

For the Healing of the Nations: A Multicultural Reading of the Book of Revelation (1/2)

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I am honored to be here. When I was invited to deliver the Annual Lectures for this year, and was told that the theme for these Alum Days was “Music, Worship, and Theology in a Multicultural Society,” I immediately decided that I would somehow try to relate that theme with the Book of Revelation. There are obvious reasons for that. The most obvious reason is that there is no book in the New Testament that has inspired more hymns than the book of Revelation. Indeed, for many of us the parts of the book of Revelation that are best known are not those that we have read in the book itself, but rather those that we sing in church:

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
Casting down their golden crowns before the glassy sea;

Lo, he comes with clouds descending,
Once for favored sinners slain;
Thousand, thousand saints attending
Swell the triumph of his train.

My Lord, what a morning;
my Lord what a morning;
Oh, my Lord, what a morning,
when the stars begin to fall.

Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod,
With its crystal tide forever flowing
By the throne of God?

Mine eyes have seen the glory
Of the coming of the Lord
He is trampling out the vintage
Where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightning

Of this terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.

When it comes to worship, there is no book in the Bible like the book of Revelation. The entire book is taken up in a divine liturgy, where angels and all creation bow before the one who sits on the throne, and all sing hymns in praise of the Lamb who was slain.

These were the obvious reasons for choosing the book of Revelation as my subject.

The not so obvious reason, at least to you, is that my wife and I are supposed to be working on a commentary on the book of Revelation, and that when I first gave the topic for these lectures we were hoping to have the book almost finished by this time. Therefore, I thought, giving a couple of lectures on the book of Revelation should be a cinch. And that is the real reason why I offered this topic.

But we have a saying both in Spanish and in English: “Uno propone, y Dios dispone” — one proposes, and God disposes. In this case, God has certainly disposed of my easy self-assurance, first of all, in that our planned commentary on the book of Revelation is much further behind than I ever dreamed possible. Thus, instead of having that commentary be the groundwork for these lectures, it turns out that these lectures are the groundwork for the commentary!

But God has also disposed of my self-assurance in another way. In the book of Jonah, God appoints a mighty wind, and then a whale, and then a plant, and then a worm, and then a dry

wind, all to bring Jonah out of his cocky self-assurance. In my book, God has apparently appointed a Dr. C.M. Kempton Hewitt to play a similar role. Little did I know, when I offered the theme for these lectures, that Dr. Hewitt would be speaking yesterday evening on “Springing the Apocalyptic Trap.” And, since I had no idea what the “Apocalyptic trap” might be, I ended up preparing these lectures in dread, lest I step into the trap, and be thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet were, there to be tormented forever and ever.

On a more serious note, there is another reason why I chose to take the book of Revelation as a starting point for our discussions today: that is the second part of the theme for these Alum Days. The theme is: “Music, Worship, and Theology in a Multicultural Society.”

When it comes to discussing issues of pluralism and the variety of cultures in church and society, there are a number of standard texts.

An obvious text, and one on which I have worked quite often, is Acts 2, where Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, and so on are all made to hear of the mighty deeds of God, each in their own tongue. I shall not be dealing with that text in these lectures; but let it be said in passing: it is important to note that all these people are not given the power to understand the language of Peter and his companions. Rather, they are made to understand “each in their own tongue.” I do not know if there was an Aramaic-only movement

in the early church. But if there was, Pentecost is God's radical and final NO to such a movement—and to every other similar movement, then and now.

Another text which is often used to deal with these matters is Paul's radical claim of his freedom to become a slave to others, in 1 Corinthians 9:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law... To the weak I became weak. ... I have become all things to all people, that I might by some means save some.

That is a very significant and beautiful passage about communication through solidarity, or perhaps about what missiologists call "accommodation." It is about the type of mission that will eventually bring about a multicultural church. But it is not really about a multicultural church.

A third passage that is often used in this context is the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations." There are obvious reasons for this. Yet, one should note that the passage itself says nothing about the cultures of those nations, and that "all nations" there may simply mean "all Gentiles." In other words, that while it is a passage that speaks of the global mission of the church, it does not necessarily take into account that such mission will take place among people of different nations, cultures, languages and traditions.

Of all the possible texts in the New Testament to deal with the issue at hand—the church in a multicultural society—there is none that is more explicit about the variety of peoples coming into the church, and specifically about the variety of their cultures, than the book of Revelation.

Indeed, seven times do we find in the book, with slight variations, the theme of “every tribe and language and people and nation.” And we do not find that listing always in similar contexts—not even always in positive contexts.

