

Recovering the Divine Narrative: Advent, Eschatology, and the Preacher

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Dividing my life's work between the church and the academy has given me an interesting vantage point from which to consider some of the challenges facing clergy. Some of those challenges arise out of the demands associated with parish life, some from the way clergy are prepared, and some of those challenges can be seen in the lives of college and seminary students themselves, even as they prepare to serve the church.

My first fulltime teaching position was in New Testament studies at a small liberal arts college, and in January, I often taught a four-week intensive devoted to the Book of Revelation. Eschatology was at the center of much of what we discussed. Midway through the course one year, I made a passing observation that prompted one of my students to raise his hand suddenly. I realized that we were going to have a far longer conversation than the time remaining before our break, so I suggested we all get a cup of coffee and come back to discuss the student's question. When we settled back in, I turned to Brian and said, "Brian, I gather that you take exception to the last observation that I made," and Brian responded, "No, I take exception to pretty much everything you've said up to this point."

Looking back on it, the class reflected many of the same complex challenges that clergy themselves face when preaching during Advent. If there is a single issue at the heart of the season, it is eschatology. There are few themes that provoke more consternation, confusion, or flat fear, and the task of preaching through the Advent texts takes us into the heart of our own formation on the subject, as well as the haphazard formation of those who sit in our churches' pews.

Judging from my experience with the subject of eschatology in both the church and the academy, I would guess that there is the same kind of bewildering diversity to the average congregation's views on the subject that I have detected in my classes over the years. Both in the academy and in the pulpit, it's worth bearing in mind that there are at least three groups of people who are potentially a part of your congregation.

Eschatology and the Congregation

SBNRs, Nones, and Others

One group may have no frame of reference at all for a conversation about eschatology during the Advent season. This first group includes the so-called "unchurched,"¹ "the spiritual but not religious,"² "the nones,"³ and "the seekers,"⁴ but it also includes a number of people who have lived on the margins of our denominations. The labels used to characterize these groups have evolved quickly, and while those labels are meant to identify a demographic trend, there is no clear delineation between them or an agreed set of definitions at work. This is partly because the research has been evolving rapidly, but the amorphous nature of the labels can also be traced to the

almost programmatic nature of the way some writers are using the language. Some scholars are not just at work describing a trend; they are also prescribing a future for the church, and that goal not only shapes the labels used but conditions the research they do as well.⁵

Anticipating what this larger, ill-defined group will understand what is said from the pulpit is further complicated by the fact that its separation from the church may not be as absolute as some people thought initially. One team of researchers suggests, for example, that a higher percentage of SBNRs are the children of divorced couples, whose religious formation was disrupted by their parents' separation.⁶ Others have proffered the theory that children of parents with lower levels of education or extremely high levels of education are less likely to receive any faith formation at all. Still others have concluded that "nones" have not rejected religion as such, but certain features of religion, including membership, ecclesiastical bureaucracies, and financial involvement.⁷ Both studies, then, suggest that "nones" and "SBNRs" may know more theology than we might expect.

That said, preachers should probably assume that for this first group of people, the sole frame of reference that they may have for the church's eschatology are the endless secular apocalypses that abound in our culture. Those stories reveal something about our common fears and hopes. They also tell us something about the way narrative and "ending" powerfully shape our lives, and both points of contact can provide a useful way into a conversation with people who know little or nothing about the Christian faith. But a conversation about eschatology that takes shape in response to the logic of the Gospel will require a good deal of explanation.

Dispensationalists

On the other end of the spectrum will be a second group of people who have been solidly influenced by dispensationalist readings of Scripture. In some ways this group of parishioners will pose a bigger challenge for preachers and pastors than people who know little or nothing about the subject. They will be specific about the lenses through which they read the Advent lections. They will be certain that they have read those texts in the only truly orthodox fashion possible, and they will instantly resist any alternative interpretation.

