

Reflections on DA Carson talk at the Living Word Conference 2008

by Daniel Chew



The Living Word conference organized by the Anglican Diocese of Singapore occurred on the 29th – 31st July 2008. This year's speaker surprisingly was Prof. Donald A. Carson, research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, USA. The morning seminars were on expositing the Word, based upon the texts of Ezekiel, and the evening session on Christians and the clash of powers, based upon the texts of Rev. 12-14. I personally did not go for the morning seminars because I did not take leave for them, going for the evening talks only.

Going for the talks on the first day, I was astonished to see so many people coming for the session. It seems that the number of people coming for the talk was much higher than expected by the organizers, of an excess of 1000. The talks were good however, and generally as the days go by, more and more people attended the talks until the last day in which we needed to go there earlier with packed dinner in order to get book a place to sit in the main sanctuary

The first session of Carson's talk was based on Rev. 12, in which Carson explicated to us from Scripture the war between Satan and the Church, and the rage which Satan has against the people of God because he knows that his time is short (Rev. 12:12b). Having being driven out of heaven after being defeated by Michael and the holy angels, Satan and his minions were cast out of heaven onto the earth and the sea, thus having no future access to the throne room of God (Rev. 12:7-9). Carson places this cosmic angelic war at the time of Christ's death on the Cross, noting that Satan had access to the throne room of God during the time of Job (Job 1:6) in the Old Testament. This most certainly sounds plausible, and such an interpretation is buttressed by texts such as Lk. 10:18. Whatever the case, it is most certainly true that Satan had previously fallen (cf Is. 14:12-15) and this interpretation just signify that Satan would from thenceforth be barred from heaven, whereas previously he could go there once in a while.

The woman who gave birth to the man-child who rules the nations with an iron scepter (Rev. 12:5); Christ, and then was persecuted by Satan, was identified by Carson as the locus of the people of God. I totally agree with this identification, although it is a pity that he wasn't too clear on how this is supposed to be understood. First of all, he wasn't too explicit on the continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament but rather more or less assumed it. Against the background of popular Dispensational premillennialism which is a teaching rather prevalent and readily embraced by many in the Singapore churches, such an assumption is probably rather unwise. Secondly, although Carson did give diverse texts from Scripture to show why it can be said that the people of God in a sense gave birth to the Messiah, it is pretty much still a puzzle as to how this can be truly understood. In light of the verse of Rev. 12:17, in which it is stated that the offspring of the woman are those "keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of

Jesus”, i.e. Christians, how can it be said that the people of God are both the woman and the offspring of the woman at the same time?

The patristic writings do mention somewhat of the concept of the Church as being the mother of Christians, in the sense that it nurtures us individual Christians. Using this same analogy, it can be maintained that the Church envisioned as a corporate entity would be a fit for the woman in Rev. 12. In this way, Jesus Christ came out of the visible people of God (being a descendent of David), and the birth pangs of the OT church included the sorrow and weeping of the mothers of Bethlehem when the wicked king Herod ordered the massacre of all boys 2 years and younger (Mt. 2:16-18). Under such an understanding, the offspring of the woman listed in Rev. 12:17 are individual Christians who because of their faith in Christ are part of the Church, and her sons and daughters since they followed the same apostolic faith. The woman therefore symbolizes the Church corporately, and her offspring symbolizes Christians as individuals. As it can be seen in the passage, Satan cannot hurt the woman and thus the Church as a corporate body, thus fulfilling the promise of Christ who has said that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church (Mt. 16:18). Yet, individual Christians will feel the wrath of Satan who will wage war against them. Harmonizing the two, what this means is that Satan can persecute and kill individual Christians, but he has no power to wipe out the Church such that there would always be God’s people in every generation and age until the very end of time itself. [As an aside, this should put a stop to the wild claims of all and any type of “restorationist” movements, like Mormonism for example, who claim that the truths of Scripture had been lost and they are the ones who have recently recovered them]

The last thing to be noted in this session is the typology of the number 1260 days (Rev. 12:6) or a time, time and half a time (Rev. 12:14), which all equates roughly to three and a half years. Carson notes that the woman was depicted as fleeing into the wilderness, which would immediately bring forth the image in his Jewish readers of the history of the Maccabees. During the reign of the Seleucid dynasty in Syria, there arose a despot named Antiochus IV Epiphanies who is the type of the Antichrist, moving into Judah with the intention of paganizing the Jews, even sacrificing a pig on the altar. Judas Maccabeus and other faithful Jews waged guerilla warfare against the armies of Antiochus IV Epiphanies for nearly 3½ years before finally defeating them. Therefore, the imagery that is meant to be conveyed here is the severe trial and testing of the people of God as like in the days of Antiochus IV Epiphanies, as Satan has poured out his rage against the church after being defeated at the Cross.