To that I shall return in a moment. First, however, it is important to acknowledge the literary source of such listing. Clearly, John the Seer has taken it from the book of Daniel, where a similar list appears four times. It is introduced in an ironic context, where Nebuchadnezzar issues a rather presumptuous decree that is to be obeyed by “all peoples, and nations, and languages,” even though it is clear that he does not actually command “all peoples, and nations, and languages.” Probably the purpose of the author is to make Nebuchadnezzar appear ridiculous in his claims, in order then to make the much less powerful Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes, to whom the book actually refers, seem ridiculously puny.

In contrast, the book of Revelation takes the phrase in earnest. The “tribes, languages, peoples, and nations,” and God’s rule over them, are not only real on earth. They even have a place in heaven.

I invite you to look at some of the more pertinent texts, like Rev. 14:6-7:

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

This must have been a rather surprising vision for John. Since we do not know beyond any doubt exactly who John of Patmos was, he may or may not have been among the eleven who went to meet Jesus on a mountain in Galilee, there to receive the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” But, no matter whether he was John the apostle, or another John, he must have known of that Great Commission which Jesus gave, not only to those first eleven, but also through them to the entire church. Whether directly or through others, he had received from Jesus the commission to preach the gospel to all the nations, making disciples and baptizing them.

But now it turns out that the mission of proclaiming the gospel throughout the world does not belong to the disciples alone, nor even to the entire church. In the last days it has been entrusted to an angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.

The visionary on Patmos to whom the proclamation of the gospel had been entrusted, the leader of the church commissioned to continue the task of that proclamation, now learns that the work of proclaiming the gospel is not to be carried out by humans alone, but also by an angel flying in midheaven.

If John thought of himself as an evangelist, the same way many of us today think of ourselves as evangelists, he might have been dismayed. We convince ourselves that, if we can somehow

preach the gospel with more fervor, with more eloquence, with more conviction, people will necessarily listen. Some even go on television arguing that all that is needed is more money for better communication technologies, for more powerful transmitters, for more stations to carry their programs. Some professors of evangelism impress on us the importance of proper techniques as part of responsible evangelism. And that may all be partially true. But, lest we take it too seriously, lest we take ourselves too seriously, it is helpful to remember that here we have no less an evangelist than an angel, and angel flying in midheaven, proclaiming the gospel “to every nation and tribe and language and people.” This angel is proclaiming the gospel with the support of all sorts of portents that have come to confirm it. And even after this angel finishes his task, with far more resources than the most powerful television station, even then, there are still enough who refuse to believe to keep the seven angels with the seven plagues busy! In a way, this is a passage to cut every professional evangelist down to size.

The text holds still another surprise. Read it again. It speaks of an angel with an eternal gospel—that is, an angel with tremendous, unequalled good news. And what does this good news angel say? He says: “Fear God!” The very first word of the angel’s good news is fear!

This seems to contradict the very idea of good news! It certainly moves in the opposite direction from the angel who said to the shepherds guarding their flocks at night: “Fear not, for I bring you news of great joy.” The Christmas angel brings good news that will cast out fear. The angel in Revelation brings good news that begins with fear: “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour

of his judgment has come.”

Fear makes sense in this connection, for the angel is announcing God’s judgment. But good news? How can fear and judgment go together with good news?

The question itself immediately brings to mind the young Martin Luther, wrestling in his cell with the commandment to love a God whom he feared deeply. If it were only a matter of believing in God, Luther would have had no problem. He certainly believed in God. Actually, his problem was that he believed so firmly in God’s judgment, he so feared God, that he found it impossible to obey the first commandment of love. He tried. He prayed. He confessed his sins over and over again. And eventually, in a shout of absolute despair, he cried: “Love God? How can I love God? I hate him!”

As we all know, Luther could find no peace until he came to understand that the God of judgment is also the God of love, and that judgment, even judgment, is an act of God’s love. This is what makes grace so amazing. The cross itself is proof of it—the cross, God’s most terrible judgment and God’s most surprising gift. The cross, where God’s love is shown in judgment, and God’s judgment is shown in love. God is not a pampering parent who allows us to do as we please. God is not a vindictive, abusive parent ready to extract the last drop of our blood. God judges. God judges with justice. But God’s justice is justice in love. And thus, even God’s judgment, even the overwhelming weight and condemnation of God’s law, becomes part

of the gospel of grace.

But, more to the point here, this good-news/bad-news story is to be proclaimed “to those who live on earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.” In some ways, this combines the elements of pluralism that we see in the Great Commission with those we see in Pentecost. The gospel is to be proclaimed to nations, as in Matthew, and to languages, as in Acts. And this is not just a missionary strategy, as for Paul in 1 Corinthians. It is not a strategy for church growth. It is not the church’s response to growing pluralism in society. It is the very purpose of God, carried forth by an angel in midheaven.

