

Theology and the Ecumenical Movement

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The ecumenical movement is showing some scattered signs of revival after a number of years of decline. This should not surprise students of the prophetic Scriptures, for eschatological Babylon, the harlot, will play a significant role in the tribulation years. Her label, "Babylon the Great," describes her roots, her religion, and her rejection of the truth of God. Like all religions (whether they realize it or not) the future Babylon will have a theological stance that will help unite and hold together this great future religious system. She will promote false theology and probably in a most attractive and appealing way like the Babylons that will have preceded her.

Babylon has had a long and consistently dishonorable history. "And the beginning of his [Nimrod's] kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar" (Gen. 10:10). This probably occurred somewhere around 3,000 B.C. The city and tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) were built to prevent the people from scattering throughout the earth, in direct defiance of God's command to do so. The city and tower served as a rallying point and symbol of the fame of the people of Babel, a fame which exalted man and his desires above God and His commands. The tower was a concrete expression of human pride in open opposition to God. When God in judgment scattered the people throughout the earth, they naturally took with them their own religious ideas about the exaltation of man and his ideas. Each resultant language group had its cultural distinctives, and the names of their respective gods and goddesses were different, but the basic concept of humanism was the same everywhere.

Hammurabi was responsible for making Babylon a religious power about 1600 B.C. This was accomplished by making Marduk the god of the city of Babylon and head of a pantheon of 1,300 deities. This brought all religious tradition into one system.

Extra-biblical sources indicate that the wife of Nimrod became the head of the Babylonian mysteries which consisted of religious rites that were part of the worship of idols in Babylon. Her name was Semiramis, and she served as high priestess of this idol worship. Supposedly she gave birth to a son, Tammuz, who claimed to be a savior and the fulfillment of the promise given to Eve in Genesis 3:15.

This mother-child legend found its way into a number of pagan religions. The mother was pictured as the queen of heaven who could cleanse sins, and the son was purported to have been killed by a wild beast and then brought back to life.

This anti-god religion is alluded to in the Bible in passages like Ezekiel 8:14, Jeremiah 7:18, and 44:17-19, 25. The queen of heaven here is the goddess Ishtar, an Assyro-Babylonian deity. The fourth Babylonian month, July, was named Tammuz.

The height of Babylon's glory came during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. His city of Babylon included vast fortifications, famous streets, canals, temples, and palaces. The Ishtar Gate led through the double wall of fortification and was adorned with rows of bulls and dragons in lapis-colored enameled brick. The tall ziggurat was rebuilt, and the nearby temple of Marduk or Bel was restored. Nebuchadnezzar also built the famous hanging gardens which were one of the seven wonders of the world. Little wonder that Nebuchadnezzar boasted, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty" (Dan. 4:30).

But Babylon was soon to be captured. On October 12, 539 B.C., it fell to Darius the Mede, and the decline of the city began. Xerxes plundered it; Alexander the Great thought to rebuild it but was deterred because of the great cost that would have been involved. During the period of Alexander's successors the area decayed and became a desert, and from about 300 B.C. on, Babylon never revived until today.

The Associated Press reported on March 29, 1971, in a dispatch from Beirut that "Iraq announced a \$30 million plan to rebuild according to its 'original architectural designs' the ancient city of Babylon whose great walls and hanging gardens were among the seven wonders of the world." Nothing was done, however, until about three years ago when work began in earnest on restoring Babylon. For these past three years over a thousand laborers imported from the Sudan (since Iraqi men were fighting the war against Iran) have been working seven days a week through wet winters and scorching summers to rebuild Nebuchadnezzar's palace, a vast complex of 500 rooms and the reputed site of the hanging gardens. As the walls rise, the builders insert inscribed bricks recording how Nebuchadnezzar's palace was "rebuilt in the era of the leader Saddam Hussein." Thus the present leader of Iraq is trying to portray himself as the successor to Babylon's greatest ruler, Nebuchadnezzar ("Ancient King's Order: Fix My Palace," *The New York Times*, April 19, 1989, p. 4).

