

Let the Earth
Rejoice!



A Biblical Theology of Holistic Mission

William A. Dyrness

Act Five

The Consummation

The brain is a history library that has run in the future tense. Almost all our thinking activity is directed towards dealing with the future since all actions taken are directed towards bringing about an effect which is not yet present.

Edward de Bono

Chapter Fourteen

The End and Goal of Creation: The New Heaven and New Earth

Introduction

We noticed that creation and the whole of biblical history has the special character of promise. People who believe in God are tied in a unique way to the future.¹ Because it is God that fashions the end, he must finally create something which will perfectly correspond to him, in which he can come to rest. At the same time each fulfillment of the promise, though partial, liberates a still greater hope.² Already our study has shown that the promise threatens to spill over history. Christ could hardly avoid pulling back the curtain of space and time and revealing undreamed of horizons. Though now at times things seem dark, we live in the period of the highest hopes because we live under the final promise: the resurrection of Jesus and the Pentecost miracle. As the horizon of the future opens to us, the scope of our responsibility to this world increases and the breadth of our mission increases.

For perspective on these things we turn to John's revelation on Patmos. There all the strands of Scripture are woven together in a final complex of images. The Book of Revelation follows a familiar literary technique called *inclusio* wherein "the final episode in the story repeats and balances the first."³ N. A. Dahl has pointed out that a common theme of images of the last things in the NT is that "the end will bring the final realization of what from the beginning

was the will of God the creator, who is himself the first and the last."⁴ While expanding and enlarging the promise of creation, the new creation when consummated will realize all that God wished to accomplish in his original work.

The idea of *inclusio* may also give us a hint as to how we may understand the unity of Scripture. As the end sums up the whole, so it uncovers its intrinsic unity. The play is only seen as a unity when the final curtain comes down. But in the Book of Revelation the unity is only suggested, not explained. For the simple fact is that our minds and imaginations cannot grasp what the end will really be like (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9, which quotes Isa. 64:4). And in Revelation we should be prepared for the fact that the continuity with previous Scripture is a matter of images rather than concepts. The images of Revelation—the horsemen, the dragon, the New Jerusalem and the river of life—have impact and meaning on several levels, but they cannot always be neatly tied down. We must allow them to master us as they open up God's future. Let us then turn to this "great drama of poetical conciseness"⁵ and reflect on how our mission may be shaped by its reality.

A Vision of God

Revelation begins and ends with a vision of God (chaps. 1, 21, 22); the central section of judgment begins with a vision of God in heaven (chaps. 4, 5); and more hymns of praise and doxology are scattered through its visions than any book in the Bible except the Psalms. The visions are given on "the Lord's day" (1:10), indicating that the context of the visions is one of worship. The presence of God is the controlling factor of the dramatic action and full communion with God the goal. In the first vision Christ is presented as redeemer (1:5-7) and as ruling Lord with all the attributes of God walking amidst the churches (1:9-20). Central is the doxology of verses 5b-7 which quotes Exodus 19:6; what God promised to do in the Exodus, Jesus has done by his redeeming death.

The visions of chapter 4 and 5 are really the controlling

visions of the book. John is taken to heaven and the throne of God with its rainbows, jasper, thunder and lightning (cf. Ex. 24:10, 16-18) and four living creatures (Ezek. 1:4-14). But the view of God in these chapters is not static; he is a speaking, acting God who reveals himself on the earth and receives the worship of the heavenly hosts. The action centers around the scroll which no one on earth or in heaven is able to open. When one of the elders announces that the Lion of Judah "has conquered" and therefore can open the scroll, the twenty-four elders sing a new song to the Lamb, who alone is worthy to reveal the secrets of the future. As M. Rissi points out,⁶ the expression "has conquered" provides the key not only for this vision but the entire book (5:5). For the decisive encounter in the Book of Revelation has already occurred in the death and resurrection of Christ; the glories of the consummation in one sense are but the unveiling of the victory that Christ has already won. Again a doxology focuses the praise (5:9, 10), paralleling that in chapter 1 except for one crucial addition: "and they shall reign on earth" (5:10b). Here the political dimension of the consummation is specially underlined.

