

ESCHATOLOGY—
THE CONTROLLING THEMATIC IN THEOLOGY

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MOTIF

A Statement of Its Importance

Harvey Cox states that "in an age of reborn eschatological thinking Hope rather than belief may become the category through which we think as men of faith."¹ God is not to be thought of as One *over* us or *within* us but as *before* us. Christ is more important as the "coming one" than as the "historical Jesus" or the "Man for Others."

Vernard Eller states,

Without eschatological perspective the only meaning the drama of history can be made to render is that of a happening, namely, the momentary satisfaction that comes in the course of doing the doing.

. . . That which man needs and needs unconditionally, if he is to have any chance of fulfilling his role in the drama which is history, is a script, or an eschatological perspective (which, in the final analysis, is what a script is).²

Jurgen Moltmann states,

From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.³

Now although we may not agree with the specific eschatology of Moltmann it does seem that we must agree with the formal statement he makes concerning its importance.

Evidences of Its Importance

As we look for evidences of the importance of this revival of Hope we ask two questions.

1. Does the current theological emphasis on eschatology evidence

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1. Harvey G. Cox, *On Not Leaving It to the Snake* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964), p. 66.
2. Vernard Eller, *His End Up Getting God into The New Theology* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 23f.
3. Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 16.

a fadism? In some measure such is undoubtedly the case. (Note the December 26, 1969 issue of *Time*.) With some it simply comes as the sharpest possible alternative to the 'Death of God' affair. Cox states,

It is . . . evident that the theology of hope stands in sharp contrast to radical theology. Although radical theology glorifies the present, there is in theology of hope no reverence for present experience. Quite the contrary. The issue is, as Moltmann insists, 'Does the present define the future through extrapolation or does the future define the present in anticipation? For Moltmann the answer is clear—the future defines the present.'⁴

To the extent to which theologies of the future represent merely an attempt to counteract recent aberrations they should be criticized. Eschatological theology can become one-sided if not unbiblical. While radical theology made the mistake of elevating present experience to divine status; the theology of Hope comes very close to identifying God with the future. If we agree that God is before us must we deny that He is also above and within us? We must be careful that this new accent in theology is not allowed to push out of sight other important concepts.

In the rush to 'puff the future' there is already evidence of inordinate claims of the importance of eschatology, and of efforts to collapse the whole Christian testimony into its categories. Not only does that skew faith perilously, but it also invites a reaction that is quick to obscure the very accents we so desperately need. And it forgets the chameleon possibilities in the plunge forward towards relevance. Captivity to current notions takes the sting out of a faith whose refusal to say in a loud voice what the times are already saying is the secret of its critical power. Our task is to illumine future-oriented times from our own eschatological perspective but to do it without violence to the full orb of Christian conviction.⁵

2. A second question must now be asked. Does the current theological emphasis on eschatology coincide with a genuine general revival of Hope in our western world? This would seem to be largely the case. Note from whence some of these evidences arise:

- a. From psychiatry—Karl Menninger calls for a recovery of 'hope' as an ingredient in human wholeness.
- b. From secular 'futurology'—There are numerous movements to rebuild cities and nations.
- c. From science—There is the task of the creation, extension, and direction of life. Apocalyptic terms are frequently employed.
- d. From politics—There is the desire 'To Seek a Newer World.'

4. Harvey G. Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 129.

5. Gabriel Fackre, *The Rainbow Sign Christian Futurity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1969), p. 7 f.

- e. From youth culture—A certain segment are constructively endeavoring to improve life with a sense of hope.

Reason for Its Importance

When we ask why this new theological trend is important we discover several answers. First, it is important because it sounds a refreshing note of hope against the backdrop of the despair which has largely characterized our age in the West.

Bertrand Russell in his autobiography forcefully states this despair in answering a letter which he had received from Will Durant on June 8th, 1931. Durant had inquired concerning the meaning or worth of human life. Russell replied,

20 June 1931

Dear Mr. Durant:

I am sorry to say that at the moment I am so busy as to be convinced that life has no meaning whatever, and that being so, I do not see how I can answer your questions intelligently.

I do not see that we can judge what would be the result of the discovery of truth, since none has hitherto been discovered.

