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 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.)

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.

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

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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).
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 could 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.” 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. Sometimes, ethics has been “banned to live in a sort of shabby lean-to, having no organic relation to the main house of faith.” 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 doctrines taking over the house of faith entirely. 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.

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 is 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.

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8 Ibid., 67.
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.”

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.**

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

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!

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