

The Strange Worlds of Apocalyptic, Christian Ethics, and Princeton Theological Seminary

Ezekiel 11:14–20
2 Corinthians 5:16–6:2

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The following is a convocation address that was delivered in Miller Chapel at Princeton Theological Seminary on September 5, 2013. Although direct reference to the work of the New Testament scholar, J. Louis Martyn, is made frequently throughout the address, the influence of Christopher Morse also stands behind everything I say about the significance of apocalyptic for theology and Christian ethics. Christopher was my advisor in the Ph.D. program in Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, starting in 1979, and continues to be my mentor and friend as well as conversation partner regarding all things apocalyptic.

PART I: THREE WORLDS

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:17–19) As I begin my 23rd year at Princeton Seminary, I know that everything has become new. But I say that *not* because we stand at the beginning of a new school year (although I always find the beginning of school energizing), *not* because we have a new entering class (although I'm very glad to welcome all of you who are beginning your first year of studies at PTS), *not* because we have new faculty and administrative staff joining us (although I welcome you with enthusiasm), and not even because we have a new president. (Of course, Mr. President, you aren't entirely new here, but I'm pleased to congratulate you as you begin your first full academic year with us, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak tonight.)¹

All of those things are exiting, but they are not the things that make everything new. Everything is new because God has made it so. *There is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.* Keeping that in mind, and the fact that this is an occasional *address* (neither a sermon nor strictly speaking an academic lecture), tonight I'm going to reflect on our *life together* at this seminary by describing what I'm calling the strange worlds of apocalyptic, Christian Ethics, and Princeton Theological Seminary.

1 M. Craig Barnes became the seventh president of Princeton Theological Seminary in January 2013. He also serves as professor of pastoral ministry.

First, the Strange World of Apocalyptic

Many Christians are rightly suspicious of the word “apocalyptic” as it refers to the expectation of the end of the world, for it can generate terribly irresponsible attitudes. Forty years ago, Hal Lindsey's popular book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, equated God's end of the world with nuclear holocaust, making the latter something Christians could anticipate with joy.² There are also apocalyptic minded people, like Harold Camping, who declare the world will end on a specific day. (In his case, most recently, it was May 21, 2011.) And not long ago, the *Left Behind* series expressed cruel delight in the eternal destruction of those who are left behind at the rapture.³

When I refer to apocalyptic, I am *not* thinking of Hal Lindsey, Harold Camping, or *Left Behind* theology. I'm referring to Pauline apocalyptic as addressed in the work of the New Testament scholar, and one of my teachers, J. Louis Martyn. While Pauline apocalyptic does refer to Paul's expectation of the imminent end of the world, it does so with a twist, because he is not just referring to a future event. In Pauline apocalyptic, the New Age, which is, according to Lou Martyn, “the space of grace, the orb of life, the sphere of power under the Lordship of Christ, the arena of freedom and life” is engaged in battle with the Old Age, which is “the space of evil and sin, the orb of death, the sphere of power generated by the powers and principalities, the arena of slavery and death.”⁴

These are not, however, two spheres that stand side by side from which we are to choose. One world, the New Age in Christ, has invaded the other and created a new reality. We are called to live within that new space created by God's revelation in Christ and become living parables of divine action. Furthermore, according to Martyn, Pauline apocalyptic provides us with bi-focal vision so that we can see in the world around us “the profound depths of evil and the profound heights of God's redeeming power.”⁵ Apocalyptic helps us understand what it means for the church to “have inherited both the triumphant Hallelujah Chorus

2 Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

3 Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* series, 16 volumes (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1995–2007). For a humorous and insightful critique of left behind theology see D. Mark Davis, *Left Behind and Loving It: A Cheeky Look at the End of Times* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011). Davis says the Christ of *Left Behind* theology is like Wyatt Earp in the movie *Tombstone*, who, having been run out of town, yells: “Tell them I'm coming back, and hell's coming with me!” Davis says it makes you wonder why anyone ever “thought it was a good idea to pray, ‘Come Lord Jesus!’” (*Left Behind*, 2)

4 Original quotation from J. Louis Martyn, “From Paul to Flanner O'Connor,” *The Morning Lectures*, (“Grace in a Troubled World”) 1980. The quotation can be found in a slightly altered form in J. Louis Martyn, “From Paul to Flannery O'Connor With the Power of Grace,” *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (London: T&T Clark, 1997), 281.

