The Church and Changing Societies: A View from the United States

Dr. Justo L. González

Sino-American Consultation
Nanjing Union Theological Seminary
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I have been asked to speak on "The Church and Changing Societies." As I began reflecting on this subject the first thought that occurred to me was that, as an historian, I learned to measure time in terms of centuries. Then I moved to the United States, where I was surprised to find that historians often measure time in terms of decades. Today, we are gathered in a country that has traditionally understood its history in terms of dynasties. I do not know exactly what that means, but I suspect that as we engage in a Sino-American dialogue it will be important for us to reflect on the dynamics of a dialogue in which one partner represents a civilization that is able to think in terms of dynasties, while the other thinks in term of decades.

The second thought that occurred to me as I began reflecting on the subject, "The Church in Changing Societies," is that the church was born precisely in the midst of such a changing society. Luke tells us that Jesus was born in the time of Augustus Caesar. That means that he was born just at the time of the demise of the Roman Republic and the beginning of a new order. The ancient land of Egypt had been conquered by Rome just a few years earlier. And a few years before that, the Roman Senate had named Herod King of Judea, and forced his authority on the Jewish people. At the time when the Christian church was born, Galilee itself was a hotbed of rebellion against Rome. And in the very years when the Christian Church was forming its identity and writing several of the books that would eventually become part of the New Testament, the Jews were revolting against Rome, and being cruelly suppressed.

Demographically, the policies of the Roman Empire were bringing about radical changes throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Romans "took from their Hellenistic predecessors the notion that human existence at its best is 'civilized' existence—that is, quite literally, 'citified' existence. The greatest invention of antiquity, from the point of view of both Greeks and Romans, was the city. When Aristotle described humans as 'political animals,' he did not mean merely, as we would today, that humans are by nature involved in politics; he also meant that the essence of the human is best seen in that highest of human creations, the polis."[1] What this meant was that Rome saw itself as the great city whose task it was to replicate itself in many other cities. Every imperialistic thrust needs an ideology with which to justify itself. The ideology of Roman imperialism, by which it justified itself, was the building of cities. Rome was the great civilizer, which means the great "cityfier." The very word "civilization," by which most modern Western languages express the highest achievements of a culture, actually means the building of cities.

And builders of cities the Romans were. Where ancient cities already existed, they were rebuilt, embellished, often granted special privileges. Where there were no cities, the Romans built new ones. This was their great pride, so that when a famous orator from Smyrna visited Rome, and sought to praise her for her achievements, he said:

> The coasts and interiors have been filled with cities, some newly founded, others increased under and by you.... All localities are full of gymnasia, fountains, monumental approaches, temples, workshops, schools, and one can say that the civilized world, which had been sick from the beginning, . . . has been brought ... to a state of health.[2]

This supposed state of health which Aelius Aristides describes, however, was seen very differently from another perspective. In order to build cities, the countryside had to pay. While wages remained fairly constant, taxes and inflation took an increasing toll on the rural poor. In Egypt, for instance, where a peasant's lot had never been easy, things were made much worse under Roman rule. The time soon came where the normal wages for a rural worker, 2 oboli a day, could only buy seven-tenths of a liter of unhulled wheat—enough to make a small loaf of bread—and out of that amount, that rural worker had to pay taxes of at least 135 oboli a year—roughly the equivalent of 67 days of work. In other provinces the situation was no better. In Asia Minor, the Book of Revelation records a protest against such conditions. In Rev. 6:5-6 we read:

