

The Butler Did It: Preaching the Mystery When You Know the End (1/2)

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Catherine: Preachers who deal with the Book of Revelation seem to fall into one of two camps. Some believe they know the meaning of every detail and can directly apply it in the present. They can readily identify the beast, the exact date of the endtimes, and make all the other references in the book relate to current events. The problem with such an approach is twofold. First, it makes it appear that this portion of Scripture was a completely closed book, uninterpretable by Christians of a past age—even at the time it was written. Such an interpretation also implies that John is at Patmos, exiled “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”; the church is suffering, persecuted, and divided; and God's word of consolation says not one word about their situation, but rather tells them about events to take place 20 centuries later. And tells them in terms that they cannot—and are not expected—to understand. Can you imagine Christians in Ephesus, in the year 96 A.D. trying to puzzle out a book that is written to them, but speaks about the pope, or communism, or nuclear war? That is a strange way to deal with Scripture.

Second, a brief glance at the history of the church will show that there have been dozens of candidates for the position of beast over the centuries, all put forward with equal conviction in their own time. If there is anything we ought to learn about the history of the interpretation of the book of Revelation, it is not to fall into the pitfalls of the long line of those who found the identity of the beast in their own day and the date—soon—of the Second Coming. We need to

remember that no one knows the day or the date.

Others of us, uncomfortable with this position, ignore the book almost completely, and if we do use it, we preach only from the early portions of the book that deal with the letters to the seven churches. They at least seem to have some parallels in our contemporary congregations. Then we skip all the middle of the book, and go to the last few chapters that paint the magnificent picture of the heavenly Jerusalem. The middle of the book remains foreign territory, available only to the initiated, and we may not wish to be among their number. The irony is that by ignoring most of the book, we give the field over to those interpretations that stress its incomprehensibility.

Revelation is a strange book, but probably a lot stranger to us than to the early church. We often deal with it as though it were telling us secrets about all sorts of things. The big secret it is telling us is one the church proclaimed publicly: Christ has gained the decisive victory over evil. The end of the history of a fallen creation has begun.

My whole family has always loved mystery stories. We read them and pass them around. Most of us read them in the normal fashion: from the beginning to the end, waiting with bated breath to see the final revealing of the truth of who did it. My father was the exception. He always began by reading the last few pages. He wanted to know how it came out. Then he read the rest from the beginning to see how the plot worked itself out to get to the final conclusion he

already knew.

His method has a lot more in common with the Book of Revelation than the more usual method of the rest of us. The conclusion of history has been revealed. In fact, the conclusive event has taken place. Christians are those who have read the end of the story, and are now willing to live as those who know that ending, while the rest of the world goes on as though nothing had happened. Christians are also given the task of proclaiming that ending so others will be enabled to live on the basis of the truth as well.

Justo: When you stop to think about it, my father-in-law's way of reading mystery stories had much to commend it. We tend to look at things from beginning to end; from past, to present, to future. If you want to understand something, you study the previous events that produced it. We even have a phrase that we use when we think we understand someone: "I know where you are coming from."

What has made this view particularly prevalent in modern society is the success of the physical sciences. In the physical sciences, to "understand" something is to be able to explain its causes. And, when we today speak of "cause," we mean what the ancients called "efficient cause." The efficient cause of a billiard ball moving into a pocket is that another ball hit it. And the efficient cause of that other ball's movement was that the cue hit it. And the efficient cause of the cue ... and so on, and, on, always backwards, into the past, to find the cause of things.

But that is not the only way to look at reality. In fact, throughout most of history most of humankind has believed that things are ultimately caused, not so much by other events as by a purpose; not so much by their beginning, as by their end. This is what medieval philosophers called the “final cause,” or the “teleological cause.” Things happen, not merely because something happened before, but also and above all because they are being called from a future towards which they are moving. Thus, when medieval philosophers said that God was the ultimate “cause” of the universe, they meant not only that in the beginning God made all things and set them in motion, as a first efficient cause, but also that God calls all things from the future, as their final teleological cause.