Many interpreters understand the prophecies concerning Babylon in Jeremiah 50-51 to indicate that Babylon will never be rebuilt. Others feel that it will be rebuilt at least in the region of ancient Babylon. The present activity in the area by the government of Iraq does not yet qualify as a rebuilt city, and no one can predict whether the effort will continue to expand or not. Even if other buildings are added to the present rebuilding, they may be only monuments and tourist attractions rather than an inhabited city whose importance could rival Baghdad, 50 miles away.

Nevertheless, the New Testament speaks in detail about a Babylon in the future. Except for several references to Old Testament Babylon and the captivity Israel endured in Babylon, most of the material in the New Testament concerns this future Babylon. Two entire chapters in the Revelation (17-18) describe this Babylon. Whatever else these two chapters reveal about Babylon they clearly describe it as the head of all entrenched worldly resistance to God, the fountainhead of all rebellion against Him.

Babylon must be more than a city; it must be seen also as a system that is anti-God.

When we speak today about Wall St. we are usually referring to more than a particular street in lower Manhattan. We include in Wall St. other aspects of the financial system, some of which are located on Wall St. and some of which extend far beyond. When a news commentator says, "Wall St. interpreted the rally as. . ." he means that brokers across the nation made the interpretation.

And yet the city is not excluded. In 1 Peter 5:13 Peter sends greetings from those in "Babylon." Some interpret this to refer to Babylon on the Euphrates, but most consider it a cryptic reference to Rome where Peter probably was at the time he wrote 1 Peter. But Peter's use of Babylon to refer to Rome includes his appraisal of the spiritual condition of Rome (city, empire, and civilization) as anti-God. He assumes that his readers will understand that the city which Romans called Rome was really a manifestation of the age-old domain of Babylonian idolatry.

Will the future Babylon include Rome or a rebuilt Babylon on the Euphrates as its capital? I think so, and in my opinion Rome will more likely be the capital. But surely it impoverishes the meaning of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18 to limit it to a city. Babylon will embrace more than one city and will be characterized in the future, as it was in the past, by idolatry and all that is opposed to God. It is the embodiment of Satanic deception and power.

In Revelation 18 the aspect of Babylon emphasized is that of commerce and world economic domination. But in chapter 17 the focus is on the religious face of Babylon. It describes what the "church" will be like during the first part of the coming tribulation days after believers have been taken to heaven just before the tribulation begins. Religion in the tribulation will continue, even prosper, after the rapture of the church. We know that the worship and rituals of Judaism will actually be protected by Antichrist during the first half of the tribulation years (Dan. 9:27). Undoubtedly eastern religions will continue to have their followers, and Muslim nations will be forces with which to be reckoned in those years. In the middle of the tribulation, when Antichrist enthrones himself in the temple in Jerusalem demanding to be worshiped, then the religion of humanism will be at its zenith.

But during the first half of the tribulation there will be a worldwide "church." It will be apostate, for sure, but nevertheless built on the remnants of the professing Christian church that existed just before the rapture. But since all true believers are taken to heaven at the rapture, then only those who are merely professing Christians will remain to form the base of this "church." What will this "church" be like?

First of all, it is described as an unfaithful harlot (Rev. 17:1, 15, 16). As a harlot she will prostitute everything she can for her own self-aggrandizement. Furthermore, she will not be an ordinary harlot; she will be "the great harlot" and thus represents the epitome of unfaithfulness. Second, she sits "upon

many waters" (verse 1)—a symbolic phrase that would be difficult to interpret were it not explained for us in verse 15 as "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues." Religious Babylon will stretch around the world. This does not necessarily mean that she will be the only or even the dominant religion of those days, but this does indicate that the scope of the organization will be worldwide. We speak of the Christian church today as being worldwide in the same sense, certainly not to the exclusion of the existence of other religions. This worldwide character of the harlot church gives us the liberty to describe it as ecumenical (which is a word derived from the Greek meaning "the inhabited earth").