A Vision of the Church

Revelation was probably written during the persecution of the Church under the Roman Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96). So the immediate purpose of the book was to present a prophetic interpretation of their persecutions and their witness from the viewpoint of the end.⁷ It was to provide comfort and assurance in the midst of suffering (1:9; 6:10, 11). Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the Church and provide what Ms. Fiorenza calls the "ecclesial framework" for the book.⁸ But note that in spite of the fact that the Church is suffering, Christ still holds her responsible. The response required of her, in fact, picks up themes common throughout Scripture: she must repent of evil, be faithful unto death, keep his word, not become self-sufficient in riches. But the one who conquers and keeps his works (2:26) is promised power over the nations to rule with a rod of iron (2:26, 27, recalling Ps.

2:9); to be made a pillar in the Temple of God (3:12); and a place on the throne of God (3:21). Again the note of dominion over the earth and the nations is sounded. Though weak and suffering, God's people are promised a share in God's own rule. Meanwhile, their witness lies in keeping his word and his works.

A Vision of Judgment on the Earth and Its Peoples

1. Following the vision of God in heaven (chaps. 4, 5), a time of troubles in human society and in nature is portrayed in the seven seals. At the outset, however, John sees a rider on a white horse going out conquering and to conquer (6:2). Reiterating the promise of Mark 13:10, this rider pictures the proclamation of the gospel of Christ in all the world.⁹ The Church will suffer with the world, but the standard she raises controls this period of struggle. The little scroll (chap. 10) gives the prophetic interpretation of the community's life during these trials, which is further explained in 14:6-20.¹⁰ There again the assurance of the proclamation of the gospel (v. 6) is given:

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 fountains of water. (v. 7)

The gospel, as we have noted, announces the judgment of the Creator God even as it expresses his mercy. But the community must also be on guard, for the danger of apostasy is real (v. 9).

Meanwhile, God will reinforce the preaching of the gospel by portents and calamities on the earth. While the judgment that begins is real and well deserved, in the beginning it is limited (to one-third of the earth or its people), to show God's desire that people repent of their wickedness. As in the plagues in Egypt, God is using natural catastrophes to urge people to repent (chap. 8). Following this, he uses even the demonic hosts to bring judgment upon the earth (chap. 9). In spite of these signs of God's wrath the refrain is

heard: "The rest of mankind . . . did not repent of the works of their hands" (9:20). Despite the hope represented by the gospel and the promise of judgment, many do not repent.

These preliminary troubles lead to a final confrontation between the forces of evil and Christ at his appearing (chap. 19). While there is much struggle and suffering here, it is possible to overestimate the element of battle. Chapter 17, for example, begins with an invitation to see the judgment (not battle) of the great harlot who has committed fornication with the kings of the earth. As we have observed, the victory of Christ in the past (5:5) controls all the visions of the book, so that the final encounter is more a revelation of that victory rather than another triumph.¹¹ Though it is true the enemy makes great preparations for battle and the armies of heaven appear with Christ, when Christ appears in 19:11 there is no battle—the enemy forces simply break down. Nevertheless, the wrath of God is fully expressed: the nations are struck with a rod of iron and Christ treads out the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty (19:15, quoting Ps. 2:9 and Isa. 63:3). Notice however, as in 6:2, 19:11 pictures Christ coming on a white horse, indicating that in the preaching of the gospel the final judgment is anticipated. In the word of the gospel the coming Lord appears to heal and to forgive.

2. We are ready, then, to outline in more detail than was possible before the meaning of this last period of time. The overriding question of Revelation is the cry of the saints: why must we still suffer (6:10, 11)? The answer given is, they must rest "a little longer" until their number is complete—that is, until the preaching of the gospel has borne its fruit and all the places at the banquet are filled.