So there lie the main points of the message on Day 1 on the Rage against the Church.

On day 2, Carson preaches on the topic of the Antichrist and the False Prophet, most certainly a very interesting topic. Expositing on Rev. 13, Carson picked up from the previous day’s message on the rage of Satan and follows through with how Satan intends to wage war against Christians. Two beasts were mentioned in Rev. 13: the first beast coming out of the sea and wage open war against the saints of God (Rev. 13:8-10), and the second beast that looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon (Rev. 13:11), thus symbolizing deception. The first beast is the Antichrist who openly opposed and persecuted Christians, waging war on them and killing them, and openly blaspheming the name of God (Rev. 13:6). It comes from the sea, which symbolizes chaos, and thus shows forth the overt persecution of the saints coming from the powers of darkness and disorder. This beast suffers from a mortal wound (Rev. 13:3), and this Carson interprets to mean that this symbolizes that the beast dies and yet it comes back again, and this cycle repeats itself. Cross-referencing Rev. 17:11, Carson shows that the beast is the eighth, yet it belongs to the seven. Seven being the number of completion, this shows that the beast of the eight is a new beast in the sense that it does not belong to their number and therefore is new, but yet at the same time, the eighth beast is as beastly as the other seven beasts. In other words, the [completion of] antichrists for periods of time would persecute the church, then they would suffer from a mortal wound and then die, following which a

new antichrist (the eighth beast) would arise which is actually part of the pantheon of antichrists and is thus actually one of the seven. After all, as Carson himself says, it is nonsensical to speak of the healing of a mortal wound, for the simple fact is that a mortal wound cannot be healed, and a wound that is healed is not mortal, and therefore there necessitates this mixing of metaphors within the texts of Scripture in order to bring this truth across. Antichrists (with a small 'a') would arise, persecute the church for a season, and then perish from the scene, and such an event repeats itself over and over again.

Later on, Carson clearly speaks that there may be a final Antichrist (with a big 'A') – the man of lawlessness of 2 Thess. 2:3, but his focus is not on that but rather on the fact that throughout the history of the Church, Satan's rage extends in the power of the first beast to persecute the people of God.

Moving on from the first beast, Carson engages the topic of the second beast, who is the epitome of false Christianity as it masquerades as a lamb (Rev. 13:11) yet its true nature is that of the antichristian beast. Thus Satan, the first beast and the second beast make up the unholy triumvirate in a mockery and an imitation of the biblical Trinity. This second beast comes up from the earth and thus comes out of relative stability alongside of the people of God. The picture here is of a non-frontal attack by the second beast as compared to the frontal opposition of the first beast. Looking like a lamb, this beast is meant to be a beast of deception, in order to deceive Christians to serve the first beast. Such deception could very well come in the form of heresies and all manner of false teaching which would be sent to corrupt and destroy the true teachings of the Faith, and that coming from within the camp from professing Christians. Yet the end result and purpose of the attack of the second beast is still the same; namely, to lead people into following and worshipping the first beast, whether they know it or not is rather irrelevant. As long as the person is not on the path of salvation, they have substituted God for an idol of their making, and therefore Satan has won here, with that idolatry being the mark of the devil.

Speaking of marks, the mark of the beast was introduced by Carson as he expounded on Rev. 13:16. Flowing from the contexts into the text, Carson shows here how those who are not God's people would receive the mark of the beast. Noting that God marks his people (Rev. 7:3 cf Eze. 9:4), Carson remarks that in the final analysis, we will either have God's mark on our foreheads, or will have the beast's mark on our foreheads or hands. There is therefore no middle ground. Those without the beast's mark, Christians, will suffer economic (Rev. 13:16-17) and other hardship plus persecution in this life. Non-Christians, bearing the mark of the beast, will however suffer from the wrath of God. Carson puts it very simply: You will face somebody's wrath, so whose wrath would you rather face? Face the wrath of Satan for this life, or face the wrath of God for eternity. I guess the answer is easy enough to decide on.

Day 2 was thus a great talk and exposition on the topic of the Antichrist and the False Prophet, refreshingly different from the viewpoint of Dispensational Premillennialism. Carson did take the beginning of his talk to answer some questions, of which those which are pertinent to the topic are addressed already.