The dispensationalist approach to eschatology originated in nineteenth century England with the work of John Nelson Darby, who divided the whole of biblical and human history into two dispensations or eras: the dispensation of the law and the dispensation of grace. The cross was the dividing line between the two eras according to Darby, and his picture of history provided a basic schema for reading Scripture, for assigning the exegetical primacy of specific texts, and for anticipating the eschatological future.⁸

Three things have kept dispensationalist theology alive, even if the numbers of devoted followers ebbed and flowed for the better part of two hundred years. The earliest was *The Scofield Reference Bible*. In 1909, C.I. Scofield paired notes on dispensationalist readings of Scripture with the text itself, offering a lens through which biblical eschatology could be read and understood. Given the daunting nature of eschatological language, Scofield's notes are the only interpretation of biblical theology that many have read. Unsurprisingly, more than one preacher has had to remind people over the years that the notes themselves are not inspired. They were

entirely Scofield's work. What is surprising is how durable Scofield's treatment has been. His Bible continues to be printed by Oxford University Press and widely used over a century later.⁹

As influential as the Scofield Bible has been, however, it is hard to believe that dispensationalism would enjoy the influence it has today if it were not for Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye. Lindsey, a student at Dallas Theological Seminary during the late fifties, was thoroughly immersed in dispensationalist theology. While some of his professors no doubt winced at the use he made of his lecture notes, Lindsey successfully wed dispensationalism, his own unique approach to current events, and popular marketing in a ground breaking book called *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Declaring that the end was near, Lindsey capitalized in particular on the possibility of nuclear war in suggesting that history, technology, and prophecy had finally and convincingly merged with one another, and the book sold like proverbial "hot cakes." *Late Great* went through thirteen editions and, in spite of shifting political realities, sold over fifteen million copies.¹⁰

Beginning in 1995, Tim LaHaye followed up with a "fictional" version of Lindsey's "non-fictional" *tour de force*. Cleverly arguing that his stories weren't scriptural but that they could be, LaHaye abandoned the effort to use eschatological texts in a more direct fashion and instead told the story of those who are "left behind."¹¹ As badly written as they are, LaHaye's efforts to catechize a new generation of readers has been even more successful than Lindsey's. The *Left Behind* series has sold over 60 million copies. Seven of the novels have hit *The New York Times* bestseller list and the *Left Behind* story has spawned a number of spin-offs including children's books, graphic novels, television series, and first-run movies.¹² The latest airing in theatres was the movie *Left Behind: The End Begins*, starring Nicholas Cage this last October.¹³

It is perilously easy for preachers to dismiss people who read the Advent texts with LaHaye's work in hand or to assume that no one in their churches has been exposed to LaHaye. Dispensationalists have been so effective at communicating their message that basic familiarity with dispensationalist understandings of eschatology is more likely than not.¹⁴

Members: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

A third group in most churches will be members of our congregations. They will know something about eschatology, but they probably won't be familiar with the term itself. In fact, what this group will be thinking about as they hear the Advent lections read is a loose pastiche of half-formed ideas about heaven and hell, judgment and deliverance, scattered political interpretations of the Kingdom of God, and cultural critiques of Scripture that associate some or all of what they have heard with an outmoded and ancient way of thinking. To make matters more complicated, even as they reject much of what they have been told about the passages they are hearing, they will nonetheless think that the "orthodox" way to read those passages requires that outmoded way of thinking that they have already rejected. Treating eschatology seriously would require them, they think, to abandon ways of thinking that they see as scientific and intellectually virtuous. A church that thinks that Jesus was a good man and a social prophet whose influence is still alive in the world but not a savior or divine hardly recognizes him as a figure who can speak convincingly about the end or purpose of history.