> When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

The background for that passage is significant. When the King of Pergamum bequeathed most of Asia Minor to the Roman Republic, the region was rich and prosperous. Its main exports were wools and dyestuffs, and its fertile lands grew sufficient wheat for all its population. Yet, as the region became integrated with the rest of the Empire, rich landlords realized that acreage devoted to grapes and olives resulted in much greater income than the same acreage planted to grain. Slowly but inexorably, the land moved into the hands of a few rich owners, who devoted more and more of it to grapevines and olive trees. Grain became scarce and the province, though rich because of its exports of wine and olive oil, was poor in that there was not enough

to eat. In the year 92 A.D., Emperor Domitian issued a decree ordering that half the vineyards in the provinces be destroyed and no more olive trees be planted precisely with the purpose of promoting grain production. But the landed aristocracy raised such an outcry that the emperor rescinded his decree. The result was even greater scarcity of grain, and greater misery for the poor. The normal price of wheat was twelve quarts for a denarius; and barley, which was used mostly for animal feed and for humans only in times of economic difficulty, was supposed to be 24 quarts for a denarius. Thus, what the "living creature" in Rev. 6:6 says is a strong protest against an inflationary process that has made the price of wheat rise by 1200%, and the price of barley rise by 800%: "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!" Furthermore, the rider against whom the living creature raises such a challenge carries in his hands not a bow like the first rider nor a sword like the second, but a pair of scales, symbol of the trade that has made the landed aristocracy rich, and the poor classes even poorer, bringing a devastation comparable to war and to the warriors of the first two horses, who carry a bow and a sword.

Demographically, this resulted in great population shifts. There are records of villages where the population declined to such a point that the entire village disappeared, as peasants moved to the city, fled to the wilderness, or were forced to work for the great latifundia that were developing. There are also records of repeated decrees ordering those who had moved to the cities with no business there to return to the countryside. But such decrees were to no avail, and city governments increasingly found themselves forced to provide a dole to prevent riots

among the growing and restless urban masses.

It was not only the lower classes that saw the changes that were taking place and decried them. The Roman aristocracy also understood that great changes were taking place in the very fibre of society, and bemoaned them. Pliny the Elder, for instance, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul and a friend and companion of Emperor Vespasian, decried the growth of latifundia where slave labor was on the rise, and looked back to former times when the land was divided into smaller holdings cultivated by free citizens who were proud to work the land.[3]

Culturally, the changes were no less dramatic. At the time of Alexander's conquests, much of the ancient civilization of the East (meaning Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia) had been submerged under the universalizing influence of Greek culture. But precisely at the beginning of the Christian era there is the emergence of several movements that have this in common: they are all new creations resulting from the filtering of the ancient, suppressed traditions of the East, through the overlay of Hellenistic culture. Hans Jonas has put it thus:

> What we do witness at the period roughly coinciding with the beginnings of Christianity is an explosion of the East. Like long-pent-up waters its forces broke through the Hellenistic crust and flooded the ancient world, flowing into the established Greek forms and filling them with their content, besides creating their own new beds.[4]

Jonas goes on to argue that among the movements that resulted out of this re-emergence of the world of the Eastern Mediterranean were Hellenistic Judaism, especially in the form of Alexandrian Jewish philosophy, Babylonian astrology and magic, the various mystery cults,

gnosticism, and Christianity.

In short, to speak of a changing society was nothing new in the world into which the Christian church was born. And the early church did indeed have much to say about a changing society. But while Pliny and much of Roman aristocracy looked to the past as the ideal model of society, the early church looked to the future, and spoke of an even more radical change—a change so radical that it was best described as the Kingdom of God, or as a new city coming down from heaven: “Then I say a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:1-2).

If the city of Rome claimed to be the great civilizer, the great cityfier, John and those around him looked forward to a new city, not built by Rome—a city where, in contrast to the squalid conditions of the urban masses, "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

Thus, contrary to what we would expect, and contrary to much of its later history, the church in the changing society of the first century, rather than simply bemoaning change, posited and announced even greater change.

Much of this is not so different from the society in which I live. The United States was a multicultural society from the outset, for there were always Native Americans, and very soon there were other minorities whom the dominant majority either conquered (as in the case of Mexicans) or imported in order to benefit from their labor (as in the case of African slaves and Asian laborers). But in the fifty years since the Second World War things have changed drastically in two directions. First, the suppressed minorities have gained greater voice and begun making a more visible impact on society at large. Second, immigration has rapidly accelerated. The result is that the United States is rapidly becoming a multicultural, multilingual society where voices previously silenced are coming to the foreground—much as Near Eastern voices silenced by Alexander's conquests were making themselves heard in the first centuries of the Christian era.