Yours sincerely,
Bertrand Russell⁶

Perhaps the present silence of God is intended to bring man to the end of himself; to the place that he will ask out of deep anguish, "It that all there is?"⁷ It is only when man comes to the end of his tether that he is ready to hear from the God of the Future, "It is safe to say that a man who has never tried to flee God has never experienced the God Who is really God."⁸

Second, it is important because it could provide something of a point of contact (common language) for profitable dialogue with the secular world and Marxists. The apostle Peter exhorts "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you. . . ." (I Pet. 3:15 RSV). Carl Braaten calls for a new correlation between apocalyptic eschatology and secular futurology.

The Christian gospel can expect to get a hearing in modern culture only when it has some important news to bring about our human future, when it is really concerned about the world's tomorrows.

6. Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914-1944* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 295.
7. This is the title of Peggy Lee's new record the lyrics of which are available in *Christianity Today*, Vol. XIV, Number 1, Oct. 10, 1969, p. 33.
8. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948) p. 42.

If it has nothing to do with the future, it is properly and understandably dismissed as irrelevant.

The truth and power of the Christian gospel must be made good within the public arena in which the future of man is being debated and decided. The eschatological message of Christianity has a point of contact today with those having a lively zest for the future. The future-less and hope-less outlook of a generation ago is no longer the dominant mood in our culture. . . . Theology must take with utmost seriousness the future-oriented culture in which we live. Only in this way can there be a truly secular translation of the gospel.⁹

It should be carefully observed however, that although Braaten calls for correlation he warns against equation. He states,

A crucial difference between secular futurology and Christian eschatology is this: the future in secular futurology is *reached* by a process of the world's *becoming*. The future in Christian eschatology *arrives* by the *coming* of God's kingdom. The one is a *becoming*, the other a *coming*.¹⁰

The apologetic value of a futuristic thrust must not be compromised by confusion with a humanistic utopianism. The unregenerate secular-minded man cannot give an adequate view of the future.

We may sometimes be astonished at the fact that non-Christians understand so much of their own time and of the future without using the light of Scripture. But we shall repeatedly find them baffled by the problems of the origins and the perspectives of the historical situations. They may be able to fit their fragmentary discoveries into some creditable whole, deserving our grateful recognition and use, but they do not realize the true meaning of the picture; they do not know what it is all about. This is the poverty of their unscriptural procedure. Without the *Bible*—and in the case of man this means without the intuition and the way of thought inspired by a life guided by the Word of God—every attempt to contemplate the society of the future must necessarily be futile.¹¹

The apologetic value may be diagramed as follows:

A BIBLICAL APOCALYPTIC ESCHATOLOGY	MODERN SECULAR FUTUROLOGY
The Christian	The Secular Man

Third, it is important because it might provide a hermeneutical bridge between the world of the Bible and our own. All of those who seriously attempt to communicate the eternal message of God to our modern world recognize immediately the hermeneutical gap existent between the two worlds. The cultural setting of the Bible has little in

9. Carl Braaten, *The Future of God The Revolutionary Dynamics of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, Pubs., 1969), p. 26 ff.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

11. H. Van Riessen, *The Society of the Future* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., n.d.), p. 17 f.

common with the present situation of modern man. All the talk about hermeneutics today indicates this difficulty. Could it be that this gap might be narrowed within the horizon of the future common to both? This is the thesis of Braaten in his recent book, *The Future of God*. When we ask what is that horizon which ties both the world of the past and the present together he states,

That is the eschatological horizon of God's future which appeared in the Christ-happening. It is a future which in coming to pass in the openness of world history is never past because it continues to be the future of God out in front of the world in its present form. This futurist perspective may open up a hermeneutical way which finds border crossings between the eschatological horizon of the Bible and the orientation of our secular culture toward the open future.

The horizon of the future can break the dualism of two rigidly self-sufficient horizons, that of the biblical records and that of the present age. The meaning of any historical event can be known only from its context. One must know the full context. However, the full context is unavailable, since history is still going on and has not come to an end. The future perspective must be included in any contextual interpretation of an event's meaning. The context of the past or of the present is not enough.¹²

Eschatology—A Hermeneutical Bridge

FUTURE

God's
future
which
appeared in
the Christ
event.

