

# Freedom ongs:

## The Apocalypse of John the Revelator and the Atonement of Christ

*By Charles Scriven*

*Follow, poet, follow right  
to the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice  
—W. H. Auden<sup>1</sup>*

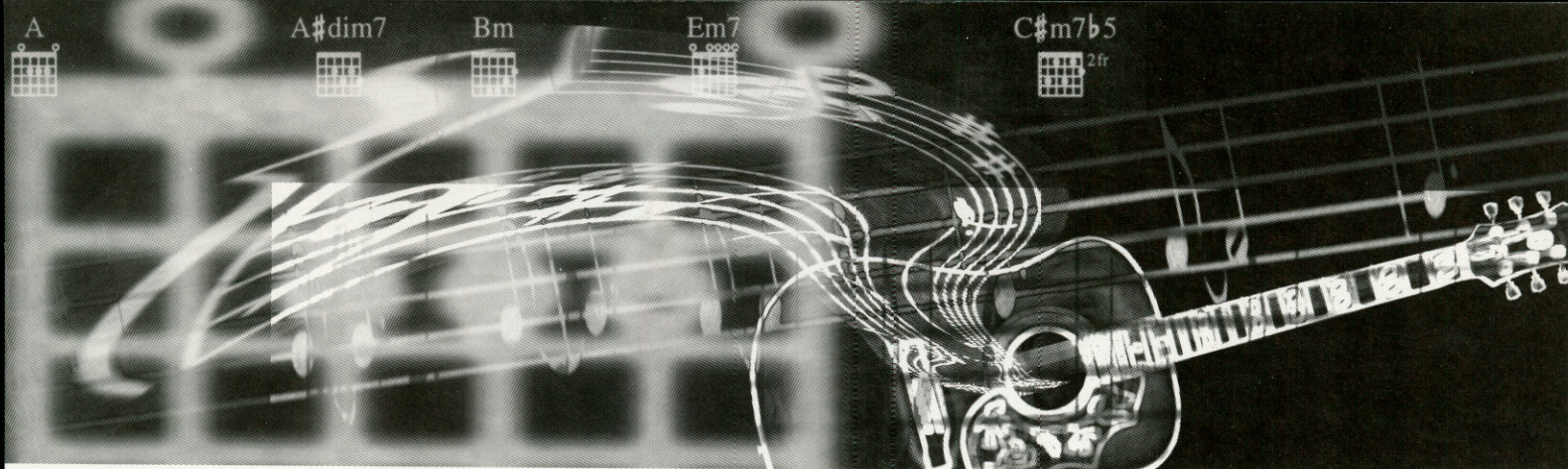
**T**he first followers of Christ rose up under “the shadow and the frown of Caesar.” When they could achieve prosperity through silent collaboration, they mainly did so, finding Roman cities congenial to a faith that was soft and unobtrusive.<sup>2</sup> But the most alert and visionary in their number recognized the lineaments of evil empire: the avarice and duplicity, the sophistication and high culture, the contempt for life, the spurious peace. John’s Apocalypse gives voice to the visionary viewpoint. Here poetry confronts unexpurgated fact. It addresses conflict; it foment awareness of injustice and oppression. Yet the rage that flows easily from such awareness neither fizzles into resignation nor explodes into violence; it resolves instead into joyful, revolutionary song. A dream springs alive, and the kingdom of evil seems neither benign nor invincible. The faithful of God receive new stamina and ardor for marching onto the field of conflict under a new banner and a new strategy.

That banner, and that strategy, is the cross. It is the blood atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the redeeming action of the Lion who is the Lamb. In chapters four to seven, John explores all this in his account of a vision that begins, “After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open” (4:1). In retelling what he sees, John first of all discredits Caesar’s power and authority. Then he upholds Christ as liberator, and declares his sacrificial death the key to victory. Finally, he makes the work of Christ the work of the Church: blood atonement is the founding of a new people who keep Christ’s will and way alive until conflict ends and peace—true peace, the divine shalom—begins.

John’s speech about God offended Roman authorities and led to his exile on the island of Patmos. There, John tells us, he was caught up one day in dream. He saw the risen Lord with eyes “like a flame of fire” and heard from his mouth words like “a sharp, two-edged sword.” Dazzled, he “fell at his feet as though dead.” The Lord put his hand on him and said, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last” (1:10, 14, 16). Then the Lord told him the conditions and prospects of seven churches that John loved in seven Asian cities (chapters 2 and 3).

