

# THE IDEAL CHURCH

## Revelations 1:3-11

### **Revelation 1:3-11**

**3** Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near. **4** John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, **5** and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, **6** and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. **7** Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. **8** "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. **9** I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. **10** I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet **11** saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

How many of you have read from the book of Revelation in the last week?

Come on, show of hands. The last month? The last year? Never before and never again?

Revelation is that scary book in the back of the Bible that those other kind of churches talk about all the time, but it just doesn't make any sense to normal people.

You know the story about the Pentecostal woman who came to a UCC Church by accident one Sunday. She heard something she liked and let out an "Amen." Everyone sort of looked at her. Later she heard something else she liked and she hollered, "Hallelujah." The ushers started easing over in her direction. Then she really got going and jumped up and raised her hands and started speaking in tongues. The head usher started to escort her to the

exit. She said, “But I’ve got the spirit.” The usher says, “Well you didn’t get it here, lady.”

This passage from near the beginning of the Book of Revelation provides some insight about the author and the purpose and the meaning of the book. First a blessing on those who read it aloud. (Bow to (first service David, second service Susan))

Next the author is named. He calls himself John. Some identify him with the “Beloved Disciple” or with the author of the Gospel of John. I like to think of him as one who considers himself in the tradition of the Gospel writer and the Beloved Disciple, but I’ll call him “John the Dreamer,” because he tells us that this vision he is writing about came to him in a dream. He says that “one like the Son of Man” appeared to him and told him to write down all of this dream in a book.

He says he is writing to the angels of the Seven Churches in Asia. I’m guessing there were more than seven Christian churches in Asia, so I believe he is writing to the angels of the seven churches affiliated with him in some way—Churches of his own denomination so to speak. They certainly were not UCC churches! For instance we know a little about a Christian Church at Colossae in Asia. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians is addressed to that church, but it is not included among John the Dreamer’s seven churches.

Incidentally, you can find in Colossians 2:18 a warning from Paul “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions...” Hmm. Sounds to me like Paul’s churches

had heard of John the Dreamer and John the Dreamer had heard about Paul's churches and by the end of the first century there was already intense conflict within and among Christian churches. In fact, when John the Dreamer gets to writing to the Church at Thyatira he specifically attacks a woman member of that church who sounds a lot like Paul's dear friend Lydia. (You can read more of her story in Acts 16.)

John the Dreamer has a strong disagreement with Paul about what a Church and its members ought to believe, how they should carry out their life together as Christians. John the Dreamer and Paul had very different understandings of the Ideal Church.

John the Dreamer identifies with his churches and says he is on the Island of Patmos in exile and under persecution for being a Christian. This sets the Book of Revelation in a time when many Christians were executed for their faith, but John the Dreamer was in exile where he had means to write. I suspect that a good bit of the intensity of the witness brought by John the Dreamer must be understood in the context of what we know about survivor's guilt.

John the Dreamer writes to these seven Churches and offers each of them unique counsel. He offers them some blessings and some appreciation and then gives them a kick in the pants. He warns them to adhere more closely to his doctrine of purity. Messages to the Seven Churches:

- You used to be ok,
- You are lukewarm,

- You are ok except ...,
- You have a good reputation, but you are dead,
- You say you are rich, but really you are poor
- I have a few things against you,
- I know your works

Not what you would want to hear about your church is it?

John the Dreamer identified the ideal church in terms of Doctrinal purity and “lively-ness”.

For too many of us the Idea of a Church includes memories of shameful episodes we have experienced and observed: rejection, prejudice, condemnation, fear, accusation, and rancor. Those words may be part of our personal history in real Churches, but they are not part of our Ideal Church.

Throughout the history of Christianity we know of historical events that are shameful in ways that surpass our personal experiences. The ideal of Church does not include words like: “Crusades”, “Dark Ages”, “Inquisition”, “Burned at the stake.” Those words are part of Church history, but they are not part of our Ideal Church.

I like to describe the Ideal Church in terms of 4 characteristics:

- WORSHIP
- EDUCATION
- OUTREACH

- FELLOWSHIP

1. **Worship** includes the Sunday morning service, and so much more: the music, the architecture, the poetry and the art that shows how an Ideal Church expresses its amazement and gratitude for God's power. It includes the rituals, and it includes the sense of "sanctuary" and separation from worldliness that set an Ideal Church apart from its surroundings.
2. **Education** includes spreading, preserving and extending knowledge about God's will and God's ways. It includes the practical applications of how members of an Ideal Church can live and grow as followers of Jesus. It shows us how to turn information into wisdom.
3. **Outreach** includes the Ideal Church's calling to do mission, evangelism and prophecy, reflecting God's compassion and moving the world toward peace and justice.
4. **Fellowship** includes the way members of the Ideal Church treat each other with fun, communal discernment and mutual self-discipline in order to build up the Christian community.

"Worship, Education, Outreach and Fellowship" Ideal characteristics of the Ideal Church.

Last Sunday in second service, Marie Trout was the worship leader. She reflected on how to describe ourselves when we hear the question: "What is your Church like? Some kind of Christian lite?" She offered a great answer and she shared detail about what makes IUCC such a great Church. And she

said she wanted to be prepared in the future when people ask her about IUCC. It's an important challenge for all of us.

When I think about IUCC I think of our **worship** experience, it's beautiful and inspiring. Our **education** ministry is stimulating from the Sunday School to the Bible Study, the special guests and speakers, the library, the Wednesday's Journey program. Our **outreach** goes to our outstanding record of donations to United Church of Christ missions; our prayer shawl ministry; our prophetic leadership on issues like Proposition 8, health care reform, environmental issues and so much more. Our **fellowship** covers everything from coffee hour to Bon Vivants and wasn't that a great picnic last weekend. What a great band, great food, and who started that water fight anyway?

Our fellowship works for mutual self discipline, too. Your friends in the Tuesday evening Bible study group did you a great favor you should know about. I told them how I was going to preach from Revelation this morning. I planned to talk about how we categorize churches, about taxonomy and say something about Plato's philosophy of the Ideal and how ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny etc. etc.. But they gently and firmly told me that I shouldn't do that to you people, so I'll just stick to the theme: Worship, Education, Outreach and Fellowship.

What's the proper ideal of Church? I disagree with John the Dreamer. It isn't doctrinal purity. It has to do with things we read in our Mission Statement that's in the bulletin every Sunday here at IUCC:

“We celebrate the Creator’s diversity as we **worship** God and grow in our faith. Guided by God’s unconditional love as **taught** by Jesus Christ, we see ourselves as children of one God, brothers and sister of all people. As servants of God, we take responsibility to **act with compassion**, to work for **peace and justice**, and to share the joy of **Christian community**.

“Irvine United Congregational Church is radically inclusive, declaring to neighbors and strangers alike, **No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.**”

Worship, Education, Outreach and Fellowship.

The Ideal Church, well, I guess IUCC comes close. We may not be the Perfect Church, and may not be the Ideal Church but we’re working on it.

Will you pray with me?