

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

Dr. Justo L. González



Methesco Theological School
Delaware, Ohio

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This morning we were speaking of the book of Revelation, and in particular of a phrase that appears seven times in that book, although with some variations. It is the phrase that refers to the many “nations, tribes, peoples, and languages” that somehow are encompassed by the vast cosmic vision of Revelation. I said in passing that not every use of that phrase in the book of Revelation is positive, and then looked in some detail to two of those occurrences: First, the passage in Rev. 14 where an angel in midheaven is sent to proclaim the eternal gospel to nations, tribes, languages, and people. And, second, the passage in Rev. 10 where the prophet is told to eat a little scroll, and then to go and prophesy “about many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings.”

Tonight, I would like to begin our discussion of multiculturalism in the church by calling your attention to three other passages in Revelation where this listing appears, of tribes, and peoples, and languages, and nations: Rev. 11:9; 13:7; and 17:15. In these three instances, that listing is not necessarily positive.

It is important to recall these, for otherwise we are in danger of romanticizing cultures and multiculturalism, and forgetting that they too have their demonic dimensions.

In Revelation 11, John offers us the vision of the two witnesses. It is not necessary for our purposes here to enter into the discussion as to whom these two witnesses might represent.

What is important is that, after the two witnesses have completed their testimony and are killed,

For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth.

In other words, if the glory of heaven is to be shared by a great multitude out of every tribe and nation and people and language, so are the Lamb and its witnesses to be opposed by others out of every people, and tribe, and language, and nation. Multiculturalism may be an important trait in the very nature of the church; but it is also an important trait in the powers of evil.

Revelation 13 makes that point even clearer. There John is speaking of the beast from the sea, which appears all-powerful, and is therefore worshiped by the whole earth, and he says: "It [that is, the beast] was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered." The glorious multitude dressed in white robes and singing hymns to the Lamb represents every tribe, and people, and language, and nation. But so does the multitude that bows before the beast and adores it.

Thirdly and finally, look at Revelation 17. This is the vision of the great harlot. As in every such vision, the details are confusing, and not always consistent with each other. For instance, the harlot is sitting on a red beast, and that is the way she is usually depicted. But the angel also tells John that she is “the great whore who is seated on many waters.” This is obviously an allusion to Jeremiah 51:13, where the prophet is speaking against Babylon: “You who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures, your end has come.” It is also a reference to a theme that appears repeatedly in ancient iconography, where a city is often depicted as a goddess enthroned by a river. The reason for this is that in ancient times most long distance transportation took place by water rather than by land. We read much about the famous Roman roads, whose remains can be seen to this day in rugged mountain passes all over Western Europe. But economically those famous roads were not half as important as the waterways. Roads were intended for moving armies and their supplies, and also sometimes for connecting areas where water transport was difficult or impossible. In the East, caravans carrying luxury items from the Orient traveled by land. But by far the vast majority of trade in the Roman Empire took place through water transport. Indeed, it was far more expensive to carry a heavy load by oxcart for a hundred miles along a mountain road than to transport it by ship from one end of the Empire to the other. That is also why at very early date Rome began shipping wheat from far-away Sicily and then from Egypt, rather than carting it from the much closer fertile valleys of the Apennines. (F & W, pp. 31, 36)

Thus, to depict the great harlot as “seated on many waters” was another way of saying that it was a rich city; a city to which, as in ancient Babylon, all the riches of the world flowed.

There follows the description of the great harlot, with whom we are all familiar, and then the angel explains the meaning of the vision to John. The ten horns, for instance, are petty rulers, kinglets whom the great harlot appoints, and who enjoy their power from her, but who will eventually turn against her. And, says the angel, “The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages” (Rev. 17:15). In other words, that the great harlot is rich, but she is rich because she sits on all these various nations and cultures, exploiting them and having their wealth flow to her like many waters.

What do we learn from all of this for our theme, the multicultural church in a multicultural society? We certainly learn that we must not romanticize culture and multiculturalism.

There are at least three ways in which we are often inclined to such romanization.

The first is by claiming for cultures—for our culture, or for any other culture—a purity which cultures by nature do not have. Cultures, and languages, and nations, and peoples, are historical phenomena. They are part of this fallen creation. And, as part of fallen creation, they carry in their very being the sign of sin.

