts, they could not make the carpet white again. When it comes to the scarlet stain of sin, only Jesus Christ, the great high priest, can make us white as snow.

3. *Christ as Almighty God.* As John looks at Christ, he perceives that Jesus Christ is God. The words, "His head

and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow,” appear in Daniel 7:9: “I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire.” Now Daniel sees the Ancient of days and the Son of man as two distinct persons: “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom.” Daniel goes on to say, “I saw the Ancient of days and His head and His hair were white like wool. I saw the Son of man who came to the Ancient of days.” But John doesn’t see the Ancient of days and the Son of man as two distinct persons any longer; he sees that the Son of man *is* the Ancient of days.

4. *Christ as the righteous Judge.* Verses 14–16 say of Christ, “His eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars; and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.” All of these word pictures point to Christ as the coming Judge.

First, John says, “his eyes were as a flame of fire” (v. 14b). They are like laser beams penetrating the heart of His church and its people. John here is telling us that the light of Christ’s omniscient gaze allows nothing to be hidden from Him. He is the eternal God, dazzling in holiness and purity, and He sees everything. The psalmist cries out, “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?” (Ps. 130:3). So the prophet Malachi asks, “Who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth?” (Mal. 3:2).

A radio commentator once asked a guest, “Do you believe in God?” The man answered, “I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t really care, but if there is a God and if there is a day of judgment, I’ll have a thing or two to say to Him. When I look at everything that has gone wrong in this world, I’ll stand before God, and ask Him my questions, looking Him in the eye.” What blindness! Oh, my friend, who could stand and look into those burning eyes? Who would dare to so much as lift up his head in the presence of such a righteous Judge?

Second, John looks at Jesus’ feet, saying they were “like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace” (v. 15a). Brass must be purified in a furnace and then thoroughly burnished to shine with such luster. Here, too, is an image of purity and perfection. Perfect in holiness from head to foot, with white-as-wool hair, laser-like eyes and burnished feet—Jesus, the Son of man, is coming to judge the world in righteousness.

Third, John says Christ’s voice is “as the sound of many waters (v. 15b).” It is like the crashing of the surf against the rocks of Patmos. His voice is the ultimate, definitive, authoritative voice of Judgment Day. We will be speechless as He pronounces His verdict, for His voice will be “as the sound of many waters.” “The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty” (Ps. 29:4).

Fourth, John says, Christ has in His right hand seven stars (v. 16a). These stars are His messengers or servants, for whose immediate benefit these very things are being written in a book (Rev. 1:1). These servants will also join with Him to judge everyone who has ever heard His Word. Christ gave warning of this very thing in Mark 4:23–25: “If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.... Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given.

For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.” The key to this parable is the biblical requirement to hear the Word with faith. To hear the Word without faith is only to add to your guilt and condemnation when you appear before the righteous Judge.

Fifth, John says out of Christ’s mouth comes a “sharp, two-edged sword” (v. 16b). The sword is a symbol of Christ’s Word, full of life and power (Heb. 4:12; Isa. 49:2). Philip Hughes says, “The sword which is the Lord’s word has two edges [so] it never fails to cut. If it does not cut with the edge of salvation, it cuts with the edge of condemnation; for the word of redemption to all who believe is at the same time the word of destruction to those who refuse to believe.”²

Finally, John says, the Man’s face is as bright as the sun in full splendor (v. 16c). According to Spurgeon, John sees an “inexpressible, indescribable, infinite splendour” on Christ’s face, an “overpowering pre-eminence” that is “justly terrible” to the ungodly and “intensely joyful” for the godly.³

Who can stand before this righteous Judge? He is coming to judge the living and the dead. And He is none other than God’s only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the Son of man in His glorious and exalted state as the high priest of His people, the Almighty God, and the Judge of all the earth.

Christ’s Impact on John

It is almost impossible to convey all that John saw, but we can see something of the impact. John tells us in verse 17, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.” When he sees his Master in the full glory of His exaltation, John

2. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 27.

3. Charles Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Sermons*, 43:9.

is overwhelmed. You would expect John to be overjoyed to see his Savior again, but, no, he falls into a dead faint at this awesome glory of Christ. James, the half-brother of Christ, reflects a similar awe and esteem for his Lord. He refers to Jesus not as his brother, but as “the Lord of glory” (James 2:1).