This period of time then reveals the *mercy of God*, a mercy that is expressed clearly in the call of the gospel. When Peter deals with the scoffers who ask why the coming of the Lord is delayed, he answers: "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9). There has been much discussion about what it is that re-

strains, or detains, the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:6. It is possible (as H. Berkhof and John Calvin believe) that this is the preaching of the gospel. This verse then would be understood in terms of Mark 13:10; the gospel must first be preached in all the world before the end comes.

But this must not be thought of only in negative terms, as though evangelism was only a matter of snatching brands from the fire. This period also expresses the *grace of God*, for it is a time in which the power of the resurrection is active. Christ was raised, Paul reminds us, so that "we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). As the Sabbath and Canaan were in the OT pointers to the promised future, so now the Church is the "sign" of Christ's reign and its activities a pointer to his victory. As John Calvin explained this: "by constraining men to obey him in the preaching of the Gospel, (Christ) establishes his throne on the earth."¹² In Revelation this positive rule is evident as God preserves his people (12:6, 14) and the earth for their sake (7:3; 9:4, 5).

Finally, however, this period is a time of gathering *opposition* to Christ's reign. Scripture teaches that the end time will be specifically marked by countersigns—suffering, apostasy and catastrophes—all of which come to focus in the image of the Antichrist. But note that it is of necessity the appearance of the Christian hope that brings out competitive doctrines of salvation; it is the presence of righteousness that stimulates persecution.¹³ Finally the Beast actually comes to the point of taking the place of God (Rev. 13). Notice, however, that whatever we make of these images, Revelation makes it clear that this struggle will inevitably have a political dimension. In Revelation this obviously represented the Roman Empire. So "only when Satan and the concrete representation of his power, the Roman Empire, no longer rule on earth is final salvation possible."¹⁴ Richard Mouw adds, "The coming of the kingdom will require an official acknowledgement on the part of human institutional authorities of the sovereign rule of God."¹⁵ Only then will his people reign on the earth (5:10). Before we turn to this final rule, however, we must inquire into the future of this created order.

3. We have stressed throughout our study that the created order is the basic context for our service to God. What will the final judgment mean for the earth? Will it simply be destroyed, or is there continuity with the new creation God will create? To answer these questions we must return to two crucial passages that consider this elsewhere in the NT.

2 Peter 3:10, 11. The context of these verses is Peter's warning about the character of the last days. Scoffers will use the very constancy of the created order as an argument against God's promises (v. 4). They forget two things, says Peter. First, the same God that created the world by his word has stored it up for fire "being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (v. 7). Second, the very delay expresses the mercy of God, who desires all men to repent (v. 9). But the day of the Lord—that is, the day of judgment—will come. To describe this, Peter uses language from the apocalyptic tradition and the OT (Ex. 15; Ps. 18, 89) and the Olivet Discourse; that is, he uses fantastic images to express a reality that transcends our ordinary powers of expression. There will be a cosmic catastrophe in which heaven will "disappear in a roar of flames,"¹⁶ and the elements will be dissolved. The following verse describes the outcome of the judgment. Older translations have elected the Greek reading consistent with previous verses but with less manuscript support: "the earth and the works that are upon it will be *burned up*" (v. 10, RSV). The newer translations follow the better manuscripts and read for "burned" "discovered" or "laid bare" (cf. NIV, NEB). This reading implies that the process of judgment is such that the essential qualities of the earth will be preserved, while what is evil will be destroyed. This is consistent with the use of fire in Scripture as a purifying rather than a destructive element (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12-15 *et al*). What is envisioned here, then, is a judgment through fire, a kind of cosmic death out of which emerges a renewed earth.