We may find this difficult to understand, because to us “cause and effect” are a sequence that follows along chronological lines, always from the past, to the present, to the future. In this, modernity has been profoundly influenced by the practical success of the physical sciences, which are precisely sciences that study efficient causes.

But, when you stop to think about it, that is not really the way we live our lives. The reason why I came here was not only that an airplane brought me to Louisville. The reason is also that, when I was back home, I envisioned and wished for my presence here, and so bought a ticket, and so got on a plane, that then brought me here. Thus, although in a way the cause of my being here is that I got on that plane, that is true only in a very limited way—as an efficient

cause. In fact, the teleological cause is closer to the truth: I got on that plane because I was to be here today.

And so it is with all of us. When we leave our driveway, we determine which way to turn on the basis of where we are going—in other words, the future is the cause of our decision.

Even though we do not often express it verbally, we all live the present out of our vision of the future. The problem is that quite often there is a divergence between the future that we think we envision and the future that is really operative in our lives. Allow me to explain that.

Suppose I were to tell you that as soon as I retire I plan to move to Japan. I love all things Japanese. There is no culture like Japan's; there is no food like Japan's; there is no life like what I expect to live in Japan. I can hardly wait these few years until I retire and can move to Japan. Then you ask me: "What are you doing meanwhile with your free time?" And I say, "Oh, I'm studying Italian!" You laugh. You laugh, because there is a ridiculous incongruity between my professed future and the way I am preparing for it. Most likely, in spite of all my enthusiastic talk about Japan, deep down I do not really believe that I will ever live there.

But then, think about Christians. Think about the Church. We spend so much time talking about the coming Kingdom of God. We pray repeatedly, "Thy Kingdom come." To hear some of our sermons, and to read some of our books, you would imagine that we can hardly wait for the Kingdom to come. But, are we practicing Kingdomese? We proclaim a Kingdom in which the last

shall be first. Yet, when I look at the church I see many of us competing to be ahead of everybody else with just as much zeal as an Olympic competition. We proclaim a Kingdom of peace, a Kingdom of justice, a Kingdom of love. But, are we practicing Kingdomese?

You see, if I claim I plan to spend the rest of my life in Japan, and meanwhile study Italian, the first and most immediate result will be that no one will believe me. If I really want to convince you that Japan is so great, I better begin learning and practicing the language and customs of Japan, or you will not believe me. If we really want the world to believe the proclamation of the Kingdom, then we better, both as individuals and as a church, we better begin living as a people that is practicing for the Kingdom.

Then, there is a second result. If the time comes when I do move to Japan, and I have not been practicing for it, Japan will not be all that great. I will not understand what people say. I will get indigestion from food to which I am not accustomed. I will get cramps in my legs from sitting on the floor. Likewise, I suspect that if we do not practice for the Kingdom now, we shall be rather uncomfortable when the Kingdom does come!

What can we do? We must begin by renewing our vision of the Kingdom. If I find myself speaking about Japan, and yet dreaming about Italy, what I must do is renew my vision of Japan. I go see a Japanese movie; I go to a Japanese restaurant; I invite some Japanese friends. If we find ourselves proclaiming the Kingdom, and yet not practicing Kingdomese, the place to start is

by renewing our vision of the Kingdom, by focusing again on God's future, by making certain that our lives are lived out of that future.

Now let us think again about my father-in-law reading a mystery book, and beginning at the end. From the point of view of purely efficient causes, that is a crazy way to read a book. But it is probably much closer to the way the book was written. Most likely, the author decided the solution long before the first word of the book was written. The entire book, from cover to cover, makes clearer sense when you read the story, not simply as the result of dozens of separate events that unfold in chronological order, but rather as the result of that final event, which pulls all the rest to itself. If we read the book from page one to the last page, it is not until the last page that we find that the butler did it. But if we have a glimpse at that last page, as my father-in-law was wont to do, then as we read the book we understand things differently. When the phone rings on page five, or when the turkey burns on page fifty, we can have a glimpse of the meaning and purpose of those events in the mind of the author, in light of the fact that the butler did it.