Now John peers into the dwelling place of God; around God’s throne is a rainbow, and along with the rainbow twenty-four elders and a ring of living creatures, all immersed in flashing light and thundering sound. The four





living creatures sing the first of the freedom songs—that is what I will call them—recorded in chapters four to seven:

*Holy, holy, holy,  
The Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and  
is to come.* (4:8)

Then the twenty-four elders chime in with the second of the freedom songs:

*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive  
glory and honor and power, for you created all  
things, and by your will they existed and were  
created.* (4:11)

These songs declare the basis for the work of Christ. The heavenly worshipers sing the fundamental affirmation of the biblical community: that God is the beginning and end of all things, the maker of heaven and earth. Thus no past or present power, nor any that looms ahead, can frustrate the will of the One whom Christians praise and heed. Whereas both pagan myth and secular ideology conceive a universe that is *essentially violent*—an amalgam of chaos, fatality, and conflict brought about by violent gods or happenstance—the gospel conceives a good creation, a universe whose maker is worthy to be praised. If conflict has intruded, it is still an intrusion: it was not there to begin. Instead of assuming, then, that violence is inherent and inevitable, the gospel assumes the “ontological priority of peace”; it envisions, in other words, an “overall providential design” conducive to harmony and joy.<sup>3</sup>

If this is the most fundamental affirmation of faith, it is also, perhaps, the most outrageous. With nature red in tooth and claw, and humanity so often inhumane, it is easy to doubt or dismiss. Yet belief in God as Creator is the key to overcoming resigned or violent rage. So when John, in the midst of evil empire, hears the heavenly creation songs, he hears the drum-beat of hope. Caesar, for all his pomp and power, cannot

be the last word, nor can his deceits, his corrupt sophistication, his ruthless peace. The God who is the first word is also the last, and all who long for harmony and joy may take heart and take action. With God as Creator, it makes sense to dream; it makes sense to attempt bold transformations of the fallen world.

After the two freedom songs that celebrate divine creation, John sees a scroll in God’s right hand that contains the secrets of the universe. He longs to know these secrets, but the scroll is shut with seven seals, and no one can open it. John breaks into tears. Then an elder points to someone he calls “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (5:5). This Lion “has conquered,” the elder says, and he can open the scroll. When John looks again the Lion is a Lamb, “standing as if it had been slaughtered” (5:6). Now, at the sight of this strange conqueror—though bloodied to death, he still stands tall—the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fill the throne room with sung praise.

*You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
for you were slaughtered and by your blood  
you ransomed for God saints from every tribe  
and language and people and nation;  
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests  
serving our God and they will reign on earth.”*  
(5:9, 10)

Again, this is a freedom song. For the heavenly choir, the death of Christ is a means of ransom; it is the price paid for liberation of a people who themselves become mediators of divine blessing and who themselves stand tall at the end, victors over evil empire. Although in popular piety the death of Christ satisfies the divine demand for punishment of sin,<sup>4</sup> here that is not at all the case. Here the death of Christ confronts evil power and meets human need. The song’s ransom metaphor evokes the experience of emancipation for slaves and prisoners of war, and the point is that the Lamb, by means both strange and courageous, defies and subverts the forces responsible for human bondage.



Whatever limits or destroys a child of God meets with resistance, and finally defeat, at the hands of the Christ who sheds blood for humanity.

How can exposure to slaughter be a strategy for conquest of evil? How can a defenseless Lamb vanquish his adversaries like a Lion? John's greeting to the seven churches provides one clue. "Grace to you and peace," he says as the Apocalypse begins, not only from God but also "from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:4, 5). Here the death of Christ finds a context: his resurrection, to be sure, and his destiny as conqueror, but also his *life*. Mere death is not the point, and mere death could not effect the ransom. Death as the capstone of faithful life—death as the cost of the radical compassion and peacemaking portrayed in the Lamb's life story—could effect the ransom. According to the testimony of the first Christians, it did.