We grieve the Holy Spirit when we take the name of Jesus lightly upon our lips. No New Testament writer would have done that. Certainly they wrote in their narratives that “Jesus did this or that.” But when they approached Him in worship or prayer, they addressed Him as the Lord Jesus Christ. As believers, we too know Jesus in a very personal way. However, we must never address Him or speak of Him in a way that detracts from His glory. He is infinitely more than a personal friend of ours; He is Lord and Master of the universe.

John was a cherished friend of Jesus while He was on this earth, but John is not yet prepared to look upon Christ as Eternal God. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. This means as earthly creatures we cannot enter the kingdom of God or look upon God in all His glory. To do that we must have a soul made perfect in holiness and a resurrected body like Christ’s. God told Moses no man can see God’s face and live. After we die and go to heaven, we will understand why even John, though a holy man, was yet unable to look upon the glorified Christ without falling down “as dead” (v. 17a). John was a dear child of God, but he was still a sinner. We look up to New Testament saints such as John, Peter, and Paul, yet we must remember that they too were men such as we are. They still battled sin and corruption. So John could not look upon this revelation of the risen and exalted Christ without fear.

We see similar reactions throughout the Old Testament when God appears to people such as Moses,

Abraham, Job, Elijah, and Isaiah. In Isaiah 6, the glory of God is revealed to Isaiah in the temple. The prophet cries out, “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” Likewise, when God appears to Elijah on Mount Horeb, the prophet covers his face with a mantle.

Daniel had a vision of Christ similar to that of John. He says, “Therefore I was left alone, and saw this great vision, and there remained no strength in me: for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength. Yet heard I the voice of his words: and when I heard the voice of his words, then was I in a deep sleep on my face, and my face toward the ground” (Dan. 10:8, 9). In describing the physical impact of this vision, Daniel is saying, “I became like a corpse. I was white as a sheet, and all my strength drained out of me. I fell to the ground like a dead man.”

Saul on the road to Damascus had the same experience. He encounters Christ on the Damascus road and “suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven” (Acts 9:3). He sees “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). The proud, self-righteous Pharisee responds to the sight of Christ by falling to the ground. Divine glory overwhelms earthly humanity; heavenly light is too much for earthly eyes. Saul is struck blind and must be led by the hand into the city of Damascus. Like all others who have truly seen the glory of Christ, Paul has been humbled to the dust.

You are not a Christian unless you have experienced this kind of humiliation. God’s Word tells us we have not come into the presence of Christ until we have fallen on our face before Him. You can clap your hands and sing at the top of your voice, but if you have never felt your unworthiness and sin in the presence of Christ, you have never seen Him at all.

Two wonderful truths are taught here. First, though John is overwhelmed by the glorified Christ, his response is different from that of an unbeliever. Think, for example, of the guards at Jesus' tomb who responded to His resurrection by fleeing in terror. Likewise, in Gethsemane, the enemies of Jesus fell backward in terror when Jesus gave Himself up to them. By contrast, John falls toward his Lord. He falls down at His feet. The enemies fall *away* from Christ, but His people fall *toward* Him.

Second, Christ does not leave believers to lie in the dust. Christ lays His right hand on His beloved disciple and says, "Fear not; I am the first and the last." While He was on earth, Jesus laid His hands upon many people, healing them of sickness, disability, and sin. He could have just spoken a word and healed them, but He usually accompanied those words with the touch of His hand. With that touch, He conveyed that He loved those poor, wounded sinners.

We need to remember that when Jesus Christ touched sinners during His three-year ministry, He was in the state of humiliation. As the Man of Sorrows, He was one of us, bone of our bone. His Godhead was hidden. But even now in His state of exaltation, He touches John as the Son of man. Though exalted as the King and Head of His church, Christ remembers what it was like to move among sinners and rub shoulders with them. So He reaches for John as if to say, "I understand your fear; I sympathize with your human weakness and your inability to take in this great revelation."

"Fear not!"—how often John heard Christ say those words. He heard them during the storm on the Sea of Galilee, on the Mount of Transfiguration, and when Christ first appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. Now, years later, John hears the same reassuring words, "Fear not!"