Third, religious Babylon will be politically powerful. Verse 3 pictures the harlot as sitting on the beast. Because of what we are told in other Scriptures about the power of Antichrist, we would have expected the reverse to be true—the beast would control the harlot. However, for the first half of the tribulation the ecumenical church will exercise great political clout through Antichrist. Why will this be? The text does not say. One can only guess, for instance, that the threat of godless communism or some other ideology will force this move. Or perhaps people may demand some kind of religion that smacks of the Christianity they knew before the rapture and will find their needs satisfied by the harlot church.

Fourth, Babylon the Great will be luxuriously enticing. Though a harlot, she will appear with all the luxury and style she can muster. The apostle John saw her clothed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls (verse 4).

Both her political power and luxurious enticements will clearly demonstrate the focus of this "church." It will be on earthly things, not heavenly. Regrettably one sees today this trend in the church in some places. Her interest in influencing politics, and her concern to have all the luxuries available could well be taking Christians' minds off heaven and focusing attention and priorities on constantly improving the quality and comfort of their lives on earth.

Fifth, the harlot is said to be the "mother of harlots" (verse 5). This phrase has always intrigued me. The mother harlot has a family of harlots. What might this mean? Here is a suggestion. Perhaps this gives us a clue as to the organizational nature of this superchurch. If so, then she will be a federation which incorporates but does not necessarily amalgamate various denominations and churches. If this is the way it will happen, then certainly it will facilitate the union of diverse groups who in such a federated structure will be able to keep their various and often contradictory distinctives of doctrine and church polity. A union would involve individual groups giving up their identities and distinctive practices, but in a federation particular religions would be able to keep their distinctions and yet join together in this "family" relationship.

Sixth, this harlot is called Babylon the Great, indicating that she will be characterized, as Babylon was, by idolatry, vice, and aggression against God's people. In the tribulation days she will persecute and kill true followers of

Christ (since, of course, people will be saved in those days even though the true church is gone).

What force or forces will bring together the pieces necessary to form this harlot church? Ultimately, of course, God will do it in carrying out His sovereign plan. But humanly, what may be involved? Perhaps the strength of other religions will be a factor or perhaps the need to fill a void left by the rapture of the true church. People will still want religion.

When I was exposed to prophetic teaching in the Bible years ago, the National Council and World Council of Churches were in their heyday. Prophetic teachers were quite sure that those organizations would form the base upon which the harlot church would be built. Actually the year 1894 (no, I was not alive then!) marked the beginning of the Christian ecumenical movement with the organization of the Open Church League. In 1900 it became the National Federation of Churches and Christian Workers. In 1905 this was replaced by the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. The stated purpose was to bring together all who called themselves Christians, and the doctrinal basis was to recognize Jesus as divine Lord and Savior.

In 1948 the World Council of Churches was formed in Amsterdam and was composed of 135 denominational bodies. In 1961 the Russian Orthodox Church was received into membership. In 1962 another ecumenical group was formed in the United States, the Council on Church Union. But all these groups fell on hard times in the 70s and 80s. Money was scarce; budgets were not being met, and church union was no longer so popular. Yet calls for cooperation, if not union, persist.

Perhaps it will require some additional force beside organizational union to glue this harlot family together. In thinking about this, I wondered what might be the theological base for this group. In the heyday of organized ecumenism the answer would generally have been liberalism. But the "old" liberalism is not the theological force in the world that it used to be. What other theology might qualify?

Would it not be true to say that like no other theology neoorthodoxy has been a dominant theology throughout almost all of the twentieth century? Karl Barth's commentary on Romans appeared in 1918, and while neoorthodoxy's influence has not been so strong in recent decades, it still remains an influential theology. Nevertheless, I doubt if neoorthodoxy is a likely candidate for the theology of the ecumenical movement. For one reason, it does call people's attention to the transcendence of God and to the Bible (even though to non-historical interpretations of some crucial passages). It does not exalt man, and probably the ecumenical theology will need to do that.