But still, how? The second clue is that the freedom song expresses the sense that the Lamb is *worthy*. In his compassion and peacemaking, Jesus adopted the practice of service to all and violence to none. Thus he averted, in a phrase from Martin Luther King, the "descending spiral" of coercive violence; he engaged the evil powers without *becoming* (and *begetting*) what he was trying to defeat.<sup>5</sup> Not only, then, did he accost evil, he discredited evil. He exposed it and made of it, as Paul would later say, "a public example."<sup>6</sup> Through his defiant, yet noncoercive love, Jesus embodied an alternative both to the indifference that leaves evil uncontested, and to the violent resistance that contests it all too superficially. Even if it cost him his own life, he determined, in language Mahatma Gandhi would one day use, to actually *be* the change he wished see in the world.<sup>7</sup> His strategy would be persuasion, not coercion. His worthiness—his admirable example and its arresting consequences—would baffle and finally exhaust the evil powers.

The freedom song next declares that those ransomed for new life through the death of the Lamb become a new people. Drawn from every tribe and

language, they become a "kingdom," a community of "priests" who serve God now and will one day "reign on earth." Popular piety, aping modernity's obsession with the individual, overuses the singular in both its praise of God and its exposition of the gospel. The Apocalypse, on the other hand, thinks mostly in the plural, and imagines the *shared life* of those who benefit from Christ's atonement. The ransomed link themselves as one, a kind of "anti-kingdom to the Roman empire."<sup>8</sup> Together, they become mediators of divine blessing and, in the end, victors over evil power.

Now John hears the angels join the heavenly choir in another hymn to the slaughtered Lamb; then he hears every creature, every voice in the universe, fuse into climactic affirmation:

*To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb,  
be blessing and honor and glory and might  
forever and ever." (5:13)*

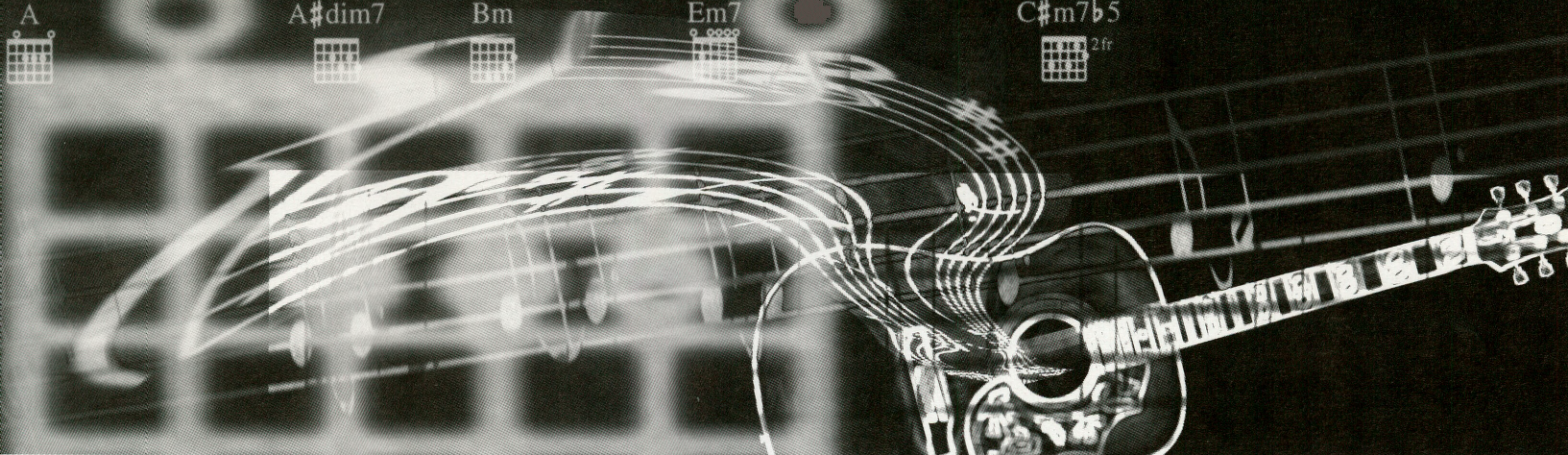
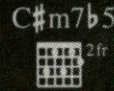
Here, against the orthodoxy of the ages, the singers identify *God* with nonviolent love; they identify *God* with the Lamb who journeyed to Jerusalem and faced in that great city the consequences of boundless compassion.

Worship, as commentator Leonard Thompson puts it, declares "what is truly real and therefore what is true."<sup>9</sup> Apocalyptic worship establishes the truth of the cross, a truth that subverts kings and emperors and ascribes "blessing and honor and glory and might" to the God of the Lamb. It makes the Creator and Redeemer one, and certifies that "painful embodiment of forgiving love—even to the point of Gethsemane"<sup>10</sup> is what achieves lasting liberation, is the one best and the one God-ordained strategy for permanent peace.