Those words were not only for John. They are also spoken to those who humble themselves before the Lord, those who suffer for the sake of Christ, those who endure hardships because of the gospel, and those who are distressed and discouraged. If your sins bring you to fall down at the feet of Jesus Christ, He will also say to you, "Fear not!" We must approach the holy and majestic God in fear and trembling. But the Lord then reveals Himself to us in mercy and says, "Fear not, I am the Savior."

He speaks about Himself for our comfort and that of the living church of all ages. He says in verse 8, "I am the first and the last," "Alpha and Omega," "the beginning and the ending" (Rev. 1:8, 11). John already understands part of this "I am" statement because he had already written in the first chapter of his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). So John already knows that Jesus was from the beginning. But he now realizes that Jesus is also the end of all things. Christ stands at the beginning of history as the Creator who made all things; but He will also appear as the Judge when everything comes to an end. In between, everything that happens is under His control. The grand theme of Revelation is that Christ is the King of kings who controls all things visible and invisible, all forces of nature, all affairs of men and nations, and every aspect of our own lives.

Christ is the Alpha and the Omega of your salvation, too. He was the Alpha when He began His saving work in you, when He revealed Himself to you in His holiness and majesty, when He showed you your sins and misery, but also when He first brought you to faith and repentance. He began that good work in you. But He is also your Omega, meaning He will bring what He has started in you all the way to perfection. Paul says this in Philippians 1:6. All the while in between, from beginning to end,

Christ provides for and protects His people, individually and as a body, in the church. He is the first and the last. Fear not.

Christ goes on to say, “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore.” He is reminding John of His death and resurrection, in order to assure John that the Master John knew and loved on earth is the same exalted One who stands before him now. Christ endured death because God required it. But when Christ died, He overcame death. He rose from the dead so that now He can say, “I am alive for evermore.” So now He assures John, “Behold, I am alive, you know I did not stay in that grave because you saw Me after My resurrection, but now I repeat this again for your comfort, *I am alive for evermore. Amen.*” The word “Amen” here is a resounding affirmation of the truth of Jesus’ statement. Jesus says He is alive for evermore, so no one need ever lose the hope of eternal life.

Then He says, “I have the keys of hell and of death.” *Hell* in this place is used to translate the Greek word *Hades*, understood as the grave, the state of the dead, and the power of death. In Greek, the place referring to eternal punishment is *Gehenna*, an entirely different word. When Christ says, “I have the keys of Hades,” He reminds us that the wages of sin is death. Death is a prison, where sinners must endure confinement under the power of death, with no hope of escape. But now Jesus says, “The devil tells people that he wields the power of death, and has taken everyone captive to it, but that is not true. I have the keys of Hades and of death.” A key both locks and unlocks a door. Jesus says, “I lock the door when people go into the grave at my command, but I will also unlock that door so they may come out. My people will not abide under the power of death but will come out of their graves to be with Me, to live with Me forever.”

Now John is told to write down the things “which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter,” so that the church may receive instruction and comfort. To have this comfort we must be like John, who trembles before the resurrected and glorified Christ. Do we have personal knowledge of Christ? Have you experienced the bond of love to the Savior? Are you His? If the Lord Jesus Christ is going to *reconstruct* our lives and make us like Himself, He must first *deconstruct* us. He must break us in pieces, then transform us into glorious creatures remade in His image. Are you a child of God? Do you live for Him and suffer for His name?

Today few people tremble before God. Few are willing to endure suffering for His Name’s sake. My friend, if you have never trembled before God, you will tremble very soon when the Lord takes you. Then you will be brought face to face with the One whom John saw in His glorious revelation, but then it will be too late. God will say, “Depart from me, ye cursed. If you have never learned to tremble here, never learned to seek Me and give your life to Me and to say farewell to the world for My sake, then you will tremble forever.”

Christ’s Interpretation of This Vision

The vision given to John is not meant to terrify us, but to encourage us. Look at the last two verses in our text: “Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches” (vv. 19–20).

Jesus is saying to John, “You have seen this vision and felt its impact. Now I will explain what it is all about.”

First, it is about the church. The seven stars are seven ministers of the gospel. People differ about who the angel or “messenger” of the church is. I don’t see how it can refer to anyone other than a minister of the gospel. John is instructed to write down the visions he sees and give them to the messengers sent to the churches. The word is sometimes used in Scripture to refer to supernatural beings, that is, angels sent from heaven. But it frequently is used to refer to human messengers, such as prophets or preachers of the Word.