I love my culture. I am certain that you must have gathered that, from some of my remarks this morning. Yet, when I stop to think about it, I realize that my culture, and this language of which I am so proud and which I so love, are in many ways the result and the distillation of many an oppression. If I speak Spanish, it is because my Spanish ancestors invaded the lands of my Indian ancestors, suppressing their language and traditions, and trying to erase their culture, as if it had never existed. And, if the Spanish I speak still includes some native words that would have sounded strange to sixteenth century Spanish conquistadors, it is because, even after five-hundred years, the culture of my Indian ancestors has refused to let itself be entirely obliterated. But I can go further back. The reason why I call a church “iglesia,” is because, even before the advent of the church, my Roman ancestors conquered my Celtiberian ancestors. And the reason why I call cheese “queso,” and not something like “fromaggio,” is that my Visigothic ancestors conquered my Roman ancestors. And the reason why, when I wish to say “may God will it,” I say “Ojala,” is that my Moorish ancestors conquered my Visigothic ancestors.

I love my culture. I love my language. I am enthralled by the richness and the fluidity with which it can express the most varied tones and moods. But I must remember: this language and this culture which I so love are the result of much pain and much oppression.

It is important for us to remember this, for otherwise love of language and culture runs the risk of becoming demonic. It is when we forget this that love of language and culture result in ethnic cleansing, in theories of supremacy, and in racial and cultural exclusivism. It is important to

remember this, for language and culture properly understood are to be represented in the great throne singing the praises of the Lamb; but language and culture turned into objects of idolatry are among the most insidious tools of the beast and the dragon.

Secondly, we tend to romanticize cultures by claiming for them a stability which they do not have. I do not have the time tonight to expand on this subject; but it is important for us to realize that culture is by definition a living thing; and a living thing is always changing. Cultures are by nature permeable, just as skin is permeable. They influence each other. They evolve as the world and society evolves. A culture that cannot evolve is dead, and is no longer a real culture, but the relic of a culture. This is perhaps the greatest problem that I encounter as I deal with people of my own cultural tradition who have come to this country, and who now feel the pain of their children receiving influences which they do not understand. "They are losing their culture," they tell me. To which probably the only answer is: "Perhaps they are creating a culture. Perhaps it will be through this encounter that the culture of their ancestors will find new expression." Certainly, if culture is only a relic of times past, and of circumstances which no longer exist, it is no longer a living culture.

But enough about that. I must move to the third way in which we tend to romanticize culture. That is by forgetting that culture always exists in a political and economic context. John of Patmos seems to be well aware of that: "The waters where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages."

If we accept the most common interpretation, that the great harlot is the city of Rome and its imperial power, it follows that John of Patmos has a very realistic understanding of the wealth of Rome. Rome is wealthy, not because she is particularly productive, and certainly not because her people work harder than the many peoples, tribes, nations and languages she has subjected, but rather because she has devised a system whereby the wealth of all these nations flows to Rome, as so many rivers.

We all know that the first century was a time of great mixing of cultures. And nowhere was this mixture more evident than in Rome itself, where people from all over the Empire converged. We also know that the more aristocratic and traditional Romans bemoaned the fact that their city was being overrun by all these people of various tribes, and nations, and languages. Actually, at approximately the same time that John was at Patmos, or shortly thereafter, Tacitus complained that Rome was a receptacle to which flowed everything that was sordid and degrading from every quarter of the globe (Annals 15.44). Others took the opposite tack, accepting quite wholeheartedly at least some of the elements of foreign culture that were invading even the most traditional quarters of Rome. But, as far as I know, it was John of Patmos who most clearly saw that the nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages were present in Rome, not simply out of cultural exchange, but also because Rome was the great harlot sitting on many waters, and the many waters were the “peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages” who actually produced the wealth that made the harlot great.

It is important for us to realize this, for the cultural encounters of ourday do not take place in abstraction of economic and political systems. It is not just that world travel has become easier, and therefore people of different cultures meet more often than they used to. It is also that the world order--or rather, the world disorder—is such that people are forced to leave their traditional homes, and move to new lands in search of safety, security, freedom, and work. All other things being equal, most people would rather live where they grew up, in their own homelands and in the context of their own cultures. But all things are not equal, and therefore people cross borders and even oceans seeking the safety and the opportunities that are often denied them in their own homelands. When the rivers of wealth flow in one direction, it is only natural for the population to flow in the same direction.

Let me give you an example. In the last twenty years, thousands and thousands of acres in Mexico have been turned from corn and beans and othersuch staples for local consumption, to vegetables and flowers for export to the United States. As vegetables flow from Mexico across the border, growers north of the border find it difficult to compete, and must seek cheaper labor. That labor is then provided by Mexican workers, probably the same workers who until recently were growing beans in Mexico, but have now been displaced by export crops and are looking for work. Thus, while the newspapers carry all sorts of reports about people crossing illegally under the bridge, those people are in a sense following the tomatoes that are crossing legally over the bridge. Where the rivers of wealth flow, there too flow the rivers of population.