The truth of apocalyptic worship is by no means mindless optimism. In chapter six, John's vision represents human history through images that come into view as the Lamb opens the scroll that contains the secrets of the universe. The breaking of the first four seals exposes four cavaliers who evoke the evils of

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military conquest, lost peace, economic upheaval, and death by violence, famine, and pestilence.<sup>11</sup> When the Lamb opens the fifth seal, the souls of those who, like the Lamb, have been “slaughtered” for their loyalty to God (6:9), enter the picture; these martyrs symbolize persecution. Then, with the opening of the sixth seal, still more images of natural catastrophe appear. So if the Apocalypse imagines the way to permanent peace, it also acknowledges the setbacks, the atrocities, the terror. It even acknowledges the spiritual agony that comes into play: John hears the suffering faithful, as impatient as Habakkuk, wondering “how long” the ordeal must go on (6:10).

If the suffering faithful have no illusions about adversity in human history, neither do they withdraw into the false spirituality of escape. As the image of the slaughtered martyrs already implies, they take the risk of involvement rather than wringing their hands on the sidelines: their hope is as engaged and courageous as the Lamb’s. Chapter seven even suggests that the faithful approach their mission with the focus and discipline of an army; they are the “one hundred forty-four thousand” (7:1-8; cf. 14:1-5, 12), those who know, that is, that following the Lamb and obeying the commandments of God means readiness for battle.<sup>12</sup>

Now John sees another multitude, as diverse as all humanity, standing before God and the Lamb, “robed in white” (7:9). They give voice to their grateful adoration, as do the angels. Then one of the elders approaches John to say (7:13), “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” John returns the question, and the elder himself provides the answer: “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14).

As perspective on the work of Christ, this is truly striking. It turns out that the faithful may resemble the Lamb even to the point of blood atonement. Some spill their own blood in the field of conflict, their loyalty tested even unto death. They thus share, to the *n*th

degree, in “the agony, the tribulation, and the patience” of Christ, and so have a share in his “redemptive action.” They experience, in a word, what Jesus experienced, and like him they become the victors for it, and their white robes signify that victory.<sup>13</sup>

All this sheds light on the first song to the Lamb that John hears in his vision. There the “slaughtered” Lamb is said to have “ransomed” a new people, from every tribe and language, to be a priestly kingdom for God (5:9, 10). They become, that is, mediators of divine blessing, and now it is clear that their work fully resembles the work of Christ. They throw themselves, as he did, into the “ordeal” (7:14) of history, refusing either to fall into lockstep with imperial evil or to withdraw into complacent private piety. They meet human need through service to all and violence to none. They embrace, by means the Lamb pioneered, all that is good; they resist all that is evil. They themselves participate, in other words, in the ransoming work of Christ. They become liberators; they suffer death, if need be, on behalf of others.

John Howard Yoder wrote: “The confessing people of God is the new world on its way.”<sup>14</sup> John the Revelator certainly sees the new people of God as *being* the change that is needed, and he certainly holds out the prospect of the new world on its way. It’s no wonder that now, at the climax of his vision, he soars again into poetry. Seeing the ransomed of the Lord before the throne, worshipping God, he imagines their future like a blazing prophet:

*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;  
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (7:16, 17)*

This is the freedom to which all the freedom songs look forward. Yet here freedom surpasses mere emancipation from powers that limit or destroy: it becomes the



divine shalom, the sweeping wholeness of life that, after all, is the whole point of God's atoning work. Here John, building on Ezekiel, foresees the day when the bloodied Lamb, now resurrected and enthroned, is the people's shepherd, and the long-venerated "covenant of peace" finds fulfillment in shared prosperity.<sup>15</sup>

All this John sees through the open door of heaven. The Creator puts Caesar in his place. The Lamb ransoms a people to perform a ransoming work themselves. All creatures, confident and glad, celebrate before God. In chapters four to seven, John's vision is no puzzle for sleuths and debaters, no calendar for the merely curious. It is food for the praying imagination. It is a summons to atonement and peacemaking. It is the song that stifles rage and resignation and gives birth to generosity and joy.