Jesus Christ is saying that ministers have been given a heavenly work to do in bringing the Word of God to His people. Our forefathers, particularly the Puritans, made much of this. James Janeway wrote, “His ministers are sent to do the work of inferior angels, to preach glad tidings of great joy.”⁴ Cotton Mather said if you bring the gospel to those in the shadow of death, your ministry “will do the work, and give you the welcome, of a good angel unto them.”⁵ In this he echoed the apostle Paul’s statement that the Galatians once welcomed him “as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus” (Gal. 4:14).

These writers were referring to the basic meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words, which link angels and ministers ultimately to Christ as the “Angel of the Covenant” (Mal. 3:1).⁶ The Hebrew word *malak* and the Greek word *angelos* are usually translated as “angel” in the English Bible, and both mean messenger. Thus the Old Testament priest who taught God’s Word was “the

4. James Janeway, *The Saints’ Encouragement* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 43.

5. Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good* (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967), 74.

6. Thomas Manton, *Works* (London: James Nisbet, 1870–75), 10:468.

messenger [literally, angel] of the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 2:7).⁷ The name of the prophet Malachi means, “My Angel,” or “My Messenger.”

The Puritans also found evidence of the angelic nature of a pastor’s calling in Revelation 2, where the seven letters are addressed to the “angel” of each of the seven churches (Rev. 2:1, 8, etc.).⁸ William Fenner reasoned that these angels could not be the angels in heaven because they are sometimes rebuked for faults. They could not be fallen angels, either, because they are sometimes commended. He said, “It remains then, that a metaphorical angel is here understood as the minister of the church.”⁹

Other Puritans confirmed this interpretation by citing Revelation 14:6, in which an angel in heaven preaches the everlasting gospel to every nation. James Durham (1622–1658) commented, “The angels are ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14), but they do not have the everlasting gospel to preach. This treasure is put in earthen vessels so that the excellence of its power may be of God (2 Cor. 4:7). Likewise, ministers are called angels because they are God’s messengers, entrusted with a high and heavenly employment.”¹⁰

7. James Durham, *Commentary upon the Book of the Revelation* (Willow Street, Pa.: Old Paths, 2000), 63.

8. Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, n.d.), 3:952.

9. William Fenner, *Christ’s Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 6. Fenner realized that at least some of these churches had more than one elder (Acts 20:17). He interpreted the singular “angel” to refer to the ministers collectively, implying that they should stand together in unity (p. 19). So also Durham, “By *angels* we understand all the bishops and presbyters that were over those churches.... Therefore take we the style *angel*, to be collective... *ministers* of such a church” (*Commentary upon the Book of the Revelation*, 63–64).

10. Durham, *Commentary upon the Book of the Revelation*, 736. In Durham’s historicist interpretation, the angels of Revelation 14 represent the preaching of the gospel and shaking of the kingdom

Matthew Poole (1624–1679) wrote, “This angel seems to me to represent faithful ministers’ speed and diligence to preach the gospel in all parts of the world.”¹¹

Puritan writers identified the following points of likeness between angels and ministers:

1. *They both study God’s mysteries.* Benjamin Keach wrote, “Angels desire to pry into the mysteries of grace and mercy in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:12). Christ’s true ministers also make it their business to dig into the hidden mysteries.”¹²

2. *They are both God’s servants.* Angels do not come to men unless they are sent by God, Fenner said. Likewise ministers may not serve unless they are sent by God (John 1:6; Rom. 10:15).¹³ As angels fly to do God’s will (Isa. 6:6), ministers also must heed the command to bring in the harvest (John 4:38).¹⁴ Keach wrote, “Angels are very obedient to God, they do his commands, and wait for his word. The faithful preachers of the gospel are very ready to obey God’s commands, though they are thereby exposed to great danger, if God bids them go, they go (Rom. 1:15).”¹⁵

3. *They both serve the church.* God sends angels to minister to the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14). Likewise, Fenner

of the Roman Babylon, that is, the Roman Catholic Church, by the Reformers like Luther. See also Thomas Goodwin, “An Exposition of Revelation,” in *Works* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 3:86–88.

11. Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 987. See also Arthur Dent, *The Rvine of Rome, or, An Exposition upon the whole Revelation* (London: by N. O. for Simon Waterson, 1633), 271.