PAST

Biblical Revelation

PRESENT

Contemporary Experience

Fourth, it is important because it could incite Christians at a grass-root level into dynamic action for Christ's kingdom. Hope for the future makes labor in the present worthwhile. "Jesus underscored the *present impact* of the imminent future. . . Jesus indeed spoke of the presence of the Kingdom of God, but always in terms of the presence of God's *coming* Kingdom. Futurity is fundamental for Jesus' message."¹³ The God of the

12. Braaten, *The Future of God*, pp. 18, 24.

13. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 53 f.

Future, revealed in Christ, is ever calling us to responsible action in the present age. We are called to be His actors in a drama which has as its aim the redemption of fallen men and the establishment of an eternal kingdom. History has meaning because it is teleologically oriented.

In the rays of this light shining from the End, history is exposed for what it is, corrupt and in travail. The vision contradicts and calls into radical question all that is. The effect of this juxtaposition of fulfilment with the frustration of immediacy makes the Christian hoper restless with the *status quo*. Rather than leading to passivity, the gap between what is and what will be drives towards action. Hope mobilizes for mission.¹⁴

Fifth, it is important because "This priority of the eschatological future which determines our present demands a reversal also in our ontological conceptions."¹⁵ In respect to the idea of God his being and existence cannot be conceived of apart from his rule. "Since his rule and his being are inseparable, God's being is still in the process of coming to be."¹⁶ Because of this, the present criticism of the traditional theistic idea of God is right. "Obviously, if the mode of God's being is interlocked with the coming of his rule, we should not be surprised or embarrassed that God cannot be 'found' somewhere in present reality."¹⁷ The philosophical implications of this assertion need to be critically explored. If it is impossible for God to die is it not equally impossible for Him to come to be? Biblically God is the "Great I Am."

THE ORIGIN OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MOTIF

The Christian perspective on the future is not something of only recent concern. Actually it is as old as divine revelation itself. "But apart from the long view, even the recent revival of eschatology cannot simply be dated from a 1965 Moltmann study or 1966 Cox essay."¹⁸ One might add, or a 1969 Braaten challenge to a dynamic revolutionary hope.

Eschatology was the concern of the World Council in its 1954 Evanston Assembly; the theme was 'Christ the Hope of the World.' Other scholars have been sounding the note of hope now for some time—Cullmann, in the context of a salvation history; Bultmann in the context of an existentialism; Chardin, in the context of an evolutionism.

From the perspective of modern theology the story may be seen to unfold in three stages. First, the neo-orthodox stage in which the future slipped into an eternal present—Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich. In this context the transcendence of God was viewed in vertical terms either as "above us" or "below us." Second, the "death of God" stage in which the divinely transcendent One ceased to exist and one spoke simply of the

14. Fackre, *The Rainbow Sign*, p. 72.

15. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, p. 54.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Fackre, *The Rainbow Sign*, p. 3.

future of man—Altizer, Hamilton, Van Buren. Third, 'the theology of Hope' stage in which the theme of eschatology became a new point of departure for a total recasting of the divine message—Moltmann, Pannenberg.

SOME MAJOR VIEWS OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MOTIF

An Existential View

Rudolph Bultmann is the foremost example of this approach. From the standpoint of traditional *temporal* eschatologies Bultmann's position represents a 'de-eschatologizing'. Flowing from the device of 'de-mythologizing' his main purpose has been to make the message of the New Testament relevant to modern man. While an Evangelical scholar may not be critical of Bultmann's purpose he cannot be pleased with his method. Thus "as an exegete he was already reinterpreting eschatology existentially in divesting it of its temporality."¹⁹ Contrasting Schweitzer with Bultmann, Cullmann states,

Whereas for Schweitzer and his school the delay of the *parousia* had to transform Jesus' eschatology, temporally understood, into a salvation history by one way or another, in a rectilinear lengthening, according to Bultmann and his school the delay induced two totally different developments. One was a legitimate one, freeing the core of Jesus' expectation to be disclosed existentially, and the other was the illegitimate, the salvation-historical one, taking further the temporal element that really should be eliminated.²⁰

According to the Bultmannian position, Paul and John provide us with a legitimate eschatological perspective—for them Christ is supposedly the end of all continuous history. "The original core is more and more consciously extracted from the mythological husk of a temporal end."²¹ The false solution is the salvation-historical approach found in Luke's writings.