At this point, one is reminded of the society of the Eastern Mediterranean at the time when the church was born. It too was a society in which people of different races and cultures met each other, but where many resented it and even legislated against it. We are all aware of the tensions between Gentile and Jew in Palestine, and even between Judean and Galilean. In North Africa, in and around the city of Carthage, there were clear lines separating Roman from Punic, and Punic from Numidian.[5] Probably the area of the Roman Empire whose social life and interaction we know best is Egypt, where the abundance of papyrus and the dry climate have served to preserve documents whose counterparts have been lost elsewhere. In Egypt, the lines separating Romans, Greeks, Jews, and native Egyptians from each other were strictly enforced,

not only by custom, but also by Roman law, which according to one of the foremost students of the period amounted to an ancient form of apartheid.[6] At approximately the same time of the ministry of Jesus, the Jews in Alexandria gained access to a number of privileges previously reserved for Romans and Greeks. The resentment was such that a few years later, in A.D. 38, there was a major massacre of Jews.

While the encounter of many cultures is intellectually enriching, there are those who resent it. As the old certainties provided by a fairly parochial worldview are challenged by the growing multicultural situation, many respond in fear and anger, just as many in the ancient Roman and Hellenistic aristocracies responded in fear and anger. And, since most of the positions of power and prestige are still held by people of Western European stock, people of other cultures and traditions find that they must constantly struggle for a place in the sun. The result is increased racial tension, often to the point of violence.

Of all the possible texts in the New Testament to deal with the issue at hand—the church amidst the changes of a multicultural society—there is none that is more explicit about the variety of peoples encompassed in God’s purposes than the book of Revelation. Indeed, seven times do we find in the book, with slight variations, the theme of "every tribe and language and people and nation."

The book of Revelation, however, does not idealize cultures and their variety, as many of us are wont to do today. Of the seven passages where this phrase appears, three are not all that positive.

1) In Revelation 11, John offers us the vision of the two witnesses. It is not necessary for our purposes here to enter into the discussion as to whom these two witnesses might represent. What is important is that after the two witnesses have completed their testimony and are killed, "for three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth." In other words, that if the glory of heaven is to be shared by a great multitude out of every tribe and nation and people and language, so are the Lamb and its witnesses to be opposed by others out of every people, and tribe, and language, and nation.

2) Revelation 13 makes that point even clearer. There John is speaking of the beast from the sea, which appears all-powerful, and is therefore worshiped by the whole earth, and he says: "It [that is, the beast] was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered." Multiculturalism may be an important trait in the very nature of the church; but it is also an

important trait in the powers of evil.

3) Thirdly and finally among these negative texts, look at Revelation 17. This is the vision of the great harlot "who is seated on many waters." This is obviously an allusion to Jeremiah 51:13, where the prophet is speaking against Babylon: "You who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures, your end has come." It is also a reference to a theme that appears repeatedly in ancient iconography, where a city is often depicted as a goddess enthroned by a river. The reason for this is that in ancient times most long distance transportation took place by water rather than by land. Thus, to depict the great harlot as "seated on many waters" was another way of saying that it was a rich city; a city to which, as in ancient Babylon, all the riches of the world flowed.

The angel explains the meaning of the vision to John: "The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Rev. 17:15). In other words, that the great harlot is rich, but she is rich because she sits on all these various nations and cultures, exploiting them and having their wealth flow to her like many waters.

What do we learn from all of this for our theme, the church in a changing multicultural society?

We certainly learn that we must not romanticize culture and multiculturalism.

More importantly, we are reminded that culture always exists in a political and economic context. John of Patmos seems to be well aware of that: "The waters where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages."

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

The first century was a time of great mixing of cultures. Some celebrated this fact, and others bemoaned it. But it was John of Patmos who most clearly saw that the nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages were present in Rome, not simply out of cultural exchange, but also because Rome was the great harlot sitting on many waters, and the many waters were the "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages" who actually produced the wealth that made the harlot great.