And with that, we come to day 3; the last day. The topic for that day was Trajectories, expounding on Rev. 14 to show us that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. Through the exposition of Rev. 14:1-5, Carson depicts the glory of heaven and the characteristics of the people there. Conversely, in his exposition of Rev. 14:6-20, the judgments of God and the horrors of hell are depicted. Expositing on these two stark trajectories, Carson issues a powerful call for people to believe in the Gospel – a method I have never seen any preacher prior to this do.

Rev. 14:1-4 depicts the Lamb coming onto Mount Zion with the 144,000. The number represents the totality of God's people, as $144,000 = 12 \times 12 \times 10^3$; the 12 tribes of Israel signifying the totality of God's people under the Old Covenant, times the 12 apostles representing God's people under the New Covenant, times 10 signifying numerical wholeness, to the power of 3. Of course, the anticipated objection to such an interpretation is that it was stated that these people are those "who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins" (Rev. 14:4). Carson however explains that the expression is meant to be taken figuratively, not literally, as appropriate to the genre. Noting that the Church is likened unto the Bride of Christ, and she is to be pure and undefiled for her bridegroom (cf 2 Cor. 11:2), and that Israel's unfaithfulness was depicted (in rather graphic terms) as adultery (cf Ez. 16:1-58), Carson thus argue that the figure of speech of "not defiling themselves with women, for they are virgins" as indicative that these people are faithful to Christ their Lord. Responding to another objection that these people are stated as being "firstfruits" (Rev. 14:4b), Carson responded that firstfruits can also just mean fruits. In fact, the phrase most likely just means that that the choicest portion is to be given to God, not that there are other portions to be similarly sacrificed to God. And therefore, it seems to me that what the phrase "firstfruits" mean in this context is that the elect of God are God's special delight and He takes pleasure in us, not to mention that we are also the firstfruits in the sense that we are redeemed first before the entire creation is redeemed (Rom. 8:23)

Next, where is this gathering of the elect of God supposed to take place? The place is Mount Zion, which refers to the heavenly abode of Christ with His people (cf Gal. 4:26, Rev. 21:2), and not a physical Jerusalem in the Middle East. For the place is stated as being before the throne of God (Rev. 14:3a) and given that this is apocalyptic genre, Mount Zion here is to be interpreted figuratively.

The people of God in heaven are said to be singing a new song which only they could sing (Rev. 14:3), and not angels. Carson suggested that it is the song of the redeemed, because only redeemed sinners could sing of the redemptive love of Christ, whereas angels were never redeemed at all and thus could not sing this song. This ties in neatly with the emphasis of the second part of verse 3, and thus seem to be a good interpretation of the activity of the saints. Such praise is a joyful praise as playing of the harp was tied to joy (cf 2 Sam. 6:5; Ps. 144:9) while during times of sorrow God's people hung them up and refuse to play them (Ps. 137 – NASB). The praises of God's people was altogether joyful and lovely, and at the same time pervasive ('the roar of many waters') and loud and powerful ('sound of loud thunder').

Next, Carson moved on to the angelic warnings proclaimed towards the inhabitants of the earth. The first angel proclaimed the eternal Gospel (Rev. 14:6) which calls upon Man to believe in the Gospel, fear God and give Him glory (Rev. 14:7). Carson remarks, and I concur, that these words are in no wise the literal words making up the Gospel alone. Rather, they are a particular manifestation of the Gospel message, which is to be found more fully in the writings of the whole of Scripture

The second angel came and proclaimed judgment on Mystery Babylon (Rev. 17:3). Mystery Babylon here symbolizes the fallen world system of wicked men who cooperates with and follows the first beast of the Antichrist and antichrists. Ultimately, the power of the world in rebellion against God is doomed, and the second angel proclaims its certain fate.

The third angel proclaims judgment on individual unbelievers who in their sinful rebellion against God follow and worship the first and/or the second beast. This thus includes heretics who follow the second beast who attempts to deceive the very elect if possible (Mt. 24:24). All of such people, who are the reprobate followers of Satan in the final analysis, will face the wrath of God in eternal hellfire. Hell: a place of anguish, eternal torment and restlessness, where the worm does not die and

the fires do not quench. The horrors of hell will far exceed the vivid imaginations of Man, and can only be matched by the contrast at the other end of the glories reserved in Christ for His elect who will believe in Him. The unspeakable glories of heaven on the one end, and the unimaginable terrors of hell on the other. The stark contrast of trajectories of heaven and hell should be enough to sober us to consider things of eternal value. As we contemplate the glories of heaven, are we so entranced by them? As we see the horrors of hell, are we not fearful of them to flee to Christ, and to warn our fellow men of the great terror that awaits them if they will not repent of their sins to follow Christ? Carson thus gives a powerful appeal to all who may not have received Christ to do so now, and flee to Him who has the power to save us while there is still time to do so.