For the early Barth, as well as for the later Tillich, the eschatology of the eternal now was dominant. The universal relevance of eschatology was gained by a radical redefinition in which the horizon of the future disappeared into the eternal depths of the present moment. . . . In Bultmann's case the future was finally subjectivized into the futurity of existence in the immediate present. The eschatological future became an existential stance of openness to the world. The future as the front line of God's advancing kingdom which generates the expectancy of really new happenings in world history was not the focus of faith in the period of dialectical theology. Neither Barth's theology of the word nor Bultmann's theology of existence gave us an eschatology that incorporated the horizontal line of history that moves outward and forward. Theology was eschatological in terms of a vertical dialectic between eternity

19. Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper and Row, Pubs., 1967), p. 41.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 43 f.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

and time, from above to below, but at the price of the horizon of the future.²²

Temporal Views

1. Consistent Eschatology—an exclusive futuristic eschatology. It may be defined as “the consistent interpretation of Jesus’ eschatology as an expectation of an imminent end.”²³ The foremost representative of this position was Albert Schweitzer. He maintained that Jesus taught the imminent end, temporally understood. This proved however, to be an illusion and thus in a subsequent development of theology we see not a consistent eschatology but a progressive abandonment of eschatology—a ‘consistent de-eschatologizing’.

Cullmann writes concerning Schweitzer,

As an *exegete* Schweitzer did not, like Bultmann, find an existential meaning as the actual intention of Jesus behind his futuristic expectation. Thus, from Schweitzer’s exegetical premises the conclusion must actually be drawn that Jesus’ whole teaching stands or falls with this expectation as its central point, and therefore must fall and be given up. We all know that Schweitzer did not draw this conclusion. We know what Jesus and Paul actually meant for Schweitzer. But he based his own philosophy of life neither on Jesus’ expectation that the end was imminent, which was proven an illusion and in no case could be reinterpreted, nor upon some kind of de-eschatologizing ‘salvation history’ understood as a solution to an embarrassment created by the delay of the *parousia* and therefore valueless because it had its beginning in an illusion. Schweitzer founded his own personal attitude on ‘reverence for life.’ For Schweitzer, this went hand in hand with a practical Christianity. But theoretically it was neither rooted in the eschatology of Jesus, as Schweitzer understood it exegetically, nor in the eschatological mysticism of Paul, which he rejected because it was worked out in an effort to come to grips with an illusion. Since Schweitzer as an exegete is averse to every reinterpretation of the New Testament, an impossible gap opens between his exegetical and his religious-philosophical attitudes. With his extremely consistent, but purely hypothetical, exegetical account of Jesus’ teachings and his flagrant inconsistency in his practical conclusions, Schweitzer’s imposing theological work left behind burning and unanswered questions and therefore has determined the debate of the present to an extent which the parties in dialogue today hardly recognize.²⁴

2. Realized Eschatology—an eschatology of the present. According to this view the Kingdom of God has already dawned in the ultimate sense. Representatives of this view include: C. H. Dodd, J. A. T. Robinson, Joachim Jeremias and Ethelbert Stauffer.

According to this position Jesus never spoke of an actual eschato-

22. Braaten, *The Future of God*, p. 19 f.

23. Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, p. 29.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 31 f.

logical event in the distant future but only of events in the impending history of Israel. Exegetically all the futuristic statements of Jesus are understood as referring either to the present or, at any rate, to the coming events of the present and already fulfilled aeon. "Whatever cannot be thus explained is regarded as a latter addition."²⁵

Dodd and his followers maintain that there was a break between Jesus' view of the end and that held by some within the early church.

We may compare Dodd and Schweitzer in this respect as follows:

	Jesus	The Primitive Church
Dodd	The Kingdom realized in the present	Its dawning shifted into the future
Schweitzer	The Kingdom to be realized in the future	Its dawning shifted into the present

It should be carefully noted that Dodd and Schweitzer are agreed that Jesus' and the Church's expectation of the end were conceived in a temporal way; the former making it all a matter of the present, the latter all a matter of the future from the perspective of Jesus Himself.