It is important for us to realize this, for the cultural encounters of our day do not take place in abstraction of economic and political systems. It is not just that world travel has become easier, and therefore people of different cultures meet more often than they used to. It is also that the world order—or rather, the world disorder—is such that people are forced to leave their traditional homes and move to new lands in search of safety, security, freedom, and work. All other things being equal, most people would rather live where they grew up, in their own homelands and in the context of their own cultures. But all things are not equal and therefore

people cross borders and even oceans seeking the safety and the opportunities that are often denied them in their own homelands. When the rivers of wealth flow in one direction, it is only natural for the population to flow in the same direction.

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

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

John of Patmos had it right. The multicultural society of the Roman Empire was not just the result of cultural exchange. It was also the result of economic exchange supported by political military might.

Then, the listing of tribes, nations, peoples and languages appears in two other settings having to do with preaching.

The first of these passages having to do with preaching appears in Rev. 10, of which I read selected portions:

> And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven . . . He held a little scroll open in his hand . . . Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying: "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.
> Then he said to me, "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

Clearly, this passage is patterned after Ezekiel 2 and 3, where the prophet is given a scroll to eat. But before we turn to that text, we must look at John's vision of the little scroll in the context of the book of Revelation itself.

This is a "little scroll." And it is open. It is not the great scroll with the seven seals, which only the victorious Lamb could open. Furthermore, it is held in the hand of an angel. It is not like the

great scroll with the seven seals, which is held by the right hand of the One who sits on the throne, and passed directly from the Almighty God to the Almighty Lamb. Presumably, this little scroll does not contain the entire mystery of God's purposes, as the larger scroll does. It is much more modest than that. It is the word given to John to proclaim to the churches. In order to proclaim God's message to the churches, John does not need to digest the entire scroll with the seven seals.

If we now compare this passage with its literary background in Ezekiel 2 and 3, the parallelisms are obvious. There is no need to dwell on them. What is more striking, however, are two significant differences. The first is that, while Ezekiel says "I ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey," John says: "it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter." Ezekiel speaks of a sweet word of God. For John, the word he is to proclaim is bittersweet.

The second difference has to do with the scope of the message of each of the two prophets. Ezekiel is told: "Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them. For you are not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel—not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand." In contrast, the mighty angel tells John: "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

There are a number of theories as to why John says that the scroll made his stomach bitter. I prefer to see a connection between the two particular traits in John's vision vis-à-vis Ezekiel's: the bitterness in the stomach and the wide scope of the message.

If any writer of the New Testament was a Jew and steeped in Jewish culture and traditions, that was John of Patmos. It has been pointed out that there is hardly a verse in his book that does not have an allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures. His Greek is full of Hebraisms, perhaps due in part to his greater familiarity with Hebrew and with Aramaic, and perhaps as a result of his constant literary dependence on the Hebrew Bible. And he quotes that Bible, not from the Septuagint that all the other New Testament authors employed, but either from an unknown translation or from his own, which he does as he goes along.

He is well aware of the mission given to the prophet Ezekiel when he ate his scroll: Ezekiel was to speak only to the house of Israel, and they would not believe him. Now he, John, is not told to whom he is to speak but about whom. (With the preposition epi, a genitive case would have meant that John was to prophesy to many peoples and nations and languages and kings. An accusative case would have meant that he was to prophesy against them. But the dative case, used here, means that he is to prophesy about them, as the NRSV correctly translates.) The difference between Ezekiel's vision and John's is not that Ezekiel is to go to Israel, to a people who understand his language, and John is to go throughout the world, to many peoples and nations and languages and kings. The difference is rather that John is to go back to his audience,

presumably the seven churches and other similar communities in Asia, and speak to them about the many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings. And that is why the word of God, the little scroll that will be John's message, although sweet to the taste, is hard to stomach.

John the Jew; John who can quote the Hebrew Scriptures back and forth apparently without even bothering to think about it, is given a message to proclaim to his congregations. His congregations are probably also mostly Jewish. Otherwise, they would hardly be able to understand this book he is writing to them, so full of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures, and even to more recent Jewish traditions. And now he is told that he is to speak to these congregations, not just the word they expect, that those who are faithful until death will receive the crown of life, or that everyone who conquers will receive some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a secret name, but he is to speak to them about "many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings."