It is hard to underestimate how poorly formed in the faith the average church member might be. According to a recent Pew Foundation report, “nearly six-in-ten U.S. adults say that religion is ‘very important’ in their lives, and roughly four-in-ten say they attend worship services at least once a week,” but the same people are “uninformed about the tenets, practices, history, and leading figures of major faith traditions—including their own.” The report went on to note that “more than four-in-ten Catholics in the United States (45%) do not know that their church teaches that the bread and wine used in Communion do not merely symbolize but actually become the body and blood of Christ,” and “about half of Protestants (53%) cannot correctly identify Martin Luther as the person whose writings and actions inspired the Protestant Reformation, which made their religion a separate branch of Christianity.”¹⁵ There was no specific information available in the report about the eschatological understandings of the respondents and nothing specifically about Advent. But if such basic information about the Christian faith is missing from the experience of Catholics and Protestants, it hardly stretches the point to assume that the same kind of ignorance prevails in connection with eschatology.

There are a number of explanations for this state of affairs. One is no doubt pragmatic. Pastors and priests of small churches complain that they lack the time to spend educating people in the Christian faith. Leaders of larger congregations with the resources to do the work often allow their educational efforts to degenerate into boutique programs, educating people in anything and everything *other* than the church’s faith. Regardless, it is clear from the Pew Study and other surveys that we have failed in our catechetical mission. To paraphrase Pogo, in some cases “we have met the enemy and the enemy is us.”

Exploring Advent from the Inside Out

Preaching in Advent, then, requires a sense of the complexity of our congregations, but it also requires us as preachers to confront our own spiritual and intellectual formation. Do we really believe that Advent marks the beginning of the year in a way that is more consequential than any other beginning? What do we mean when we call this an eschatological moment or, more directly, what do we believe about eschatology? How does preparation for that eschatological moment, or waiting on God, require of us? How do we read the times in which we live against the backdrop of the Messiah’s return?

To answer those questions in an honest fashion is to begin defining the task of preaching at Advent from the inside out. It also helps to define the themes that we can explore throughout the Advent season. You will have your own answers to those questions. By way of conversation, allow me to offer answers to them.

In what sense does Advent mark the beginning of a new year?

Positively, Advent is an invitation to enter the drama of salvation history anew, preparing for a new world order. The anticipated coming of the Messiah, and with him the coming of the Kingdom of God, is a singular event that changes everything. Advent invites us to live into the new year focused on the things of God: God’s priorities, God’s way of looking at the world, God’s way of being in the world. It is this challenge that makes Advent the beginning of the year for those who have been

baptized into Christ. The obstacle we face in grasping that reality is not the so-called secular world around us. It is the depth of our own conviction that subverts us.¹⁶ But the spell that the world exercises over us still needs to be broken, and breaking that spell is not easy. Sandwiched between Thanksgiving and Christmas, the Advent season has become an extended baby shower, satisfying the needs of people who, if they must, are certainly welcome to light candles while they wait for Christmas to arrive. It is a religious sideshow that occupies the attention of people who aren't quite as busy as the rest of us.

The preacher must break that spell, alerting the congregation to its spiritual peril before she can begin to explore the spiritual promise made by God in Advent. That, of course, is always the case with the anticipated "Day of the Lord."¹⁷ It is judgment to those who fail to appreciate its significance. It is the day of deliverance to those who grasp its promise and prepare for it.

One way to accomplish that task is to do what the rest of the world will do a month later, but will do it a very different way: take stock, evaluate the year behind us, ask what our own schemes really accomplished, name the inadequacy of the salvation we craft for ourselves, and name the places where God has been present, the victories achieved as a result.

An effective preacher will not review the year behind us as a tableau of triumphs and fears or as a series of celebrity moments. The romantic and sentimental approach that we take to the year behind us is precisely why on January 2 we begin living our lives in the same way we lived them on December 31. In Advent, an effective preacher will in good Ignatian fashion ask the congregation, "What were the moments that drew us closer to God and others in love?" and "What were the moments that drove us away from God and others?" To begin enshrining that process of Examen in the life of a congregation is to begin building a Christian community with the kind of spiritual sensibilities that belong to an Advent people. Driving a wedge between sentimentalism and a preoccupation with what makes us "happy" or successful, such questions cultivate a commitment to discernment as a spiritual discipline and give the congregation a concrete way of making decisions in the year ahead.¹⁸

What do we believe about eschatology?