5 This quotation is from an unpublished manuscript of a presentation given by J. Louis Martyn to the Duodecim Society in 1982. One similar to it can be found in J. Louis Martyn, “From Paul to Flannery O'Connor With the Power of Grace,” *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 284: “To see bi-focally in Paul's terms is to see *both* the enslaving Old Age and God's invading and liberating new creation.”

and the suffering world.”⁶ I will return to those aspects of Pauline apocalyptic shortly, but first we turn to the strange world of Christian ethics.

The Strange World of Christian Ethics

Christian ethics really isn’t as strange as it is complex. There is no agreement among scholars regarding how to define it, how to identify its various parts, or how to describe its relationship to Christian belief. Using an image employed by the nineteenth century Jewish scholar, Leo Baeck, Lou Martyn says that ethics has had difficulty finding a “stable home” within Christianity.⁷ Sometimes, ethics has been “banned to live in a sort of shabby lean-to, having no organic relation to the main house of faith.”⁸ Here, ethics is an afterthought to right doctrine and is often restricted to personal piety, where it can become comfortable with the suffering of others, since personal piety can encourage us to protect our clear conscience even if doing means that others have to suffer.

In the broader world of academic theology, there are theologians who focus almost exclusively on right doctrine. For them, faith becomes strictly a matter of right belief, ignoring what responsible action looks like when we *obey* the God in whom we believe. These theologians may, in fact, be protecting important affirmations of the faith, but they have little need to bring together what we believe with what we do.

On the other hand, ethics has sometimes been allowed to leave the lean-to and take over the house of faith completely. Here, ethics constitutes the *whole* of Christianity. Issues of justice and human welfare (which are neglected when ethics is banished to the lean-to) take over entirely and turn the Church into a social service agency or a community of political activists. In the broader world of academic theology, there are theologians who define the Church *solely* as an organization to promote social justice, believing that long established Christian doctrines, such as the uniqueness of Christ and the sovereignty of God, have caused so much suffering in the world, they need to be dismantled. These theologians may, in fact, be doing good things, but they have no need for classic Christian doctrine or for the mysteries and practices of faith.

Lou Martyn insists that neither image (ethics banned to the lean-to or ethics taking over the house of faith entirely) is consistent with Pauline apocalyptic. Because Paul’s letters include sections of moral exhortation, it’s easy to divide them into theology, on the one hand, and lists of vices and virtues, on the other, or doctrine and application, but that interpretation of Paul is on the wrong track. Every theological affirmation in Paul’s letters is also an ethical statement, and every imperative arises from a theological affirmation.

And the ethic one does find in Paul is not the one people are usually look-

6 J. Louis Martyn, “From Paul to Flanner O’Connor,” *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 279–80.

7 J. Louis Martyn, “Leo Baeck’s Reading of Paul,” *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 66.

8 *Ibid.*, 67.

ing for.⁹ Ethics often focuses on the human agent’s ability to know and to do the good. In what Martyn calls the theological two-step, this view understands God as offering human beings grace and a choice between good and evil, and by exercising free will, we are, in turn, free to choose or reject what God offers. But in Paul, Martyn says, the focus is not on the autonomous, human agent; ethics is first of all concerned with what *God* has done, is doing, and will do *for us*. Our task is not to turn what God has done into universal principles that we follow; our task is to obey God, who has set us free, and to become living parables of the New Creation with our actions always pointing to what God has done for us and for the world.¹⁰

Finally, the Strange World of Princeton Seminary

Like ethics, the Seminary isn’t strange, so much as it, too, is complex. Most institutions are rather easily identified as primarily liberal or mainly conservative. But when I first came to Princeton Seminary in 1991, I would hear graduates say: “Princeton Seminary was never that conservative when I was a student there.” And then, on another occasion, I would hear some graduates declare: “When I was a student, Princeton Seminary was never the liberal institution it has now become.” So, which was it? And which is it? Are we conservative, or are we primarily liberal? Well, in fact, faculty and students, administration and staff, represent a broad spectrum of views from very conservative to very liberal, and all kinds of positions in between. Some of us affirm classic Christian doctrines; others embrace feminist, womanist, and liberation theologies; and some of us try to bring them together in conversation. Many of us are Presbyterian, but we also represent a variety of Wesleyan and Baptist traditions, and we have an increasing number of Pentecostals. We are Episcopalian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, UCC, Disciples, and no doubt many others that I’m leaving out.