I submit to you that this is the most difficult aspect of becoming a multicultural church in a multicultural world. Bringing people in from other nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages is not difficult, as long as they are brought into the same church, dominated by the same nation, and tribe, and people, and language. Throughout its history, whenever the church has taken the Great Commission seriously, it has been willing and even eager to prophesy to many nations, tribes, and peoples. It has also been willing to prophesy in many languages, and to that end missionaries have translated the Bible into thousands of languages, and have even devised methods for reducing hundreds of languages to writing.

But that is not what John is told to do. He is not told to go and speak to many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. He is told rather to speak to his congregations about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. And he finds that bitter to his stomach.

The vision which John the Jew has is a vision of a Gentile church; a church where the Gentiles would come and take their place right next to the tribes of Israel, and all together would claim the ancient promise made to the people of Israel, that they would be a kingdom of priests. That is a vision sweet as honey, for it shows the fullness of the mercy of God; but it is also a vision bitter to the stomach, because it shows that no people, no tribe, no language, no nation, can claim a place of particular honor in that fullness. And it is bittersweet, because it involves radical change in the very congregations where John has served and which he loves.

In some ways that is the challenge facing the church today in the changing society of the United States. And, as in John's case, that church is finding it a bittersweet challenge, and is not always responding to it with total openness.

Then there is a second passage in which our phrase appears in the context of preaching. It appears in Rev. 14:6: “Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.” Unfortunately, we do not have the time to study this passage in detail. Suffice it to say that, in the context in which it appears, it is a very freeing passage for any who believe that their task is

to preach the Gospel. John exiled in Patmos may have felt frustrated that there was so much preaching to do, and he was confined to a tiny island. But no. The preaching of the Gospel is not finally up to him. It is also the task of the angels and it will be done. The church in the United States confronted by changes it often does not understand, and the church in any changing society, must draw comfort from this vision. We may not be equal to the task, but John saw, and we must also see, an "angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth--to every nation and tribe and language and people."

Finally, there are two passages in the book of Revelation where our phrase appears in the context of the eschatological promise:

1) In Rev. 5:9-10, we are told of a heavenly choir singing to the Lamb: "You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom of priests serving our God."

2) And in Rev. 7:9 the Seer tells us "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

As we deal with the challenges to the church in an increasingly multicultural society, these two passages, more than the others we have studied, must provide our vision and guide our action.

The first three passages deal with the power of evil in the present age. The next two deal with the responsibility of preaching a different order. But these two provide the vision for the interpretation of the present order, and the power for preaching the coming order. Because they are a vision of the end from which God is calling, they are the real force behind the church's response to a changing society.

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

It is a strange way to read a mystery. But on second thought, that way of reading mystery stories has much to commend it. We tend to look at things from beginning to end; from past, to present, to future. If you want to understand something, you study the previous events that produced it.

What has made this view particularly prevalent in modern society is the success of the physical sciences. In the physical sciences to "understand" something is to be able to explain its causes. And, when we today speak of "cause," we mean what the ancients called "efficient cause."

But that is not the only way to look at reality. In fact, throughout most of history most of humankind has believed that things are ultimately caused, not so much by other events as by a purpose; not so much by their beginning, as by their end. This is what European medieval philosophers called the "final cause," or the "teleological cause." Things happen, not merely because something happened before, but also and above all because they are being called from a future towards which they are moving. Thus, when those philosophers said that God was the ultimate "cause" of the universe, they meant not only that in the beginning God made all things and set them in motion, as a first efficient cause, but also that God calls all things from the future, as their final teleological cause.

We may find this difficult to understand, because to us "cause and effect" are a sequence that follows along chronological lines, always from the past, to the present, to the future. In this, modernity has been profoundly influenced by the practical success of the physical sciences, which are precisely sciences that study efficient causes.