3. A Realized and Anticipated Eschatology—a present and future eschatology. According to this view, "the basic feature characterizing Jesus' eschatology was that the Kingdom of God proclaimed to be at once present and future."²⁶ Two important representatives of this position are Oscar Cullmann and W. G. Kummel. Cullmann states,

Without advancing the tension between 'already' and 'not yet,' as I have done in my later works, I took up a position accepting neither the present nor the futuristic interpretation of Jesus' eschatology, finding instead its characteristic and essential feature in the juxtaposition of present and future, thereby assuming that the beginnings of a salvation history could already be found with Jesus.²⁷

Cullmann maintains that the key to the understanding of New Testament Salvation History is the Salvation-Historical tension between 'Already' and 'Not Yet.'²⁸ In Christ, the Kingdom is both present and future.

Cullmann sees two days in the divine war with evil: D-day occurred at the midpoint of history in Jesus Christ when the powers of evil were broken by the Kingdom of God; V-day will be the day of the Parousia when the Kingdom will destroy the powers of evil and will fill the world.²⁹

25. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 37 f.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 166 ff.

29. George E. Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1968), p. 50.

Others scholars representing this approach have suggested the formula: promise, fulfillment, and consummation of the Kingdom—A. M. Hunter, R. Schnackenburg. Actually the central problem in current discussion of the Kingdom of God is its relationship to history in view of the modern historian's understanding of history but for all of those in this school the Kingdom is concerned with history. "It has broken into history in Jesus Christ, and it will involve a consummation in power either in history or at the end of history."³⁰

The Old Testament *promise* of the coming of the Kingdom, *fulfillment* of the promise of the Kingdom in history in the person, words, and deeds of Jesus, *consummation* of the promise at the end of history—this is the basic structure of the theology of the Synoptic Gospels.³¹

The Kingdom *has come* (Matt. 12:28) in Christ's own person and mission. "This is the 'mystery' of the Kingdom (Mark 4:11): the revelation of a new redemptive act—that before the eschatological theophany, God has invaded history to bring men the blessings of his redemptive reign."³² But the Kingdom is also yet to come.

This eschatological (referring to the end of time) character of the kingdom of God preached by Jesus is one of the chief presuppositions of the whole of his *kerygma*, and the references to it are like a golden thread interwoven with glorious future in places like Matthew 7:21, . . . (Matt. 8:11, cf. Luke 13:28, 29); . . . (Matt. 13:43); . . . (Matt. 16:28); . . . (Mark 9:1); . . . (Matt. 20:21; cf. Mark 10:37); . . . (Matt. 25:34); . . . (Matt. 26:29, cf. Mark 14:25, Luke 22:18). It is difficult to deny that these passages, and many others, speak of another reality—an 'eschatological' reality.³³

This later view would appear to be the lines along which an Evangelical eschatology must be constructed.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps we may best summarize the purpose of this survey of current eschatological thought as providing the controlling thematic in theology by the following statements.

First, eschatology is an aspect of divine truth which needs special emphasis in our day; it would appear to have particular apologetic value.

Second, we must be careful however, that we do not allow it to become simply another theological fad.

Third, one way in which we may guard against this is by seeking to

30. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

33. Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Pub Co., 1962), p. 37 f.

construct a Biblical concept of the Future. Our eschatology must be based upon a careful exegetical study of the Scriptures themselves.

This Biblical concept of the Future in broad outline would include: (1) The idea of the Kingdom of God as His sovereign redemptive *rule* in the lives of men working forward toward the ultimate dawning of that eternal Kingdom when God will be all in all—a Kingdom which will be realized either *in* or at the *end* of history. (2) The idea that this Kingdom is both present and future—‘already’ but ‘not yet’. (3) The idea that this rule of God is being centrally mediated through Christ by the Spirit in history. (4) The idea that the power of the God of the Future is calculated to move us into responsible action on behalf of others in the present.

Fourth, we should celebrate in the present in appreciation of God’s working in the past and in anticipation of His coming in the future.