Studies show that seminaries that have the least conflict and the greatest growth (or, these days, the slowest decline) are those made up of like-minded individuals—most especially conservative evangelical seminaries. *At PTS, we are not like-minded*. Our differences can challenge us to grow individually and as a community, but they can also erupt into serious conflict, which can do serious harm. Besides doctrine, biblical interpretation, and particular moral issues, conflict can arise in situations that involve race or gender or sexual orientation. When Paul tells us that God has given us a ministry of reconciliation, we need to take that very seriously.

9 Christopher Morse also makes this claim in, “The Ethics of Heaven,” chapter four of *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 75–98.

10 This is one of the reasons why public display of the Ten Commandments is wrong from the perspective of Christian faith (besides being unconstitutional). It reduces the commandments to a list of rules to live by, omitting the prologue that tells us who God is: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2).

PART II: PUTTING THESE THREE WORLDS TOGETHER

Having described the “strange” worlds of apocalyptic, Christian ethics, and Princeton Seminary, now I want to put the three together to see what we may discern about our life together as we begin our new academic year. There are two aspects of Pauline apocalyptic as Louis Martyn describes it (that I touched on earlier) that I think are especially important for us to consider: bi-focal vision and the changed reality in which we live.

Bi-focal Vision. Martyn says that bi-focal vision stands at the heart of Pauline apocalyptic. Many of us see the world with uni-focal vision. Some of us look at the world pessimistically and see only suffering. We see that nothing will ever change and that problems are too big to solve. Others of us look at the world and see only the good things. We see that progress has been made, things are changing, and life is good. Lou Martyn says that Pauline apocalyptic challenges our uni-focal vision and provides us instead with bi-focal vision so that we see both the profound suffering and evil in the world *and* God’s triumphant grace. Walter Brueggemann says that we are shaped by the character of our discourse and that ethical reflection must be mediated through “disclosures of hurt and articulations of hope.”¹¹

If our life together is to be successful, we must be able to see and disclose past and present hurt. It serves no one for us to deny the moral failures that have marked our past or to ignore the legacy of those failures that is very much with us today. But if our life together is to be successful, we must also be able to articulate our hope, which includes remembering the moral strengths of our past and living into our calling today.

There was a time in our history when the seminary’s most eminent theologians refused to condemn slaveholders. They didn’t promote slavery (they thought it was wrong), but they advocated a very gradual change away from slavery, and they said some terrible things about slaves. And yet, **Theodore Wright**, the first African American to earn a degree from a theological seminary in the U.S., graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1829. A 1953 graduate, **James Reeb**, who was white, risked and lost his life marching with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama. We have graduated African Americans and Asian Americans and Hispanics who have become leaders in the church. *Bi-focal vision allows us to see that our history includes human sinfulness, and it allows us to see the triumph of God’s grace.*

There was a time when the seminary’s founding theologians believed that while Paul’s statement that women should be silent in the churches was universal and timeless, Paul’s references to women who prophesied in the church was limited to his own time and no longer valid for today. And yet, **today** the ordination of women simply isn’t an issue for Princeton Seminary or for the denomination that supports it. It is a given that we support women who join our student body to fulfill their call to ordained ministry. *Bi-focal vision allows us to see that our history includes human sinfulness, and it allows us to see the triumph of God’s grace.*

11 Walter Brueggemann, “The Rhetoric of Hurt and Hope: Ethics Odd and Crucial,” *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 45.

There was a time when gay and lesbian students at Princeton Seminary met together as a group only in secret for fear that if anyone knew they had joined a gay organization on campus they would endure condemnation from various members of the seminary community, who would in turn threaten them with expulsion from their denominations by revealing who they were. And yet, today BGLASS is an officially recognized student organization. And the denomination that supports this seminary no longer specifically excludes from ordained ministry its LGBT members. *Bi-focal vision allows us to see that our history includes human sinfulness, and it allows us to see the triumph of God’s grace.*

We are called to be, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, a community *for* others and that includes being *for each other*.¹² We cannot ignore the suffering of those around us just because it isn’t immediately clear to us. Years ago, a white student said in class that she had never really understood the daily reality of racism until she went shopping with her mother-in-law, who is black. She was stunned at the way her mother-in-law and she as her shopping partner were treated in department stores, something that she as a white woman had never experienced when shopping alone or with white friends.

We have to be willing to see the suffering of others that we may not have seen before. People of color, women, gays and lesbians, and numerous individuals who may not belong to any of those groups, but who carry memories of soul-destroying events, need us to acknowledge their suffering as real. But apocalyptic bi-focal vision also allows us to see the triumph of God’s grace victory not confined to the world to come, but a triumph that has already occurred in the world, establishing a new reality, so that we know that the suffering we have endured does not defeat us.