Or look at Great Britain and France, where there is now a strong backlash against all the immigrants who are coming to those countries from their former colonies. The Europeans may not like it; but the reason why such migrations are taking place, and precisely to those particular countries, is that those very countries previously colonized the lands from which those immigrants come. For decades, the colonial powers were enriched with the wealth of the world. Today, they should not be surprised by the resulting demographical shifts. Where the rivers of wealth flow, there to flow the rivers of population.

John of Patmos had it right. The multicultural society of the Roman Empire was not just the result of cultural exchange. It was also the result of economic exchange supported by military might. And, in some ways, the same is true of the multicultural society of the twentieth century. It is the result of European conquest and westward expansion. It is the result of black slavery and the trade that supported it. It is the result of colonialism in the nineteenth century, and of economic neocolonialism in the twentieth. It is the result of two world wars and a cold one. It is the result of civil wars in Central America, fostered by the great superpowers. Thus, when you look at your communities, and see them as multicultural, multiethnic microcosms in which all the nations, cultures, languages and people of the world meet, it is important that you realize that your community is also the result of the vast forces, mostly evil forces, that have uprooted people, and tossed them upon distant shores. A multiethnic society is a microcosm, not only of ethnic diversity throughout the world, but also of the strife, injustice and oppression that rules the world—or as John of Patmos would say, of the power of the beast.

In summary, as we deal with issues of culture and multicultural society, we must avoid romanticizing culture (a) by granting them a purity they do not have; (b) by claiming for them a permanence and stability they also do not have; or (c) by imagining that it is possible to deal with issues of culture quite apart from issues of justice.

Allow me now to make a radical shift. If I had been given the opportunity to offer three lectures, I would have expanded what I have just said into a second lecture, and reserved what I am about to say for a third. But, since I must try to make my main points within the scope of two lectures, I beg you to bear with me, and allow me what may at first seem to be little more than a digression. As Perry Mason would say, bear with me, and I will show relevance.

My father-in-law was an avid reader of mystery stories. He had walls and walls of bookcases with nothing but mysteries. But we used to make fun of the way he read mystery stories. Whenever he got a new book, he would immediately turn to the last chapter, and read it. Then he would go back to the beginning, and see how the author got to the intended end.

It is a strange way to read a mystery. But, on second thought, that way of reading mystery stories has 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 Columbus. The reason is also that, when I was back home, I envisioned and wished 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, I was to be here today, because some committee or other such group was sufficiently misguided to wish it so.

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.

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 ever 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.

This is why I find the book of Revelation so enthralling. We think that the book is mysterious, because it speaks a language and uses symbols that are difficult to understand. We think that the book is mysterious because it speaks of bowls of wrath, and angels with trumpets, and seven seals, and four strange living creatures. But the book is mysterious in a deeper sense than that. The book is mysterious, paradoxically enough, because it declares what the early church announced openly: that when the final trumpet sounds, loud voices in heaven will proclaim: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (11:15). And not only the Lamb, but also its servants, who are now

brought low and persecuted, they too “will reign forever and ever” (22:5).

John’s message is not ultimately about a beast whose number is 666, nor about seven bowls of wrath. John’s message is about the goal and end of history, about the purpose of the world, about the final cause of all that exists, about the fact that, even in spite of beasts coming out of the land and of the sea, and in spite of the great harlot sitting on the seven hills, and in spite of people from all nations, and tribes, and languages, being willing to serve the beast, in spite of all this, God and God’s Messiah, the Lamb who was slain, will reign forever and ever.

And John’s message is also that, in that everlasting reign of God, “saints from every tribe and language and people and nation” will be made “a kingdom of priests serving our God” (5:9-10). That these will be “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands... [crying] out in a loud voice saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (7:9-10).

These are the two texts we have not discussed yet, in which the phrase “peoples, and nations, and tribes, and languages” appears. This morning we discussed a text in which an angel in midheaven proclaims the gospel “to every nation and tribe and language and people.” And we discussed another text in which John is told to speak “about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.” Earlier this evening we have studied three texts which show that the

phrase is not always entirely positive. These two other texts I have just quoted, one from chapter 5 and one from chapter 7, point to the end of the story. Reading them, I feel as my father in law must have felt when he opened the last chapter of a mystery novel. Aha! The butler did it! So that is what it is all about! Aha! A kingdom of God, where God and the Lamb shall reign forever. A kingdom from all tribes, and peoples, and nations, and languages, where they shall all be a royal priesthood. A kingdom where they shall wear their white robes of victory, and wave palms of jubilation, celebrating the victory of the Lamb in a multitude of languages, for they are people from every tribe and nation. So that is what it is all about!