To make a sweeping, but I hope helpful generalization, most contemporary eschatologies fall into one of four categories: personal,¹⁹ spiritual,²⁰ socio-political,²¹ or cosmic.²² Each has some exegetical claims in its favor, which we won't rehearse here. But none of them, held alone, adequately captures the scope of biblical and Christian eschatology. Nor, for the same reason, can any of the four usefully serve as its center.

It is small wonder, then, that so many conversations about eschatology finally feel smaller and less focused than one might expect from a topic that has been so central to Christian theology. Personal eschatologies appear to leave our world untouched and seem to provide an excuse for treating social issues with casual disregard. Spiritual eschatologies are criticized as quietist in character. Political eschatologies degenerate into human visions of how we might change the world since God is so slow about it. And cosmic eschatologies invite people to "get right with God" and muse about those who might be "left behind." It is no surprise that people who gravitate to one or the other view excoriate those who hold a different eschatology. It is no surprise

that many caricature the whole conversation about eschatology as speculation about “pie in the sky by and by;” and no surprise that the subject itself seems somehow quaint and irrelevant.²³

The difficulty with all four eschatologies, and the problem with the conversation itself, is that the focus is squarely on the nature of eschatological transformation and not on the place of that transformation in salvation history. Or, to put it another way, far too much conversation about eschatology is about our place in that transformation: our salvation, our redemption, our lives, our world, and our social order.

The problem with that obsession is this: eschatology in the biblical and Christian tradition is not about us. It is about God. Or to put it another way, eschatological hope is about the promise that in the end, God will make good on the claim to be God. It is this that needs to be communicated from the pulpit in clear, direct language. Eschatology is not about redeeming your life or mine. It is not about transforming the social or spiritual order, and it is not about saving the planet. All of that and more will happen. But it will happen, because in the end, God will make good on God’s claim to be God by conquering death and by returning us and the world to a condition that meets and exceeds the conditions that held sway in the beginning. Our well being, then, and our story are caught up in a larger narrative that is theocentric, not anthropocentric.²⁴

What does waiting in that eschatological place require of us?

By trivializing eschatology, the Left Behind tableau has robbed us of the specifically eschatological waiting that is characteristic of the Advent texts and can be found in our eucharistic prayers. We are understandably put off by the fearful quest to avoid being left behind and the self-righteous picture of those who want to know “Who is going to hell?”

Waiting and watching as it is found in Mark 13 and other Advent texts in any year is not about such vain and silly preoccupations. It is about availability. It is about the ability to walk with Christ. It is, to reprise what I have just said about eschatology, our willingness to cooperate with the life-giving message that God will make good on God’s claim to be God. Waiting in Advent, then, necessarily requires confession, repentance, and amendment of life, not because God longs to make us feel badly about ourselves and not because God enjoys seeing us in pain, but because it is our own brokenness and sin that makes that availability impossible.

That emphasis will take us headlong into opposition with our culture. One of the real challenges of society marked by the spiritual seeking I described above is that it is often marked by longing for a spiritual life emptied of the need to change and unwilling to acknowledge something or someone larger than ourselves. More than once I have heard Christian clergy and others argue that we are our own best judges of what we need spiritually, rather than listening for what God wants to give us.²⁵ Further, as Karl Menninger noted years ago, our culture has lost its ability to talk about sin.²⁶ As a result we tend to forget that God is God and we are not.

But if the central problem with the human race is its inability to acknowledge that God is God, and if that claim lies at the heart of a narrative that ends with God’s firm declaration, “I am,” then there is no internally consistent preaching of Advent that can do without waiting that results in confession, repentance, and amendment of life. These are not unrelated vestiges of an abusive spirituality that the church

imposes on otherwise well-adjusted people outside its walls. It is the truth that we learn about ourselves when Scripture reads us.

How, then, do we read the times in which we live against the backdrop of the Messiah's return?

It is common to think that eschatological language is about sweeping away this world in favor of the next. But this approach misunderstands the way eschatology is used in the biblical text. In both the Old and New Testaments, eschatology is not just about the comprehensive healing and redemption that lies ahead. It is about what that remarkable ending says about the present.