A New Reality. That brings us to the second aspect of Pauline apocalyptic. God’s revelation in Jesus Christ has changed the nature of reality. God has reconciled the world to God’s self—not *will* reconcile if we do the right things, but *has* reconciled the world, and that’s the reality in which we now live. When the founder of black liberation theology, James Cone, wrote *Black Theology and Black Power*, he insisted that “people cannot live according to what *ought* to be, but according to what *is*,” claiming the church “means men and women running through the streets announcing that ‘freedom is a reality.’”¹³ In Christ, people *are* free—not will be, not ought to be, but in Christ *are* free. Of course, James Cone is as aware as any of us that there are people who live under the weight of oppression generated by those who serve the powers and principalities in the world. But he is also aware that all who wield such power over others are living in the Old Age by Old Age distinctions, which means, they are living a lie.

So, if someone asks you why as a person of color you are still complaining that things aren’t right, consider telling them they’ve lost their bi-focal vision that would allow them to see the suffering of others and have traded that vision for rose-colored glasses. Tell them God’s triumphant grace and their Pollyanna opti-

12 This is a theme that runs throughout Bonhoeffer’s work.

13 James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 67.

mism are not the same thing and that by God's grace you will continue to disclose your hurt and articulate your hope.

If someone says to you: "What are you doing here? You're a woman," tell them they aren't living according to the New Creation where in Christ there is no male or female (Gal. 3:28). Tell them that what you're doing here is what Mary did and what Phoebe and Priscilla and Junia did: you are learning to give witness to the One who was born in a manger and who died on the cross *for* us—for *all* of us.

If someone says to you, you are a sinner in the eyes of God because you're gay, tell them that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and that in passing judgment on you, they are condemning themselves (Rom. 3:23 and Rom. 2:1). Tell them, you are a child of God, created by God, saved by God, and sustained by God—just like everybody else.

And, of course, you don't have to be a person of color, or a woman—you don't have to be gay or lesbian—to defend those who are. Lou Martyn suggests that Pauline apocalyptic leaves us with a question: "Where are you in this apocalyptic, cosmic conflict?" Not "where should you be," but "where are you?" And he says, "the answer is as clear as the question":

Look! God has placed us in [God's] struggle for redemption, the ultimate outcome of which is not in question.

God has ... placed us in the front trenches of his apocalyptic war of redemption, that in the power of [God's] unconditional grace we may fight the only good fight in the world, the fight of the God who is the Passionate Advocate of every one of us.¹⁴

Of course, not everyone here agrees with all that I've said. We are not a like-minded institution. Some years ago, a friend of mine and I visited a church for an Ash Wednesday service. When the time came to go forward to receive ashes, I stayed behind. I know that receiving ashes is a meaningful part of Ash Wednesday for many people; it's just not for me. As my friend got up to walk forward, she leaned toward me and said, "There are no Christians on this pew." Since I was the only person left on the pew, I was stunned. I had always known this person to have a gracious, non-judgmental spirit about her. So, when she came back, I had to say something. I turned to her and asked: "Do you really think I'm not a Christian because I didn't want to receive ashes?" She looked at me as if I had lost my mind. "What in the world are you talking about?" she asked. I responded by saying, "Well, you said there were no Christians on this pew, and since I was the only one left sitting, I thought you were saying I'm not a Christian." She leaned very close to me and spoke slowly and clearly: "*Cushions*," she said. "I said there are no *cushions* on this pew."

There are no cushions on these pews in Miller Chapel either. But the pews

are full of Christians. We are not like-minded Christians. We aren't always going to agree. And our disagreements matter. They will sometimes cause some of us to harm others; they will sometimes cause heartache or anger; and they will occasionally cause some of us to stumble and fall. But at the beginning of this academic year, as we welcome new students, new faculty, new administrators and staff, and the new President, we are reminded that God has reconciled God's self to us in Christ and has given us a ministry of reconciliation. God has taken our hearts of stone and given us new hearts—hearts of flesh that can share the pain and the joys of others however much we may disagree. Here, at the beginning of the academic year, we can use bi-focal vision to see into the depths of suffering *and* into the heights of God's triumphant grace. Let us hear and believe that God will give us one heart and put a new spirit within us. For God has spoken:

'At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you' (2 Cor. 6:2).

See, *now* is the acceptable time; see, *now* is the day of salvation!

¹⁴ J. Louis Martyn, "From Paul to Flannery O'Connor," *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 297.