

## WHATCHA SELLING?

SHERARD EDINGTON

Revelation 21:1-6

I want you to think of a busy place that you know well—a city or street or the center of town. Maybe West Main out front, or the square. Set that in your mind. Now, look at the buildings there and think about the businesses that they house. Maybe there is a bank, a doughnut shop, a movie theater, a barbershop, an oil change place, a car dealership, a grocery store, a gym, a gift store, and more. All of these places are part of the economy of the town. You don't need to go inside every one of these businesses to have a good idea of what they are like and what they do. They have signs out front. A bank takes deposits and makes loans. The oil change place changes oil. At the grocery store you buy food. At the paint store you buy paint. For internet, you go to Starbucks. It makes life easier to know what a particular business does simply based on the sign out front—bank, gym, auto parts, library, and so on.

However, what if we didn't know what each business did? Just think how frustrating it would be if you needed a part for your lawnmower and you had to go to every business asking, "Do you sell these?" It would be like knocking on every door in an apartment complex to locate your friend who lives there, and you don't have the apartment number. It's nice to know the businesses with their signs.

Now, go back to the scene in your head. This time, you see a church. You look at it. What is their business? What do they sell? What will you find inside that building?

To be honest, it is difficult to guess what you will find in a church. Every church is different—different people, different preachers, different theology and practices, different music. Even as a church professional I have a hard time guessing what a particular church would be like if I were to venture inside.

When we look at a business, we know what we will find there. Toy stores have toys, shoe stores have shoes, gas stations have beef jerky. But what should someone expect to find in a church? Well, hopefully...God. When we enter a church, we should fully expect to encounter the Holy Spirit, to sense the presence of the Divine, to experience something that we can only describe as numinous, to be transported to a realm different than the one we inhabit every day. When we visit a house of worship, we should be disappointed if we don't come away with at least a sliver of the sacred.

That is our business; that is what we should offer here. People should see the sign out front that says "church" and be confident that God is here. But do they? Have we, through our actions, convinced the community that God can be found in

this place? Are we living signs for the church? More importantly, do we, the members of this church, do we expect to find God here?

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Today, I am reading from the book of Revelation. Revelation is the final book in our Bible and our reading is from one of the closing chapters. In this passage, the author of Revelation describes a vision—his vision. In this vision, he witnesses something extraordinary. He calls it a *new heaven and a new earth*. Don't we all have that vision in one form or another? We look around at this earth and think that things need changing. Too much is going wrong. There is too much misery and pain. Something new can only be better. It has to be. We would rejoice with a new heaven and a new earth.

In this vision, the first heaven and the first earth have *passed away*. In this vision, the holy city of God—the *new Jerusalem*—descends from heaven. A great voice announces, *The home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them*. The voice continues to speak, saying, *God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away*. This is truly a compelling vision.

In fact, it is the crowning fulfillment of the great covenant God made with Abraham back at the beginning. God called Abraham and Sarah and promised them a great nation of descendants if they would worship the Lord. The covenant is made and God is faithful to it. Abraham and Sarah's people, however, fail, time after time, to hold up their end and they turn their backs on God. But God persists and each time brings the people back into the fold. But, like clockwork, the people just wander away again. Finally, God comes to us in person, as the Christ. In the ultimate observance of the covenant, God gives his own life to honor the covenant.

And now, here in Revelation, we read of the culmination of this covenant in this vision of a new heaven and new earth. The old has not been discarded or erased, just improved—made new.

If you ask people what happens at the end of the Bible, many of them may tell you that God's faithful are taken up in an event known as the Rapture. But that is not what we find here. The Rapture has no real basis in scripture. It is a fantasy of how, in the end, those who consider themselves righteous will be rewarded. In other words, lead a good Christian life and you will be taken up to heaven to live in the ultimate gated-community safe and separate from the undesirables of the world.

This reading in Revelation tells something quite different. Here, we discover a reverse-Rapture. Instead of the faithful being lifted up, God comes down. It is God who is raptured to us. The new Jerusalem establishes heaven's foothold on earth.

We hear the promise that *the home of God is among mortals*. Then we hear words that sound so much like God's original covenant with Abraham: *God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them*. This is the promise of the great covenant—that God will always be with us. When God dwells with us and we with God, the pain of this world disappears. God wipes away our tears. *Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more*. This is the promise of God's realm.

So, here's the million-dollar question: has this happened already or are we still waiting for it? Is God's kingdom with us now or is it a future event? And the answer is... yes. The kingdom is here, and it is yet to come.

Some will insist that the kingdom is not yet with us—that it is reserved for the end times. But I will argue that we are already living in the new heaven and new earth. The kingdom of God is among us, just not fully. Occasionally, if we are looking, we are privileged to catch a glimpse of God's kingdom. We may see it in moments of kindness and caring, in acts of love and sacrifice. The kingdom can be elusive to those whose eyes refuse to see.

For example, earlier this month, at graduation at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, a historically Black college, it was announced that all student debt held by members of the senior class, had been paid off by an anonymous donor—approximately \$300,000.<sup>1</sup> Some might look at that and say, “That is some generous philanthropy.” I choose to say, “That is the kingdom breaking through.”

But the kingdom should be visible here in the church. We are a special community—not special because we are better, but special because we strive to be different. We are called to be different than the rest of the world. We are to be a community of faith living and working and worshiping together in a way that should mirror God's kingdom. To the world, we are to be the new Jerusalem; we are to demonstrate to the world what the kingdom of God is like. When people come to us then they should sense that this place is distinct, and we should welcome them. They should see the kingdom in the way we treat one another and how we treat others, the way that we wipe away tears and display love and care to those who mourn and cry in pain, in the way that we open our homes in Christian hospitality. We do these things not for profit or pleasure, but as our part of keeping the covenant with God. The church is the place where we worship and praise God with joy, where we fellowship with love, and where we demonstrate compassion for all our neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/education-news/2022/05/10/424939/wiley-college-graduates-have-tuition-balances-paid-off-by-anonymous-donor/>

The nice thing about the idea of the Rapture is that it is neat and tidy—the good are set apart from the not-good. Everyone gets what they deserve. The reverse-rapture, on the other hand, is messy. Everyone must live in this world together. But it is different because God is here dwelling among us all.

What can we do for those driving past our building to let them know that the kingdom of God is open to them? The church is not a business like Walgreens or Cracker Barrel, but we are part of the economy of God's kingdom. Our business is to demonstrate a quality of life that reflects that kingdom, that tells people, "God loves you. God is here for you." It is what we are selling.