This purpose, however, is carried out by human agents. This is seen quite clearly in another passage where the list occurs: “peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings.” I read selected portions of Rev. 10:

And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He held a little scroll open in his hand. ... Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying: “Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, “Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.” So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. Then he said to me, “You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”

Clearly, this passage is patterned after Ezekiel 2 and 3, where the prophet is given a scroll to eat. But before we turn to that text, we must look at John’s vision of the little scroll in the context of the book of Revelation itself.

This is a “little scroll.” And it is open. It is not the great scroll with theseven seals, which only the victorious Lamb could open. Furthermore, it is held in the hand of an angel. It is not like the great scroll with the seven seals, which is held by the right hand of the One who sits on the throne, and passed directly from the Almighty God to the Almighty Lamb. Presumably, this little scroll does not contain the entire mystery of history, as the larger scroll does. It is much more modest than that. It is the word given to John to proclaim to the churches. In order to proclaim God’s message to the churches, John does not need to digest the entire scroll with the seven seals. Indeed, in this very vision of the little scroll there is an episode in which “the seven thunders” sound with a mighty voice, and John prepares to write what he has heard. But he is told not to write. Scholars debate what that may mean. But whatever it means, it clearly implies that what John is to proclaim is much humbler than any such grandiose vision. What he is to proclaim is the word which he has digested and assimilated in this little scroll.

Here again the role of the prophet/evangelist is put in its proper context. It is a very important role. So important, that a mighty angel brings it. But the prophet does not get to eat the great scroll with the seven seals. And, as we saw in the other passage we have just discussed, he is not the only one proclaiming the eternal gospel.

If we now compare this passage with its literary background in Ezekiel 2 and 3, the parallelisms are obvious. There is no need to dwell on them. What is more striking, however, are two significant differences. The first is that, while Ezekiel says “I ate it, and in my mouth it was as

sweet as honey,” John says: “it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.” Ezekiel speaks of a sweet word of God. For John, the word he is to proclaim is bittersweet.

The second difference has to do with the scope of the message of each of the two prophets. Ezekiel is told: “Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them. For you are not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel—not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand.” In contrast, the mighty angel tells John: “You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”

There are a number of theories as to why John says that the scroll made his stomach bitter. One possibility is that the word he receives is a word of judgment. Although it is sweet because it is the word of God, it is bitter because it is a word of destruction and death. This is an attractive theory, although the truth is that Ezekiel’s word is equally of judgment, for he says that in the scroll which he ate were written “words of lamentation and mourning and woe.” Thus, if John’s scroll was bitter for that reason, so should Ezekiel’s have been. Another theory is that the scroll is bitter in John’s stomach because it contains words about the persecution and suffering that Christians are to undergo. That too is an attractive theory.

I prefer, however, to see a connection between the two particular traits in John's vision vis-a-vis Ezekiel's: the bitterness in the stomach and the wide scope of the message.

If any writer of the New Testament was a Jew, and steeped in Jewish culture and traditions, that was John of Patmos. It has been pointed out that there is hardly a verse in his book that does not have an allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures. His Greek is full of Hebraisms, perhaps due in part to his greater familiarity with Hebrew and with Aramaic, and perhaps as a result of his constant literary dependence on the Hebrew Bible. And he quotes that Bible, not from the Septuagint that all the other New Testament authors employed, but either from an unknown translation or from his own, which he does as he goes along.

He is well aware of the mission given to the prophet Ezekiel when he ate his scroll: Ezekiel was to speak only to the house of Israel, and they would not believe him. Now he, John, is not told to whom he is to speak, but about whom. (With the preposition epi, a genitive case would have meant that John was to prophesy to many peoples and nations and languages and kings. An accusative case would have meant that he was to prophesy against them. But the dative case, used here, means that he is to prophesy about them, as the NRSV correctly translates.) The difference between Ezekiel's vision and John's is not that Ezekiel is to go to Israel, to a people who understand his language, and John is to go throughout the world, to many peoples and nations and languages and kings. The difference is rather that John is to go back to his audience, presumably the seven churches and other similar communities in Asia, and speak to them about

the many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings. And that is why the word of God, the little scroll that will be John's message, although sweet to the taste, is hard to stomach.

John the Jew; John who can quote the Hebrew Scriptures back and forth, apparently without even bothering to think about it, is given a message to proclaim to his congregations. His congregations are probably also mostly Jewish. Otherwise, they will hardly be able to understand this book he is writing to them, so full of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures, and even to more recent Jewish traditions. And now he is told that he is to speak to these congregations, not just the word they expect, that those who are faithful until death will receive the crown of life, or that everyone who conquers will receive some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a secret name, but he is to speak to them about "many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings." He is to speak to them, not only about how important it is that they be faithful in the impending tribulations and persecution, but also about "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation," whom the Lamb has made "to be a kingdom and priests serving God, and who will reign on earth" (Rev. 5:9-10).