No matter how long the interlude may last between the first and the second coming of the Messiah, we live out our lives in God's presence, and both the present and the future belong to God. The durability of that truth does not lie in fulfilling even one of a hundred predictions nor, thankfully, does it depend upon our ability to restore the natural order or remake the social order. It is grounded in the truth that is the claim of the one who was "in the beginning" and will be made manifest "in the end."²⁷

Our times, then, are exactly like those of any generation: marked by the responsibility to "wait and watch," requiring patient and faithful dependence upon the one whose claim to be God has been guaranteed. We are not diminished by that fact. We do not need to be delivered from this world, nor do we need to abandon our availability for the work of God's kingdom in favor of kingdoms of our own making. It is enough to know that we are the object of God's love and the bearers of God's Christ-restored image.

In the final analysis, this is the challenge the preacher faces in Advent: the telling of a story, a metanarrative that transcends every other life narrative and becomes not just *a* reality, but *is the reality* that governs the life of the church and the year begun in Advent.²⁸ That conviction should be brought home to every congregation, not as an abstraction or as sentimental hope, but as the wellspring of a life lived and poured out in the presence of God.

Notes

1 Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

2 *Ibid.*

3 The term, "Nones," was first coined by Barry Kosmin. See: Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keyser, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans, Who, What, Why, Where* (Ithaca: Paramount Market Publishing, 2006), xii. But, as Kosmin notes, the term has taken on a life of its own: Wendy Thomas Russell, "An Interview with the Guy Who Named the 'Nones,'" January 10, 2013: <http://wendythomasrussell.com/nones/>. Cf., for example, the Pew Religion and Public Life Survey conducted in 2012: "'Nones' on the Rise," <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

4 See Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1ff.

5 Cf., for example, Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013).

6 Jiexia Elisa Zhai, Christopher G. Ellison, and Charles E. Stokes, "'Spiritual, But Not Religious': The Impact of Parental Divorce on the Religious and Spiritual Identities of Young Adults in the United States," *Review of Religious Research* 49.4 (2008): 379-394.

7 Jamie Manson, "Panel at Fordham focuses on the spiritual AND religious," *National Catholic Reporter*, (December 11, 2013): <http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/panel-fordham-focuses-spiritual-and-religious>. See also: Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion*

in Everyday Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2ff. and Laura Darling, "Listening to the 'Nones': An Interview with Elizabeth Drescher" (May 23, 2013): <http://blueboat.blogs.uua.org/2014/01/21/nones-hurt-angry-or-bored/>

8 For more on Darby, see: Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 141-42, 181-82.

9 Oxford University Press even publishes what they call *The Old Scofield Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For one window into the influence of the Scofield's Bible, see: R. Todd Mangum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster Publishing, 2009).

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

11 Tim F. LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *The Left Behind Collection* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003).

12 Most articles on the subject of LaHaye's influence and the theology of his books inevitably goes well beyond that subject to touch LaHaye's political commitments, so there are few measured theological assessments available. See, for example: Melanie McAlister, "An Empire of Their Own," *The Nation* (September 4, 2003): <http://www.thenation.com/article/empire-their-own?page=0.0>. For a hands-on assessment of LaHaye's franchise, see his own website: <https://timlahaye.com/>. My own effort to analyze what I have also called "roadmap" readings of Scripture's eschatological content as it is found in the Book of Revelation can be found here: Frederick W. Schmidt, *Conversations with Scripture: Revelation*, Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars Study Series (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2005), 1ff.

13 <http://www.leftbehindmovie.com/about/>

14 See: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/september/syria-survey-end-times-armageddon-lifeway.html?paging=off>. Consider these statistics outlined there: "'41 percent of all U.S. adults, 54 percent of Protestants, and 77 percent of evangelicals believe the world is now living in the biblical end times.'...Nearly 4 in 10 Americans (and 65 percent of white evangelicals) believe recent natural disasters are evidence of the End Times, while 15 percent of Americans (and 29 percent of white evangelicals) believe that the end of the world, as predicted in the Book of Revelation, will occur in their lifetimes...'Nearly 15 percent of people worldwide believe the world will end during their lifetime.'"