In a way, that is also true about creation and history. We can study creation in all its details, limiting ourselves to efficient causes, and think we understand it. We can study historical events thoroughly according to their efficient causes, and think we understand them. But that is like reading the book from page one, and coming to page fifty where the turkey burns. We understand that the turkey burns because it was too long in the oven. But in truth, the reason

why the turkey burns on page fifty is because on page 250 we are to be told that the butler did it. Likewise, we understand neither creation nor history until we have a glimpse of the end for which creation was made, and the purpose towards which history is moving.

That is why a relatively recent book on eschatology has the provocative, but perceptive title of Last Things First. It is in the light of God's purposes that we understand life and death, creation and history. It is not enough to read the Bible "from Genesis to Revelation." We must also learn to read it "from Revelation to Genesis."

Catherine: The mystery of God's intentions for creation is not the province only of the last book of the canon. The Bible itself is not like a mystery story in that respect. God's intentions for creation; God's dealing with a wayward creation; these are part of the entire Bible. And it must be read as a whole. Within that whole, however, Revelation can help us see elements in Genesis we might otherwise miss, even as a knowledge of Genesis is essential for understanding Revelation. But usually we do not read Revelation in this wider context.

Scholars correctly point out that Revelation is apocalyptic literature, and therefore unlike much of the rest of Scripture in its style and form. As a different sort of literature, it must be read differently. But what must also be made clear is that the message of this book is of a piece with the rest of Scripture. It has its own nuances, and therefore can help to clarify the overall Gospel in its own way, even as other parts of Scripture help us to understand Revelation. Precisely

because it is apocalyptic literature, it has greater stress on the end—the goal—the telos of history than do many other portions of the Bible. But Revelation is not a foreign substance in Scripture. Part of the task of the preacher is to make links, to show that however varied the purposes and language and setting each part of the canon is, there is an overarching unity.

For that reason, when preaching from Revelation, it may be helpful to make allusions to the more familiar portions of Scripture where common themes appear. This can help both the preacher and the congregation feel more at home with the material. In addition, the particular view of this more apocalyptic material can help us to see what is really there in the other parts of Scripture that we may have toned down, or failed to see how it really does clarify the radical message of the coming end.

For instance, part of the character of apocalyptic writing is a stress on the apparent absence of God from the historical process for the time being. Evil seems to be given free rein, precisely so that it can become more obvious, immediately before the time of judgment. The task of the faithful is to cling to the promises and purposes of God even in the time of this seeming absence.

But is this emphasis on the absence of God—leaving human beings to show their true allegiances—typical only of apocalyptic writing? Not at all. Think of some of the very familiar parables of the synoptic gospels. They begin: “It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned

his slaves and entrusted his property to them.” “A nobleman went to a distant country ... He summoned ten of his slaves and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, ‘Do business with these until I come back.’” “A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time.” Clearly the reference is to the people of God who are God’s stewards. These parables imply that God has given us rather free rein to make decisions about the creation and all of God’s gifts, to show whether or not we are faithful in the time of the apparent absence of God. God is not minutely directing our activities. We have some real freedom. If we are not faithful, we will be given great opportunity to show that. Judgment will not be upon us the moment we turn aside from the master’s will. And if we are faithful, any reward will not be given immediately or publicly.

When we do not recognize the parallel between the kind of absence of God in the steward parables and the more dramatic absence of God in the apocalyptic material, some strange things happen in our preaching. Think of the famous 25th chapter of Matthew. Verses 14-30 tell the parable of the talents—one of the most familiar of the steward parables. Then immediately, verses 31 to 49 speak of the last judgment, with Christ returning as judge, separating the sheep and the goats. Generally, preachers deal with these two passages in very different ways and not together. The parable of the talents is not seen as particularly eschatological, whereas it is hard to miss the eschatological, almost apocalyptic flavor of the last judgment section. Yet the two passages have much in common.

In fact, having them back to back in the gospel makes clear that the issue in the judgment scene is related to our stewardship—and that stewardship is always subject to judgment upon the master's return. What have we done with what was available to us? Judgment awaits the stewards who have been given the talents, but there is space and freedom for them to make decisions without such judgment occurring, perhaps even within their lifetime. It is in this time that the true character of the stewards is displayed. Have they used their stewardship wisely, carrying out the will of the master? In the last judgment passage it becomes clear that the master may have gone on a far journey as the clearly identified Lord, but was present in a hidden way in the least of the community that the faithful encountered.

