

Our common identity and destiny in Christ

Teun van der Leer, rector Baptist Seminary VU-Amsterdam

Two Scriptures were suggested to me and I was allowed to choose, but in the end choose both. They talk respectively about our identity in Christ and about our destiny in Christ.

Let's first read them: Gal. 3:26-29; Rev. 7:9-10.

Two salvation 'facts':

1. In Galatians Paul talks about our identity in Christ through baptism. In Christ we are one, since the water of baptism sort of washes away every difference: we go into the baptismal waters as Greek/Jew, slave/free, man/woman, but we come out clothed with Christ. Since we are His now, this is our decisive identity: being in Christ now determines our life in all aspects. From now on this matters far more than being Greek/Jew, slave/free, man/woman. This is fact 1 (identity).

2. Our destination is to stand for the throne and the Lamb 'from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages'. This is what we are on our way to, this is our God-willed and God-promised future, this is the goal of his plan of salvation: to unite us all before his throne. This is the ultimate goal of history, this will be 'the end' (in its double meaning). This is fact 2 (destination).

Let us take a closer look at this identity that we received in the baptismal font and at our future in Christ.

Our identity lies in Christ and in nothing and no one else. Paul makes this very clear in Galatians, his most vehement letter. The only one in which he doesn't start with giving thanks for something (he even does that in Corinthians!). He just starts with stating his authority (1:1), then adds to this 'all the brothers and sisters who are with me' to give his words also a community authority, gives them 'grace and peace' (of course), but then starts right of: 'I am astonished...' (6-9).

The whole front of Paul in this letter is the thought that something could be added to grace. Grace 'plus' (law, circumcision, certain food, certain days etc.). From this letter Luther took his sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus. Being in Christ goes beyond everything else we are. When we look at each other, when we meet, when we worship, we do not see western or eastern or southern, we do not see white or black, male or female, we see...Christ, a member of the body of Christ.

Well, theology distracted by baptism should probably even more speak to us Baptists, then to other Christians. It is at least an argument we can't easily get rid of. Remember how William Carey in 1792 used it in his 'Inquiry' towards the people that said that the Great Commandment in Mat. 28 was only meant for the apostles, but not for us, because in that case, he said, we better stop baptizing too.

So this is what every baptism in our churches 'preaches', proclaims: your identity lies in Christ and Christ alone and this is what unites us, more than what divides us. Let's take our baptism serious in its far-reaching consequences.

And even if this baptismal theology is not enough, just look at the Lord's Supper, which proclaims the same: at that table we are all equal, all beggars, saved sinners, children of God. When we share the bread and cup, we share what is most vital and determines our life above anything else 'until He comes'.

Now Revelation is the book about this coming: from 1:7 ('Look! He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see Him') to 22:20 ('Surely I am coming soon').

Book of comfort for a scattered church. Not only by telling what will happen in a far future, but by telling what is really at stake right now. Prophecy is not so much foreseen as well seeing through. As someone (Althaus, cited by McClendon) said: Eschatology is not only concerned with what (Who!) comes last, but with what lasts.¹ What will prevail in the end?

So in Rev. we are looking behind the scenes at the real state of affairs:

Chapter 1: A vision of Christ, who He is (5) and where He is (13!)

Chapter 2-3: Seven messages of the Spirit to the churches in which

- a. Christ is central
- b. Christ 'knows' them, looking through, laying His finger on the sore spot
- c. promises are made for those that 'conquer'

All the descriptions of Christ you'll find back in ch. 1, all the promises in ch. 21 and 22.

Chapter 4: An open door in heaven

What is the first that John sees, when going through that door? *A throne with one seated on the throne.* The rest of the chapter is what is around

¹ James McClendon, *Doctrine* (Nashville 1994), 75.

the throne and their worship. But this first picture is decisive: Someone is seated on the throne.

Again two 'facts' that are decisive:

1. 'He comes' (whatever may come, whosoever will come: *He comes!*)
2. One is seated on the throne. Barth: *Es wird regiert*. Amidst the turmoil of this world, whatever and wherever kings and rulers are in power (and there were a lot and there are a lot): He is on the throne and that is the only thing that matters.

Now we come closer and closer, we get even 'warmer':

Chapter 5: The lion and the lamb

Two things:

1. The scroll of history; who is worthy to enroll it, to judge the world and lead it to its utmost destiny? To whom can we entrust our world, our life, our story?

First it looks as if to no one and John weeps bitterly, for he knows that there is no hope. Verse 5! And then probably the most powerful verse of Rev, the Bible: 6.

The Lion of Judah, *who turns out to be a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered*. This is the full gospel, the heart of salvation history: The Lion is the Lamb and the Lamb is the Lion. This is the foolishness of God that is wiser than man; this is the weakness of God that is stronger than man and it conquers everything.