Romans 8:19-21. Support for this line of thinking is found in the second passage, from Romans, where the strongest NT evidence appears that the earth is destined to

share in the redemption of God's people. The context in chapter 8 is the life that is promised to the one who is righteous by faith and the complete liberation promised in the gospel (v. 2). Verses 17-30 mark a transition from obedience to the hope that belongs to one possessed by the Holy Spirit and who is thus a joint-heir with Christ. Our verses then emphasize that creation itself waits with a "neck-straining expectancy" for the revealing of something that is now hidden from view.¹⁷ This hidden reality is the completion of redemption associated in verse 23b with the resurrection. Creation was subjected to futility at the time of the curse (Gen. 3:17-19), obviously by God himself, and thus has failed to reach the goal set for it (explained in v. 21 as "bondage to decay"). Despite decay, however, there is hope that the final purposes of God for the earth will triumph. But this cannot happen until mankind is able to play its proper role of having dominion: "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (v. 19b). When that dominion is restored (as Revelation so amply assures us it will be), then creation itself will be liberated. "Paul sees the future glory of believers not by itself but accompanied by the glorious liberation of the whole subhuman creation."¹⁸ Meanwhile, creation groans and waits expectantly, with a hope that focuses on those who already live righteously!

A Vision of the End of History

The end will surely come, but Revelation makes it clear that this is no predetermined process that is working like a kind of fate. It will be the personal decision of God, and it will take into account the activities of his people. The preaching of the gospel is already a sign that the end approaches. As previously in Scripture, moreover, God remains open to the cry of his people. One of the earliest prayers in the Church was the prayer, "May our Lord come," a prayer which closes the Book of Revelation (22:20). So it is that though God delays his coming because of his mercy, he may shorten the time for the sake of his people who cry out to him for deliver-

ance (cf. Luke 18:7). The last days unfold in the context of a dialogue between God and his people.

Revelation pictures this end of history in two separate stages, the first described in chapter 20, the second in chapters 21, 22. The first stage is the establishment of Christ's kingdom on the earth, pictured in Revelation 20:1-10 and usually called the millennium. The background of this picture lies in the OT sabbath rest for the land and the Jewish messianic kingdom which precedes the end of all things. (Klein believes Paul may have this in mind in 1 Corinthians 15:24.¹⁹) It is also the fulfillment of the Christians' prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven and of Christ's promise that the meek (his followers) shall inherit the earth.

The millennium is an image of the perfection and completion of God's created work, what might be called the sabbath week of creation. "The kingdom of Christ (is) the sabbath week of history so fulfilling the type of the kingdom in the sabbath of creation."²⁰ During this period the powers of evil will objectively cease to exist in the world, and the power of the resurrection will break out in the whole of human existence.²¹ Finally, in fulfillment of Revelation 5:10, God's people will reign with Christ on the earth. At last, in fulfillment of the promises to Adam and to David, final dominion will be realized. As M. Rissi says, the dominion belonging to the Church by virtue of Christ's work will be revealed, "their secret nature will be revealed."²² The millennial kingdom is an image of great power and meaning even if we cannot describe it exactly. The number of years—1,000—may stand for a perfectly long period of time, a week of years. But it marks the perfect triumph of Christ's kingdom on earth, the perfection of creation, the link between this world and the next.

The second and final period of the end is called a new saving act in which everything will be made new (21:5). This represents the goal of God's creative and redemptive work and is described by John as a heavenly city coming down out

of heaven. But note that while it is clearly a new creative work (21:1) there is a continuity implied with the present order. Consider the following:

First the NT makes it plain that God's people are already, in the last days, citizens of heaven (Heb. 12:22; Phil. 3:20; and Gal. 4:26). Revelation continues this idea, speaking of God's people as dwelling in heaven even while they suffer on the earth (13:6; 5:9-13; 12:12). That is, because of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the reality of the resurrection-life of Christ, God's people have tasted already the reality of the age to come.