To read the parable of the talents through the light of the passage that comes after it is to see much more clearly the radical character of the stewardship we are given. It also prevents dealing with the parable of the talents as though it really was a personal matter of our self-development, losing the sharpness of the words of judgment. Our stewardship includes the use of those things entrusted to us for the least of the community. In fact, when we use it usually, we meet the apparently absent Master. It also implies that the Master is judging our stewardship from the perspective of those least ones.

In the book of Revelation there is a constant emphasis on how the faithful live and act in this time when the Lord is not present with them in a clear, visible way. There is indeed judgment to come. In the freedom of the moment, when judgment is withheld, what kind of stewards will

they be? Revelation deals less with individual stewardship and more with the actions of corporate entities: churches, empires, nations. Revelation therefore also makes clearer than the parables do, that all human beings are God's stewards, not only the people of God. Genesis 1 tells us that. All will be judged on their stewardship—even though some do not realize either that they are stewards or that there will be a judgment. Part of the witness of God's people is the truth of these things, to a world that acknowledges no master and no judgment. The parables are sharpened by being read within the wider context of Revelation, even as Revelation is clearer by being read in the wider context of Genesis and the Gospels.

Justo: Another of the difficulties we have in interpreting and using the book of Revelation is obviously its cryptic symbolism and its apparently mysterious tone. Granted that there is much in the book of Revelation that it is difficult to understand. But there is also much that we could understand if we approached the book with the same tools that we use to read other books of the Bible. In particular, the book would be much clearer if we were to look at it in the light of what we know about circumstances at the time it was written.

We regularly do this in the case of the epistles of Paul. As we begin to study an epistle, we ask questions such as: What were the conditions and challenges of the church to which this epistle was written? What do we know of the geography, the economy, the religion, the customs, and the social life of that particular city? We do it also in the case of the Old Testament prophets. When we read, for instance, the prophet Amos, we ask: What were conditions like in Judea,

from whence he came? What were they in Israel, where he was sent? What do we know about the reign of King Jeroboam? When he speaks of Tyre, or of Edom, or of Moab, what was happening in those various places? What was their most recent history? We ask all these questions, even though we know that all we can have are at best partial answers. We do this because we cannot conceive of interpreting the Corinthian correspondence without some reference to the city of Corinth and its life in the first century. Nor can we conceive of interpreting Amos without some understanding of conditions in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam.

Yet, when it comes to the book of Revelation, because the book has seemed so mysterious, we hardly attempt to find in it any reference to the very earthly matters that were occurring at the time of its writing. It is true that the symbolic language of the book makes it difficult to find such references, and then to understand their full import. Indeed, much of that symbolism was apparently used precisely in order to hide from unintended readers the true meaning of what was being said. But that in itself should draw our attention to the need to delve into the historical circumstances of the time. If a book is written in cryptic language, almost in a code, so that some people can understand it, and not others, the reason is usually one of two: On the one hand, it may be that we are dealing with one of those esoteric cults that thrives on secrecy, where everything is concealed behind layers of secret codes reserved only for the initiated. Or, on the other hand, the book itself is referring to things that it would be dangerous for the outsiders to understand—in other words, things that are closely related to what is going on in

the political, economic and social realms.

Clearly, the reason for the cryptic language of the book of Revelation is not the former. Then, most likely it is precisely referring to things that were of such immediate relevance that it would have been dangerous to discuss them openly.

Therefore, the book's cryptic language and its elaborate symbolism, rather than drawing us away from an attempt to understand it in its historical setting, should have the opposite effect, and alert us to the need to try to decipher the symbolism, not merely in terms of theological or doctrinal ideas, but also in terms of the political and economic issues of the time.