15 <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/28/u-s-religious-knowledge-survey/>

16 Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann once observed that the challenge facing the church is not secularization. What bedevils the church is its failure to believe in the reality of its own sacramental life. But that failure of nerve extends to more than the church's lack of confidence in its sacraments. The same diffidence is apparent in the church's attitude toward its own creeds. See: Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans., Paul Kachur (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003).

17 See: Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 646ff.

18 For more on the Examen or "examination of consciousness," as well as the concepts of "consolation" ("What were the moments that drew us closer to God and others in love?") and "desolation" ("What were the moments that drove us away from God and others?"), see: John J. English, *Spiritual Freedom: From an Experience of the Ignatian Exercises to the Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995), 111ff.

19 There are countless rehearsals of "what happens to us when we die," which focus on the personal dimension of eschatology, many of them without ever using the word. Some of those hail from beyond the walls of the church (see, for example: Michael Tymn, *The After Life Revealed: What Happens After We Die* (Guildford: White Crow Books, 2011). I am not as surprised as I used to be to find their readers in our churches. Others are written by Christians (see, for example: C. Baxter Kruger, *The Shack Revisited: There is More Going on Here than You Ever Dared to Dream* (New York: Faithwords, 2012).

20 There are a number of what I would call "spiritual" or "spiritualizing" eschatologies that were written long before the term might have been used to describe them as such. One of the best examples is Rudolf Bultmann's existentialist reading of biblical eschatology. See, for example: Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans., Louise Pettiware Smith and Erminie Huntress (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1935), 51ff.

21 Among a number of other "Progressive" Protestants, see: Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011), 191ff. McLaren would probably prefer "participatory" to socio-political and he offers a cautious agnosticism about the

future that sidesteps an unequivocal commitment to a socio-political eschatology, but the weight of his eschatology centers on what we can do. Notably, McLaren's eschatology is deeply shaped by his reaction to the dispensationalist eschatology of his youth.

22 This category includes dispensationalist eschatologies (see below), but it also includes countless secular apocalyptic narratives, many of them rehearsed in popular literature and in film.

23 Cf. my comments earlier this year: Frederick W. Schmidt, "Protagonist Corner," *Journal for Preachers* 37.4 (Pentecost, 2014): 47-48.

24 Augustine does not put it quite this way, but he comes close. Recounting Augustine's reaction to millenarian interpretations in his own day, Paula Fredriksen writes: "Augustine concludes his mediation on final redemption by wrenching all temporal reference away from that amalgm of the seven world-ages and the millennial reign of the saints. The six preceding world ages are indeed historical, he says; but the Great Sabbath, the eschatological seventh day, is the saints themselves who dwell in the heavenly Jerusalem, the eternal *visio pacis*. 'Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they will praise you for ever and ever!' (Ps. 54:5). After the present age, 'God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day; and he will cause us, *who are the seventh day*, to find our rest in him'...." See: Paula Fredriksen, "Apocalypticism," *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed., Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 52.

25 See: Elizabeth Lesser, *The New American Spirituality* (New York: Random House, 1998).

26 Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* 2nd ed. (Portland: Hawthorn Books, 1972).

27 This conclusion accords with the way in which I believe the message of John's Apocalypse should be understood: "Will those of you who live in Asia Minor, knowing the deeper nature of reality, [movement one: 1:1 – 5:14] time and the future, [movement two: 6:1 – 16:21] live your lives in the City of Bablylon or the City of God [movement three: 17:1 – 22:21]?" Schmidt, *Revelation*, 45ff.

28 This challenge has been a subject of concern to me for some time now. I was heartened to find that there are others who share that concern. See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014). See also a fine review of Wright's work by Robert Barron, "Reading N. T. Wright with the Rock," (July 31, 2014): http://www.realcclarreligion.org/articles/2014/07/31/reading_nt_wright_with_the_rock.html.