But, when you stop to think about it, that is not really the way we live our lives. The reason why I came here was not only that an airplane brought me to Nanjing. The reason is also that, when I was back home, I envisioned and wished for my presence here, and so bought a ticket, and so got on a plane that then brought me here. And the reason is also that someone here in Nanjing envisioned my presence here and therefore extended an invitation. Thus, although in a way the cause of my being here is that I got on that plane, that is true only in a very limited way—as an

efficient cause. In fact, the teleological cause is closer to the truth: I got on that plane because I was to be here today.

And so it is with all of us. When we leave our homes, we determine which way to turn on the basis of where we are going—in other words, the future is the cause of our decision.

Now let us think again about my father-in-law reading a mystery book and beginning at the end. From the point of view of purely efficient causes, that is a crazy way to read a book. But it is probably much closer to the way the book was written. Most likely, the author decided the solution long before the first word of the book was ever written. The entire book, from cover to cover, makes clearer sense when you read the story, not simply as the result of dozens of separate events that unfold in chronological order, but rather as the result of that final event, which pulls all the rest to itself. If we read the book from page one to the last page, it is not until the last page that we find that the cook will turn out to be the murderer. But if we have a glimpse at that last page as my father-in-law was wont to do, then as we read the book we understand things differently. When the phone rings on page fifty, we can have a glimpse of the meaning and purpose of that event in the mind of the author, in light of the fact that the cook will be the murderer.

In a way, that is also true about society and history. We can study society in all its details, limiting ourselves to efficient causes, and think we understand it. We can study historical events

thoroughly according to their efficient causes, and think we understand them. But that is like reading the book from page one and coming to page fifty where the phone rings. We understand that the phone rings because someone called. But in truth, the reason why the phone rings on page fifty is because on page 250 we are to be told that the cook is the murderer. Likewise, we do not really understand creation, or society, or history until we have a glimpse of the end for which creation was made, and the purpose towards which history and society are moving.

I said earlier that, in a radically changing society, where the city of Rome had set out to citify the world, and where this was creating enormous upheaval, the early church proclaimed a vision of an even more radical change, of "a new heaven and a new earth," and a "holy city, the new Jerusalem." Now we see also that in a world where languages, and cultures, and nations were clashing, where they were being exploited by the imperial power of Rome, where they were made to serve the powers of evil, the church proclaimed a vision of even greater cultural interchange, of an even greater sharing of power and prestige and authority, for the Lamb who was slain has ransomed from God "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation, and made them a kingdom of priests serving God and reigning on earth.

Reading these passages, I feel as my father in law must have felt when he opened the last chapter of a mystery novel. Aha! The cook did it! So that is what it is all about! Aha! A kingdom of God, where God and the Lamb shall reign forever. A kingdom from all tribes, and peoples,

and nations, and languages, where they shall all be a royal priesthood. A kingdom where they shall wear their white robes of victory, and wave palms of jubilation, celebrating the victory of the Lamb in a multitude of languages, for they are people from every tribe and nation. So that is what it is all about!

If that is what it is all about, the task of the church in a changing society is not simply to preserve the values of the past which are threatened with extinction, as the more conservative elements in the United States seem to believe. Nor is it even to help people cope with the changes that are taking place, as the more liberal elements tell us. The task of the church is to proclaim an even greater change, to look at the present in the light of God's future, and to live as those who truly believe that this is the future from which God is pulling history and society. This is a task which the church in the United States cannot fulfill without the help and guidance of the rest of the church throughout the world. It is for that reason that we come to this Consultation, asking our Chinese brothers and sisters to help us discern God's future, and be faithful to it.

Endnotes

1. J. L. González, *Faith and Wealth* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 28.
2. Aelius Aristides, *Roman Oration*, 94, 97. Translation by J.H. Oliver, *The Ruling Power: A Study of the Roman Empire in the Second Century after Christ through the Roman Oration of Aelius Aristides* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1953).
3. Pliny The Elder, *Natural History*, 1.18.13,21.
4. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 23.
5. W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), has shown that this social division was an important factor in the Donatist schism and its aftermath.
6. Naphtali Lewis*, Life in Egypt under Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 32-35.