History and its judgment is in the hands of the Lamb; He's got the whole world in his *pierced* hands. It's love 'to the end' (Joh. 13:1) that carries the world, that determines history. History is His Story. (and we are taken up into that story). McClendon calls the picture of the Lamb standing as one that has been slain 'the master picture by which we can learn to see all the rest'.²

2. So the second thing is easy to guess. There's just one response possible: Worship. This chapter teaches important things about worship (relay here on Eugene Peterson's *Reversed Thunder*):
 - it centers: 'Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God'.³Read Ps. 86:8-13. An 'undivided' heart, a centered heart, a focused heart. Worship brings us back to our real business: glorifying God and lifting up His name and have our life ordered from there. The right priorities: Name, Kingdom, Will.

² McClendon, 101.

³ E.H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (San Francisco 1988), 60.

- it gathers, 'the effect of the centering is a vast gathering'.⁴ It brings us together. The closer we come to Him, the closer we come to each other.
- it reveals: history is not what it looks like. It looks as if the powers are in control, evil succeeds, marching armies and mighty kings reign. Beasts rising out of the sea and out of the earth, great red dragons with seven heads and ten horns. They impress us and seem to have it all. But as Psalm 2 says 'He who sits in the heavens laughs'. Whatever dragons or beasts will rise up, it is the Lamb that holds the scroll and that is the decisive act in Revelation, in history. That marks our future.

Now in ch. 6 the Lamb starts opening the seven seals and we see history in its true colors red, black and pale; its evil unmasked for what it is and the crying out of the souls under the altar who had been slaughtered: How long? How long?

It is the cry of Ps. 13 of all the martyrs of history, of all who have been under the rod of their oppressors. And then it is the wrath of the Lamb that judges the world rightly, it is the *good* news of the wrath of the Lamb, that will judge the kings and the rulers and avenge the blood of the martyrs.

Look at the closing verses 15 and 16: who is able to stand?

The answer is in chapter 7: verse 1 (angels) and verse 9: 'a great multitude that no one could count...*standing...*'.

This does not only say something about the huge number of people, but more than that about: no one being able to control them. In the old times if you could count people you owned them. Rulers liked counting and registering their nationals; it showed their wealth and their power. Like Emperor Augustus in Luke 2. He send out an order that 'all the world should be registered'. I am the powerful one; they are mine. He couldn't have imagined that 2000 years later his name would be just a footnote in the story of a child in a manger. That is nice theology!

So if we read in ch. 7 about 'a great multitude that no one could count', we know that we read about a free people, delivered, escaped, released: free at last! Verse 16 and 17 sum it up. The whole of history, with all its pain and its suffering, is brought home into God's mercy, who knows every grief, every affliction, every rejection, sickness and pain. 'He will wipe away *every* tear from their eyes'. Not just 'all at once', but every tear individually he knows, he keeps, he wipes away and heals.

This is our hope; what lies ahead empowers us today. This vision of hope is sung out in these chapters and gives us the brightest theology and eschatology ever.

⁴ Peterson, 61.

Remark how in seven(!) songs in these chapters 4-7 this hope is spelled and how in liturgy the real state of affairs, the real value of life and its destiny, is proclaimed and sung about:

4:8

Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

4:11

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

5:9-10

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for 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 and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.

5:12

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!

5:13

To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!

7:10

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!

7:12

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.

Worship is important. We do something when we worship. We confess, we proclaim, we anticipate on the things to come according to God's will.

Now look at this 'from every tribe and language and nation and people' in ch. 5 and ch. 7 as well. This not only means that the gospel is global and that it finds its way into every culture and context. It also means that history is about the formation of a new race of human beings, a race made of all races, a people made of all peoples.

McClendon calls this 'a cultural rainbow, a people composed of all peoples, all classes and colors and kinds, all genders, all languages, all

racial stocks' and with Yoder he calls it the 'politics of the Lamb' that overcomes all boundaries. That is the 'new' of the new song.⁵

Now this is eschatology. And we can think that's still far away. We'll see 'some time'. But you and I know that eschatology in Scripture is not about some time far away, but is always a promise that challenges us today. As Gayraud Wilmore writes in his *Last Things First*: 'An eschatological people is one in whom the hope of the Kingdom to come provides the motivating power for living...and dominates and regulates the self-understanding and behavior'.⁶

Worship does not only center, gather and reveal, it also *transforms*!

May I leave you with the question of how our identity in Christ and our destiny in Christ as we have discovered them this morning in Galatians and Revelation can shape and regulate our self-understanding and behavior as churches of Jesus Christ today 'from all races and languages and nations and colors and genders'.

⁵ McClendon, 99.

⁶ Gayraud Wilmore, *Last Things First*, 67, as quoted in McClendon, 90.