For the Apocalypse, atonement is liberation achieved under the banner and strategy of the cross. The point is not punitive and the means neither violent nor abusive.<sup>16</sup> Nor is the agent Christ alone. Here Jesus is the *representative* man, the man who, in ransoming the victimized and making peace instead of conflict, realizes what everyone can have a share in.<sup>17</sup> When Martin Luther King preached the 1963 funeral for two girls killed in a Montgomery, Alabama, church bombing, he said their "innocent blood may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city."<sup>18</sup> In holding that "unmerited" human suffering can have an effect like Christ's, King was faithful to the apocalyptic vision. Here evil is overcome by goodness and violence by nonviolence, and here the faithful share both in the payment of the price and the winning of the victory. Here the Church, like the Church's Lord, performs a priestly function and is "the bearer of reconciliation."<sup>19</sup> Here the disciples' story *is* the Jesus story.

These are points that Adventist thinking, captive, perhaps, to the spirit of modernity, has often missed. Almost nothing of John's vision comes through in the (highly individualistic) dispute over the theology of the cross that racked the Adventist Church during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>20</sup> During the 1960s, many Church leaders

were aloof to the civil rights movement; in 1965, for example, F. D. Nichol, editor of the *Review and Herald*, criticized clergy for participation in freedom marches.<sup>21</sup>

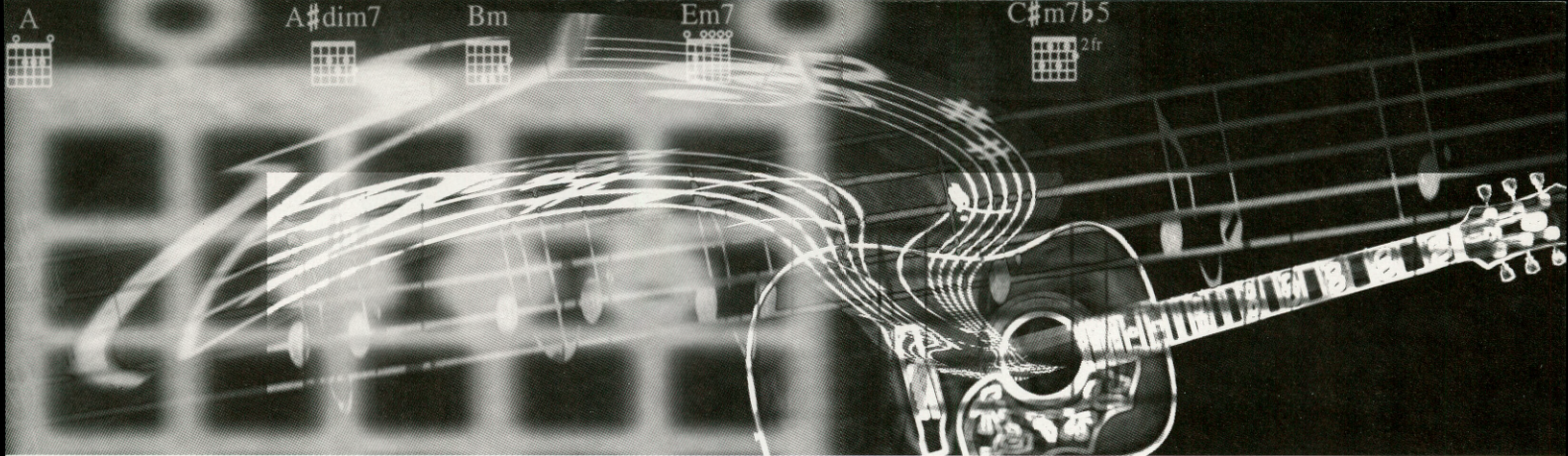
Still, hints of openness to John's vision of atonement appear both in the older and more recent history of Adventism. Ellen White long ago evoked the conflict image with her talk of the "great controversy," and spoke of the "*Redeemer*" (my italics) "enlisting" his followers in redemptive service; their calling, she said, is to be "co-workers with Christ." Between the 1960s and the outbreak of the disagreement concerning the cross, Gottfried Osterwal proposed that the "church's mission" is to "participate in God's own mission." In 1983, Bert Beach affirmed the ransoming work of the faithful with his argument that the "Christian Church is the peace-making link between the first and second advents."<sup>22</sup>

What has yet to emerge in popular Adventism, however, is the perspective that John's vision addresses the praying imagination *today* as it confront the evils of *today*. When the South African pastor Allan Boesak was contending with apartheid, he came to see that "John, in describing his own time, is describing the times in which we live."<sup>23</sup> That same perspective—the sense that "the cliché called Rome is never quite finished with"<sup>24</sup> and that John's vision has no single referent—might have blunted Adventist complicity, not only with Jim Crow in North America, but also with Nazi terror in Europe and tribal genocide in Africa. In any case, it could now generate new devotion to Christ, new insight into the ransoming work of the Church, new stamina and ardor for the *present* field of conflict.