12. Benjamin Keach, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 828.

13. Fenner, *Christ’s Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 9.

14. Fenner, *Christ’s Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 12–13.

15. Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 828.

said, ministers exist for the good of the church of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:22).¹⁶ They work mainly for God's elect.¹⁷

4. *They both comfort the downcast.* Keach wrote, "Angels are often sent to comfort the saints when cast down, as they ministered to Christ in his agony. So are gospel preachers sent to comfort the feeble-minded¹⁸ [those given to doubt and indecision], and support the weak; they know how to comfort others with the same comfort whereby they themselves are comforted of God (2 Cor. 1:4)."¹⁹

So our Lord is saying to John that the seven stars in his vision are seven gospel preachers, and the seven candlesticks are the seven churches they serve. Though these churches face a hostile environment that threatens their very existence, Christ is in their midst. He commends her graces, comforts her in her sufferings, rebukes her faults, calls her members to repentance, warning them of judgment to come, commands her to cast out the unrepentant and unbelieving, exhorts her to persevere in the grace He supplies, and holds forth the promise of great reward. The church will always shine in the midst of all the darkness of this world, yet Christ is ever with her.

A Fourfold Comfort

Let us conclude this sermon with four comforts that we find in John's first vision. First, Christ comforts His church. The true church has no reason to fear the present or the future, for all is safe in our Lord's hands. Our divine, glorious, exalted Prophet, Priest, and King is with His church, to the very end of time itself. He has every

16. Fenner, *Christ's Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 9.

17. Fenner, *Christ's Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 16.

18. See 1 Thessalonians 5:14; W.E. Vine prefers the translation, "fainthearted." See *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1940), 70.

19. Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 829.

situation under control. He will ever be the defender of His church. He promises, “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:20).

Second, Christ enables His church to shine in the world. In the Old Testament sanctuary, the lamps on the candlestick burned continuously. Likewise, Jesus says to us, “Ye are the light of the world.” The church may not merge into the background of this dark world. We are told to stand out and shine forth and be different because we are new creatures in Christ. If there is no difference between believers and unbelievers, why should people take notice of the gospel? Christ’s presence will not allow that, for He makes the church shine. He stands in the midst of the candlesticks. He fills them with the oil of the Holy Spirit. Even when He rebukes the faults of His church, He also tells her members to ask Him for whatever they need. He says, “I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see” (3:18). In her lowest state, the church is not beyond the power of Christ to raise her up and restore her to health and strength, to shine once more in the darkness of this world.

Third, Christ is jealous for His church, for it professes His name. He will not indulge her in any error, weakness, sin, or folly. Often in Israel’s history God’s wrath broke out against ungodliness in Israel, the professing church of God, to show the whole world that the name of God and His holy things must not be trifled with.

Fourth, Christ maintains His church. Sometimes the church is expanding, sometimes diminishing. Christ will keep His church forever, even if only a remnant remains to serve Him (Ps. 22:30–31). The Belgic Confession says, “This Church hath been from the beginning of the world

and will be unto the end thereof... And this church is preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world; though she sometimes (for a while) appears very small, and in the eyes of men, as to be reduced to nothing.”²⁰ Spurgeon graphically portrays this truth in a gripping story. He tells about a woman who prayed long for her unbelieving husband. She went to worship at a meeting house in northern England, but her husband never went with her. He was a drinking and swearing man, and his wife had much anguish because of this. She never ceased to pray, yet she never saw any change in her spouse. She went to the meeting house alone, with one exception; her dog always went with her. The animal would curl up under the seats during the service. When the woman died, her husband was still unsaved. But the dog kept going to the meeting house. His master wondered why the dog did that, so he followed the animal one day. The dog led him down the aisle to his mistress’s seat.

God led the minister that day to preach the Word with such power that the widower wept until he found the Savior. “So never give up your husbands, good women, for the Lord may use even a dog to bring them to Christ when you are dead and gone,” Spurgeon said. “Never, never give up praying, or hoping, or expecting. Fear not, believe only, and you shall have your heart’s desire.”

Today there is little for tourists to see on the Isle of Patmos. But when the apostle John was there, he saw everything necessary for believers to continue to hope to the end, until Jesus Christ comes again. Let us thus turn with John to see who speaks to us, then worship the glorious, exalted Son of man, who says to those who trust in Him alone for salvation, “Fear not, I am the first and the last.” Amen.

20. The Belgic Confession, Article 27.