The last part of the session was spent looking at the grain and the wine harvest as depicted in Rev. 14:14-20. The grain harvest tells us that in the end, justice will be done and judgment passed by Jesus, the Son of Man. This alludes to Jesus' parable of the weeds in Mt. 13:24-30, as God will in the end gather all people and differentiate between the true and false believers within the visible Church. Christ will vindicate His work in saving the elect, while all false converts will be gathered up for destruction on that day.

The grape or wine harvest in Rev. 14:17-20 speaks of the judgment of God on the wicked. The outpouring of God's wrath for their destruction is spoken of here in vivid terms in pressing people together and squeezing their blood out like the wine press pressed out the grape juice from the grapes, with the torrent of blood so great that it was stated as flowing "as high as a horse's bridle, for 1600 stadia" (Rev. 14:20), which is certainly a lot of blood. This is the graphic picture of God's wrath in wiping the wicked out and shedding their blood, mercilessly trampling them underfoot in His wrath. As it can be seen, God is not just a God of love, but a God who detests the wicked as they continue in their sin, and plots their destruction unless they repent.

And this thus ends the three evening sessions on the book of Revelation.

There are two questions that were answered in the Q&A sessions at the beginning of the last two sessions that I think are worth reflecting on, which are not exactly related to the topic at hand but which warrants our attention. The first question was with regards to the use of magic by a "prominent pastor in Singapore", while the second question was asking if the prosperity "gospel" is part of the second beast in Rev. 13. I will talk about the second question first because it is easier too.

To the second question whether the prosperity "gospel" is part of the second beast, Carson replied strongly in the affirmative. That said, Carson mentioned that there is a difference between those who dabble in part of the prosperity and those who are firmly entrenched in that heresy. That surely is a good differentiation which must be made. Yet, such a differentiation as worded like that could be made into a subjective call by those deluded people believing that heresy, and therefore while it is a correct differentiation, my personal opinion is that it should either be worded differently or omitted since the natural tendency of fallen Man is to paint themselves in the best possible light. After all, which of the two prosperity "gospel" churches in Singapore, City Harvest and New Creation, are going to admit that they believe in the prosperity "gospel" heresy? Rather they would most definitely state at the most that they have "sieved out" the "biblical" teachings of prosperity and continue to focus on Christ.

With regards to the first question, the question was rather pointed such that everyone immediately knows who it was referring to – (Apostle) Pastor Lawrence Khong of FCBC. The questioner asked what did Carson thought about the use of magic by a prominent pastor in Singapore, or something to that effect. In my opinion, that was a question that would not really get to the point of contention about Lawrence Khong's use of magic. After all, with this, it cannot be expected for Carson to know anything of the background information or what this whole issue is about. Furthermore, the

question sounded rather personal so it wasn't a very good question overall. Therefore not only was the basic issue not addressed, but the question was too ad-hominem in nature. From the way that Carson answered, it shows precisely why that was a bad question because Carson probably had in mind a pastor who uses magic occasionally during his sermons. Such magic is thus not occultic in nature, but sleight of hand, and therefore has nothing to do with Scripture's condemnation of magic. Carson however states that if the doing of magic becomes the primary focus such that it is done to show people how good we are at magic, then he would have a serious issue with that, and with that he ended his answer.

In my opinion, the question should be better worded to focus on the real problem and not on the person. The problem with Lawrence Khong's focus on magic is not stated here, which is the doing of magic as a semi-substitute for preaching the whole counsel of God, and a distrust of the sufficiency and power of the Word of God to effect salvation apart from his magic tricks. Since Rom. 10:17 proclaims to us that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God, it is totally unbiblical and inconceivable that anyone can truly come to faith by just going to one of Khong's "evangelistic" magic shows, in which no mention is made of the wrath of God, of the sinfulness of Man, and of the necessity of repentance and true faith [mere words do not count], and where magic skills were flaunted. This then is the issue and the background information which should be conveyed to Carson, instead of giving a question which assumes as if Carson knows anything about the issues with Lawrence Khong, not to mention Khong is personally irrelevant to the entire issue. A better question to ask Dr. Carson thus is: "What do you think of the using of magic shows by a pastor as a medium for evangelism?"

So with this, I conclude this reflection of mine. This has indeed been a fruitful three evenings of expositions, and may God continue to bless us and the churches of Singapore in order that we may grow deeper in Him as we fulfill the Great Commission.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. (1 Thess. 5:23-24)

Amen,