Eastern religions and the New Age movement have sometimes been suggested as a possibility. New Age teaching does have wide appeal, and that would seem to be necessary for the theology of the harlot church. But if Rome be the headquarters, then one suspects that the theology could not be strongly

mixed with the thought of eastern religions. Those religions would likely be in opposition to the theology the harlot church.

Occasionally I have heard it suggested that the charismatic theology will be the glue for the ecumenical movement. I do not think that could possibly be correct, for many charismatics are believing people who will be raptured before the tribulation begins. Even though charismatic theology is in my judgment flawed, it does take the Bible seriously, and that would be incompatible with ecumenism.

A more likely candidate is the new universalism. I say the new universalism because the belief that all will ultimately be saved (usually after a temporary period of punishment) has been around since the second century. But the new universalism declares that all men are now saved, though many do not realize it. Therefore, the job of the preacher and missionary is to tell them that they are already saved. The gospel of the new universalism would write 2 Corinthians 5:20 this way: "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God was making an announcement through us: we tell you on Christ's behalf, you are already reconciled to God."

Scriptures used to support this teaching include John 12:32 "... will draw all men unto me;" 1 Corinthians 15:22 "... in Christ all will be made alive;" Philippians 2:10,11 "... every tongue shall confess . . ." Of course, these verses do not teach that all people are saved. But even if they did, other verses like Matthew 25:46 ("and these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal"), John 3:36 ("he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him"), and 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 ("in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power") clearly teach that there will be eternal punishment and that it will be as eternal as eternal life will be. But I presume that in a harlot church the preacher would not be concerned about this last group (if he would use the Bible at all).

Universalism is a modern version of Satan's lie to Eve, "Ye shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). So perhaps it will continue its age-long appeal even into the tribulation years.

Some theologies come and go, but one that has come in the last quarter century has had widespread influence in many cultures and parts of the world. It was publicized first in Germany with the publication of *The Theology of Hope* by Jurgen Moltmann in 1964. In the 1970s it began to flourish in Latin America under the label "Liberation Theology." Also at the same time it blossomed in the United States under the label "Black Theology" and was popularized especially by James Cone. From all I can discover, these theologies, which are essentially the same, sprang up independently of each other. In other words, one area of the world did not import from another. But the teachings are almost carbon copies.

Since Moltman's *Theology of Hope* and Cone's *Black Theology* are much less known today, I shall use the label Liberation Theology. As the name

states, the central theme is liberation; only liberation is not understood as liberation from sin but liberation as a socio-cultural-economic transformation for the poor and oppressed of this world. The example always cited is the Exodus in which the Jews were delivered from Egyptian slavery.

This kind of liberation from injustice, inequality, and economic oppression is claimed to be salvation. Thus salvation's purpose is not concerned with solving the sin problem but with eliminating misery and exploitation. This will lead to a utopian society in which all are more or less equal (Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

The poor are God's chosen people according to Liberation Theology. Capitalism and colonialism have made them poor. If one loves the oppressed, then one must be angry at the oppressors. Such anger justifies the use of violence, kidnapping, and revolution.

One can readily see how such a theology would have wide appeal and could, as it has, attract many followers.

One other strain appears in some theologians of this persuasion, and that is universalism, albeit social and political rather than soteriological. Salvation, according to Liberation Theology, encompasses not only the whole man but also embraces all men.

No one can predict with certainty what will be the theological base of the eschatological Babylon, but it surely will have one. Movements and theologies come and go, but Babylon's harlot family will come one day with great power and opposition to God. In the meantime, let us believe, proclaim, and live, as our pastor has done for all these years, the truth of God's Word which is able to make people wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.