While the judgment spoken of in chapter 21 (and in 2 Peter 3) will be complete and final, the Scriptures imply that it brings with it the perfection and salvation of all that is good and perfect. We have noticed all the way through our study that God's work of judgment has another side of renewal and salvation. It is clear that this will be true of God's final judgment as well. The final judgment is pictured in Revelation as primarily a destruction of death and Satan—those things which threaten creation—rather than of creation itself. As G. R. Beasley-Murray comments: "There is not a line of John's description of the city of God which is not capable of realization in measure within history, although its perfect expression requires the transcendent order as John makes plain."²³ The dimensions of the city may transcend space and time as we know it, but Revelation pictures this as the perfecting rather than the destruction of created structures. Indeed, the very fact that John uses elements from our experience to describe what is in one sense indescribable indicates that the New Jerusalem gives to this order a higher meaning. John's vision, Paul Minear says, "gives to man's existence within space and time a final and indestructible meaning."²⁴

Finally continuity is confirmed by the fact that twice John mentions that all the glory of the nations will be brought into the New Jerusalem (21:24, 26). There will be a continuing battle between the values of Jerusalem and those of Babylon in these last days: While we cannot always iden-

tify which nation in history belongs where, we can say on the basis of Revelation that what is of Jerusalem will find a place in the new creation, while what is of Babylon will be destroyed. (Mouw²⁵ goes on to argue that in some sense historically developed institutions will be "received" into the kingdom of God; cf. Revelation 22:2, 3.) For the NT makes it plain that our works will follow us. So we can invest ourselves in the seemingly hopeless work of making our society and its institutions more just because by faith we see through them to the heavenly Jerusalem.

As the goal God has for his people is one in which the structures and environment reflect the loving communion among persons that will prevail, so we must do more than encourage individual human development. God desires a place where people may be truly human and reflect him. So our witness must tend to change places as well as people. We insist on this precisely because God will one day transform both into his likeness. Such a faith, Míguez-Bonino believes, "makes it possible for the Christian to invest his life historically in the building of a temporary and imperfect order with the certainty that neither he nor his efforts is meaningless or lost."²⁶

The image of the New Jerusalem is the climactic event in the biblical drama. It brings together all the prophetic strands of Scripture and unites God, his people and heaven and earth into a single glorious unity. The center of the vision is the fact that God's dwelling is with man. Then the communion of biblical religion is perfected. There will be no more Temple, and the light of his presence will be manifested—there will be no sun. God will at that time completely reveal himself, and his presence will be the determining reality of the new city. At the same time, this is the place of God's people. There is an interesting ambiguity to the heavenly city: it is city and it is a people (just as Jerusalem is often used both as a city and as a people). Now the people of God who doubted and were wavering in chapters 2 and 3, who suffered in chapter 6 are perfected and glorified (21:3, 4). They are called a people, a son (21:7), and yet they

are nations (22:2). They will experience no suffering (21:4) and will know complete satisfaction of their needs:

They shall hunger no more,
Neither thirst any more;
The sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne
will be their shepherd. (7:16, 17)

The New Jerusalem represents finally a new and perfected created order, a "resurrection" of the earth that will match that of the body. But this creation—perfect in splendor and righteousness and radiant in beauty and life—will link heaven and earth in one reality. The river of life flowing from the throne of God "symbolizes the fulness of life-powers which flow through paradise,"²⁷ but also reminds us of the waters in Eden (Gen. 2:10) and the river in Ezekiel's vision of the temple (Ezek. 47:1, 12). This home for God and man will be the ultimate source and locus of all creativity, the home for all the glory of the nations. But alas, there are walls; John goes to great length to describe them in 21:9-21. Though they reflect the beauty that is inside and though their gates are always open (as the way to God has always been open throughout Scripture), there is an outside and an inside: for "nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27).

This is the future that even now determines and shapes our present. For it is to this future order that we belong, and to which we are meant to point with every fibre of life and work.