Perhaps an example may help. In Rev. 6:5-6 we read:

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

As we study the economic history of the Roman Empire, and its impact on its provinces, we gain some insights into the meaning of this passage. When Attalus III, King of Pergamum, bequeathed most of Asia to the Roman Republic, the region was rich and prosperous. Its main exports were wools and dyestuffs, and its fertile lands grew sufficient wheat for all its population. Yet, as the region became integrated with the rest of the Empire, rich landlords realized that acreage devoted to grapes and olives resulted in much greater income than the

same acreage planted to grain. Slowly but inexorably, the land moved into the hands of a few rich owners, who devoted more and more of it to grapevines and olive trees. Grain became scarce and the province, though rich because of its exports of wine and olive oil, was poor in that there was not enough to eat. In the year 92 A.D., Emperor Domitian issued a decree ordering that half the vineyards in the province be destroyed, precisely with the purpose of promoting grain production. But the landed aristocracy raised such an outcry that the emperor rescinded his decree. The result was even greater scarcity of grain, and greater misery for the poor. The normal price of wheat was twelve quarts for a denarius; and barley, which was used mostly for animal feed and for humans only in times of economic difficulty, was supposed to be 24 quarts for a denarius. Thus, what the “living creature” in Rev. 6:6 says is a strong protest against an inflationary process that has made the price of wheat rise by 1200%, and the price of barley rise by 800%: “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!” Furthermore, the rider against whom the living creature raises such a challenge carries in his hands, not a bow like the first rider nor a sword like the second, but a pair of scales, symbol of the trade that has made the landed aristocracy rich, and the poor classes even poorer, bringing a devastation comparable to war and to the warriors of the first two horses, who carry a bow and a sword.

We often read that the book of Revelation is concerned about Domitian and his religious policies. But here we have a clear example that the analysis of the situation in the book of Revelation is much more sophisticated than that. The book is not concerned only about

religious persecution, nor does it blame it all on Domitian and Rome. Rather, the book sees the connection between religious and economic issues, and is willing to decry, not only the injustices of Domitian, but also the injustices of a system in which the landed aristocracy, like a rider on a black horse, carrying the scales of commerce, can produce famine throughout the land.

Catherine: We may not wish to see the historical situation in which Revelation was written precisely because it does deal theologically with the economic and political issues of the time. It may well say something about parallel situations the contemporary church faces that would be significant for today's preaching. In one sense it is safer to have it deal with more esoteric concerns, or to avoid it completely.

It is not only a knowledge of the political, economic and social conditions of the time that helps us understand some of the references that would have been clear to early Christians. Revelation contains many allusions to the early worship of the church—worship that differs from what we are used to. Therefore we may see as mysterious what was not so for the original readers.

For instance, the opening verses of the book tell us that John had this vision “on the Lord’s day.” That is the day when the churches were gathered around the Lord’s table. The concluding verses of the book include the words, “Come, Lord Jesus.” We know from the Didache that these words were used at the close of the Eucharist. The marriage feast of the Lamb is a prominent

part of the concluding chapters, and has overtones of the Lord's Table. The early church had a far greater stress on the eschatological character of the Lord's Supper than has been typical of the Western church until fairly recently. Even the words of Jesus to the church at Laodicea have overtones of the communion service: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any will hear my voice and open to me, I will come in and sup with them, and they with me."

There are references to white robes which may have been used in the baptismal services by this time, robes that were made white by being washed in the blood of the Lamb. There is a sealing on the forehead, which may reflect the anointing that occurred immediately following baptism. Without a knowledge of some of early worship practices these references may seem much more alien to us than they would have been to the early church.

The book of Revelation was therefore far less mysterious to the early church than it is to us. They understood the oblique references to the economic and social circumstances of their time. They resonated to the overtones of their worship which we are only beginning to comprehend. Closely related to the overtones of early liturgy to be found in Revelation is the issue of typology—a form of Biblical interpretation by which this writing is related to the rest of the canon. It is not a method that is common in our day. We are more likely to approach Scripture looking for statements about historical events or eternal truths that are valid apart from any historical setting. The early church used typology extensively, within Scripture itself, in the task of preaching, and in the liturgy. Tomorrow we shall look at the character of typology and its

significance both for the content and the interpretation of the book of Revelation.