I submit to you that this is the most difficult aspect of becoming a multicultural church in a multicultural world. Bringing people in from other nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages is not difficult, as long as they are brought into the same church, dominated by the same nation, and tribe, and people, and language. Throughout its history, whenever the church has taken the Great Commission seriously, it has been willing and even eager to prophesy to

many nations, tribes, and peoples. It has also been willing to prophesy in many languages, and to that end missionaries have translated the Bible into thousands of languages, and have even devised methods for reducing hundreds of languages to writing. We have certainly taken to heart the task of going throughout the world, and preaching the gospel to every creature. To that task many of our great missionaries have devoted their entire lives, and even sacrificed them. For that task, we continually collect offerings in our churches. And there are many in our congregations right now who complain that we are not doing enough of it, and argue that we should try to recover our first love for missions.

Be that as it may, that is not what John is told to do. He is not told to go and speak to many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. He is told rather to speak to his congregations about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. And he finds that bitter to his stomach.

The difficult task facing us today, as we seek to be faithful in today's world, is not, as some might imagine, creating and sustaining ethnic minority churches. The difficult part is telling our congregations about the many peoples, and nations, and languages, who are also called to be part of the great multitude which worships the Lamb. And telling them in such a way that they realize that, no matter what they may have thought, their own people, and tribe, and nation, and language is no more in God's plan than one of the many peoples, and tribes, and nations, and languages whom God is calling to make, as Revelation would say, "a kingdom of priests serving God."

It is easy to speak the word of a multicultural church in a multicultural society in such a way that it is sweet as honey in our mouth. And it should be. There is beauty, and joy, and fullness, in many people coming together, out of every tribe and nation, and people, and language. But if we remain there; if somehow we avoid that part of the same word which is bitter to the stomach, we are not faithful to John's vision. The vision which John the Jew has is a vision of a Gentile church; a church where the Gentiles, the nations, *ta ethne*, would come and take their place right next to the tribes of Israel, and all together would claim the ancient promise made to the people of Israel, that they would be a kingdom of priests. That is a vision sweet as honey, for it shows the fullness of the mercy of God; but it is also a vision bitter to the stomach, because it shows that no people, no tribe, no language, no nation, can claim a place of particular honor in that fullness. And it is bittersweet, because it involves radical change in the very congregations where John has served and which he loves.

And so it is with us today. The multicultural vision is sweet. But there is also a bitter side to it. There is the bitter side of having to declare that the vision of many peoples, many tribes, many nations, and many languages involves much more than bringing in a bit of color and folklore into our traditional worship services. That it involves radical changes in the way we understand ourselves, and in the way we run our business.

Before we turn to that point, however, there is another factor that must be pointed out.

Although it is true that in a sense John's profound appreciation for his Jewish background may

make it difficult for him to stomach the vision of many tribes, many peoples, many nations, and many languages, it is also true, paradoxically enough, that he can only be true to that vision precisely because he has that profound appreciation for his own culture. The Apostle Paul is free to be a Jew to the Jews, and as one outside the Law to those outside the Law, because he can claim to be “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, ... as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Fil. 3:5-6). If we are to develop a truly multicultural church, we must begin by each one of us having a profound appreciation of her or his own culture. It is very difficult to become multicultural when one is not even cultural—when one is not deeply rooted in the traditions and values that have sustained one's people through generations; when one does not resonate with the central symbols of one's culture.

This is something I have come to understand as I have worked with people training to be missionaries among Spanish-speaking people. When I meet a candidate who appreciates her own language and culture, I know that she will be able to catch a glimpse of the beauty of my own language and culture. But when I meet a candidate who has not even taken the trouble to learn English properly, whose heart does not throb at the subtleties of Shakespeare or the cadences of Longfellow, I lose hope of ever being able to make him understand how I feel about my own language, about the rhythms that I heard in the cradle, or the sonnets which Lope addressed to the Crucified.

John of Patmos, who apparently cannot speak without quoting the ancient literature of his people, can understand both the joy and the pain of a vision where “saints from every tribe and language and people and nation have been made a kingdom of priests serving God” (5:9-10). What we need today, if we are to become a truly multicultural church, is a Jane Smith of Delaware, who is deeply rooted in her Anglo culture, who shares and claims both the glories and the horrors of her tradition. And we need her to work with John Smith of Columbus, who shares and claims the glories and the horrors of his African-American ancestry. And we need them to work with Juana Pérez of Cincinnati, and with John Silverfox of Cleveland, and with Jung Young Kim of Dayton, all of whom share and claim the glories and the horrors of their respective traditions. And together, and separately, we must each and all take the little scroll, that portion of God's message entrusted to us, and eat it, and digest it, and rejoice at the sweetness in our mouths, and wonder at the bitterness in our stomachs, for we, like John, are called to go and “prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”