Yes, according to the book of Revelation, that is what it is all about. And if that is what it is all about, that better be what we are about. If we really believe that this is the future towards which God's history is moving, we better live out of that future, and not out of some other.

Allow me to explain that. Suppose I were to tell you that as soon as I retire I plan to spend all my time fishing. I am going to move to the woods, build me a little cabin where no one will bother me, and where there will be no sound by the rustling of a spring. I am going to spend hours sitting quietly leaning against a tree, feeling the breeze on my face, and smelling the flowers. I can hardly wait till I can retire, and spend the rest of my days fishing. Then you ask me: "What do you do now in your free time?" And I answer, "Oh, I spend my time in the stock car races. Actually, I am even building my own hot rod!" You laugh. You laugh, because there is an incongruity between my professed future and the way I am preparing for it. Most likely, in spite

of all my enthusiastic talk about fishing by a quiet brook, deep down I do not really believe that I will ever live in a cabin in the woods.

But then, think about Christians. Think about the Church. We spend so much time talking about the coming Reign 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 Reign of God to come. But, are we preparing for the time when God's Reign does come? We proclaim a Reign 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 Reign of peace, a Reign of justice, a Reign of love. But, are we living as those whose future is there?

You see, if I claim I plan to spend the rest of my life fishing by a quiet brook, and meanwhile spend my time building hot rods, the first and most immediate result will be that no one will believe me. If I really want to convince you that fishing by a rustling brook is so great, I better begin by going fishing as often as I can, or you will not believe me. If we really want the world to believe the proclamation of the Reign of God, then we better, both as individuals and as a church, we better begin living as a people that are practicing for that Reign.

Then, there is a second result. If the time comes when I do move to a cabin in the woods, and I have not been practicing for it, the woods will not be all that great. I will not know how to

manage in the woods. Every unexpected sound will scare me. I will not know how to cook the fish that I catch, and I will get indigestion from the fish I do try to cook. I will get cramps all over my body from sitting on the ground, leaning on a tree. Likewise, I suspect that if we do not practice for the Reign of God now, we shall be rather uncomfortable when the Reign does come!

Perhaps we ought to change the title for our concern here, and instead of saying “Music, Worship, and Theology in a Multicultural Society,” say “Music, Worship, and Theology towards a Multicultural Reign of God.”

Music and worship. In that respect, the book of Revelation is very strange indeed. In no book of the New Testament are there more references to singing and to worship. Yet the book of Revelation does not give even one directive for worship. Paul tells the Corinthians that when they celebrate their meal they should wait for each other, and gives them some directions as to doing things decently and in order. He tells the Colossians to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Col. 3:16). In Leviticus and in other portions of the Hebrew Scriptures there are many directives for worship. But in Revelation, the book where the four living creatures that represent all of creation sing day and night without ceasing, the book where the 24 elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne, casting their crowns and worshipping the one who lives for ever and ever; in Revelation there is not one word about how we should worship.

There is no need for such a word, for the entire book is an announcement of the worship which takes place in heaven, the worship which is the ultimate end of all things, the worship towards which we are bound.

In that worship, saints take part from every tribe, and people, and nation, and language.

Do we believe that vision? Do we really wish others to believe it? Then we better start living it out. Not just because we are living in a multicultural society, but also and above all because that is the Reign we proclaim, the future for which we yearn.

We have other options. There are alternative visions. There is a vision, according to which all peoples, and nations, and tribes, and languages must bow before the beast and worship it.

There is the vision of the great harlot who sits upon many waters; and these waters are the many nations, and tribes, and languages, and people who bring their wealth to her. If we live by that vision, we shall be content with a world order in which many nations, and tribes, and peoples, and cultures have no other purpose in life but to enrich those who sit upon many waters. According to that vision, the nations, and peoples, and tribes can and should remain subjected, for that is their place in the scheme of things.

But that is not the vision of John at Patmos. According to that vision, out of these many nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages, God will build a kingdom in which all have royal and

priestly honor. According to that vision, a great multitude, from all different nations and cultures, will jointly sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” According to that vision, our music and our worship must be multicultural, not simply because our society is multicultural, but because the future from which God is calling us is multicultural. We must be multicultural, not just so that those from other cultures may feel at home among us, but also so that we may feel at home in God’s future. We must be multicultural because, like John at Patmos, our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; because we know and we believe that on that waking-up morning when the stars begin to fall, when we gather at the river where angel feet have trod, we shall all, from all nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages, we shall all sing without ceasing: “Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee, casting down our golden crowns before the glassy sea; cherubim and seraphim; Japanese and Swahili; American and European; Cherokee and Ukrainian; falling down before thee, which wert, and art, and evermore shall be! Amen!

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