“Then...the End”

LEE E. SNOOK
Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota

Then comes the end, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and [every] power...When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. 1 Corinthians 15:24

“THEN...THE END.” ABOUT ENDINGS, WE ARE FAMILIAR ENOUGH; ABOUT GAMES being finished when the clock runs down we know well; about assignments coming at last to their conclusion, we have ample experience; about a course of study, a span of weeks at last coming to the final day, the final exam, the final paper, the final grade, we have known them all. Such endings are not the end, they are merely endings, like the ending of another day to be succeeded by the next, which then will end. The endings never end. They are instances of just one more ending among the endless string of endings. About endings, we know well enough. We are collectors of endings duly recorded as cancelled checks, school transcripts, tax receipts, class notes, stubs of theater tickets, snapshots of the kids at the beach, college letters saved by mother. And what of our dying, is it not also just another ending added to the collected endings and marked by obituaries, tombstones, and flowers on the grave?

Our text, assigned for the ending of the church year, does not speak of endings, but of the end. “Then...the end.” The telos, the end, as in the usually neglected and fearful question: To what end, to what purpose, toward what consummation do all these endings go? Is there any point to these endings, these fi-

LEE E. SNOOK, professor of systematic theology, preached this sermon in the Luther Seminary Chapel of the Incarnation on November 18, 1993.
nal papers which are only endings but not at all the end of it all? Endings are not
the point, are not the goal, but do these continuing endings have a final end, not as
in full-stop end but as in fulfillment of purpose? Do all the endings serve the end?
“Then...the end.” And when the end comes, will that end illuminate, throw light
upon, make sense for, and justify the often weaving and seemingly endless parade
of endings?

“Then...the end.” How could this be? How could the end put an end to the
threat of pointless endings? Can there be such as that which the apostle here calls
the end? Have we not collected over all these centuries one catastrophic instance
after another of proposed final ends, final solutions, final systems, final doctrines
which have only added to the wreckage of false promises and deceit? “Then...the
end.” Can there be such as the end, which will end the specter, the haunting fear
that all these endings are pointless?

If in our anxious, fearful contemplation about endings, we are moved to ask
what will be the end of our endings, there will be no answer. Nothing. Nothing, be-
cause it is the wrong, and therefore unanswerable, question. But if we are moved
to ask who will be the end of our endings, the text points us. Again, listen to the
apostle, “Then...the end, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father,
after he has destroyed every ruler, and every authority and [every] power.”
Then...the end. At the end there waits for us not the final solution, not the final sys-
tem, but at the end there waits for us the One who has “destroyed every ruler,
every authority, every power.”

Be careful with that text. Oh, how we love to speak knowingly about rulers,
about dominion, about authority, about power. And oh, how easily we think that
the One who destroys every ruler, every authority, and every power will, of
course, do his destroying work in the very way every ruler, every authority, and
every power has done it—only more so. And so off we go, prattling on about God
being in control, just as we would be in control if we were God.

And off we go, speaking about the authority of God over all other authorities
by giving God more of the same kind of authority. Is the highest imaginable
authority a five-star general, then God is—well—God has stars without number.

And what about power? Well, is it not all too obvious who has power over
whom around here? And if you do not have enough power, then go find yourself
someone with power who can empower you. And soon even the power of God be-
comes a commodity to be traded on the open market, only now God is the one
who—as the deus absconditus—really has all the power, only it is all hidden away,
and... and... then... the end.

When we read the text which begins, “Then...the end,” let us be careful that
we read it in such a way that, in the end, the power of God is the power of God, the
jealous Lover, who dies of love, who dies of an eternal longing that all those whom
God loves might live forever in love with God. When we read the text, be careful
that the power of God not be rendered as the power of a jealous tyrant, who does
not keep promises, who is not at heart generous in sharing power with all the
creatures whom God loves, but in the end takes back everything that God had ever
given in love.

We can too easily become so mesmerized by our cramped and pinched ways
of imagining the power of God, that we let our assumptions about power over-
whelm and overpower even the story of Jesus, whose strong defiance of those in
power sent him to his death. Our ways of imagining the power of God too easily
trick us into thinking that the resurrection of Christ the crucified somehow can-
celed what God shows us of God’s way in the life of Jesus, and turns the crucified
Jesus into a resurrected ruthless overlord who behaves like the conquering Caesar
of Rome rather than the suffering servant of God.

And our assumptions about power can even cause us to forget what the
apostle Paul also wrote to the congregation at Corinth—a community of spirit-
empowered people who were much impressed by their own claims of spiritual
power. Of the three, wrote Paul, love is the greatest power, greater even than faith
by which we are justified, greater even than hope. The suffering love of God is the
power of God by which the many who are so often eager to lord their power over
the power of others become one with God in Christ.

Two chapters later the apostle returns to the theme of the many become one
in God, in the passage introduced by the words, “Then... the end.” By now it
should be plain that the destruction by Christ of every ruler, every authority, and
every power will be accomplished by God’s determination to be the God whose
way of ruling is Jesus the suffering servant and not Caesar the conquering tyrant.
Then...the end. And only then, when all things are subjected to God’s way of rul-
ing, only then will the Son who lived and ruled as God’s way in the world, only
then—as Paul writes—will the Son himself be subjected under God, “so that God
may be all in all,” “so that God may be everything to everyone.” And then:
“Then... the end.”