No one would call this easy. Yet according to the faith inscribed in John's Apocalypse, Christ's atoning work, despite setbacks, atrocities, and terror, achieves victory in the end. Of Jesus it has been said, indeed, that killing him was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing on it. The faithfulness of those who follow Jesus' pioneering footsteps is also seed. It is the seed of peace for all humanity.

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## Notes and References

1. W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), sect. 3, stanza 7.

2. The quoted phrase is from Daniel Berrigan, "War in Heaven, Peace on Earth," *Spirituality Today* 40 (spring 1988): 42. Leonard Thompson has argued influentially that toward the end of the first century, most Christians in Roman cities were living "quietly, peacefully, and prosperously." See, e.g., *Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 22.

3. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 22, 364. All scriptural quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

4. I have expressed strong reservations about this popular understanding in "God's Justice, Yes; Penal Substitution, No," *Spectrum* 22 (Oct. 1993): 31-38. For groundbreaking analysis of the ransom metaphor, see Eugene Teselle, "The Cross as Ransom," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1996): 147-70.

5. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 62, quoted in Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 202.

6. This is the language Paul, looking back on Jesus' life, used in Colossians. 2:15.

7. Mahatma Gandhi, as is well known, embraced Jesus' strategy of nonviolence. One source for his familiar remark is Albert Gore, *Earth in the Balance* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 14. Compare the level of "worthiness" we ascribe to freedom fighters who kill for the cause: Lenin, Castro, and Mao. Or (more troubling) think: George Washington.

8. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza uses this phrase in her exposition of Revelation 5, 9, and 10, in *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 75.

9. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 70.

10. L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 293.

11. Scholars differ on the significance of the white horse and its rider, some thinking that the Messiah is symbolized here. I accept the view of David Barr, in *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 1998), 82; and David E. Aune, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 5B, *Revelation 6-16* (Dallas: Word Books, 1998), 393-95, that the first cavalier represents military conquest.

12. In Revelation 14, the celibacy of the one hundred forty-four thousand connotes holy warfare. See Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 443-47.

13. The quotes come from Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New*

*Earth* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1968), 79. "White signifies victory (not necessarily purity)," according to Barr, *Tales of the End*, 9.

14. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1998), 373.

15. Revelation 7:15-17 alludes to Ezekial 34 and 37:24-27, with its imagery of the Good Shepherd and its portrayal of God's promises as a "covenant of peace." Similar shepherd imagery occurs, e.g., in Psalms 23 and Isaiah. 40:11. These verses also allude to Isaiah. 25:8 and 49:10. I have further explored the themes of peace and peacemaking in "The Peacemaking Remnant: Dreaming a Grander Dream," *Spectrum* 27 (summer 1999): 67-73.

16. See Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998), for an excellent effort to rehabilitate Atonement doctrine from feminist criticism that orthodoxy makes the Father an abusive parent.

17. On the idea of Jesus as the "representative," not the "substitute," consult, e.g., Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989); and S. W. Sykes, *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Here recall Hebrews 12:1, 2, where Jesus is the "pioneer" of the faith we embody.

18. James M. Washington, ed., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 116.

19. Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 2.

20. I refer to the controversy surrounding Desmond Ford.

21. Nichol, "Unity in the Faith," *Review and Herald*, Apr. 29, 1965, 12. Nichol expressed "sympathetic concern" for the "underprivileged," but he upheld "personal evangelism" against the "social gospel" and suggested that freedom marches contradicted the "noncombatant attitude."

22. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1988), and *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 3:382, 391; Osterwal, *Mission Possible* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1972), 69; Beach, "Adventists and Disarmament," *Adventist Review*, Apr. 21, 1983, 5.

23. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 29.

24. Berrigan, "War in Heaven, Peace on Earth," 43.

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