



On Speaking of the Kingdom Today

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The primary Christian symbols of the future have to do with a victory at the end of time which will vindicate Jesus the Christ's followers' faith in him. The central symbol for this in Jesus' preaching is the coming Kingdom of God, better translated as the coming "kingly rule of God." It is a dynamic reality rather than a place (as in the popular notion). Within the preaching of the historical Jesus the Kingdom was said to be near at hand and, indeed, already realized in some sense in his own presence and in the presence of the Spirit. Yet it was still expected in its fullness only at the end of history.

After Jesus' death and resurrection the symbol of the Kingdom was taken up into more specific symbols, and these were all related to him: his promised return, the resurrection of all the dead, and the judgment when he will be known as Lord of all and when salvation will come to all who are "in Christ."

The point of all this for the followers of Christ has been the presence of a powerful expectation of God's fulfillment of his promises in the future. This hope is commonly called "eschatological" (from *eschaton*, end) in order to distinguish it from ordinary human hopes. In this eschatological hope it is expected that God himself will act to bring this present age to a close and to bring to completion the age to come. This eschatological age to come is not a future brought about by humans (although God may also work through humans) but by God. It is an age when present suffering and injustice will be overruled and mortality and sinfulness will be transformed.

What sense do we make of such talk in our day? After nearly two millennia in which the eschatological fulfillment still has not occurred, how do we deal with such ideas? No longer do we have the option of letting this future aspect of the message simply drop out, as did Christians of earlier times. Research by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer should have made that impossible after the turn of our century.¹ The fact that such insights were resisted by later liberals and trans-

¹Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961; orig., 1906); Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; orig., 1892).

formed by neoorthodoxy into nontemporal notions of transcendence (Barth) or existential urgency (Bultmann) is no reason for us to ignore any longer the fact that the New Testament is permeated with eschatology. It can only be ignored at the risk of misrepresenting the whole Christian message. Ernst Käsemann and Jürgen Moltmann, from differing starting points, have made this clear.²

What is less clear is how we are to interpret such materials once we have acknowledged their presence. The specter of apocalyptic groups and individuals predicting dates for Christ's return and acting irresponsibly because the end is thought to be near must make us wary of any simple literal interpretation of this material. In addition, the difficulty of conceiving of a future which is discontinuous from the present and from the more immediate historical future should make us reluctant simply to repeat the promises about the future which do not seem to have any referent or any relationship to what we do now. The oft-repeated criticism to the effect that Christians are so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good is a warning that we must spell out more precisely what we mean here.

I. THE KINGDOM IN RECENT THEOLOGY

The major schools of thought in current theology which deal extensively with the future are process theology, Teilhardian theology, the theology of hope, and liberation theology. The first two are quite different from the latter two, but among them they cover an important range of possible interpretive options with which to begin our thinking.

A. *Process theology* is dependent upon the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, who stressed the radically temporal nature of reality and saw process as fundamental to the world and to God.³ While Whitehead focuses on the present as the locus of decision, he is very interested in the ordinary temporal future because there is little of value or interest in life if it is devoid of a sense that what is going on now has value beyond the present moment. Whitehead sees neither beginning nor end to the process, however, and so his thought will not allow theology to adopt at face value the language of biblical eschatology. For Whitehead the meaning is not in the end but in God, the dimension of reality which has permanence. And in his view of God, God is not only the origin but the recipient of all values realized in the world.

Process theologians argue that Whitehead's viewpoint makes better sense of the notion of the future than traditional eschatological views. They state the dilemma as follows: (in agreement with the traditional approach) if there is no

²Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," *Apocalypticism*, ed. Robert W. Funk (Vol. 6 of *Journal for Theology and the Church* [New York: Herder & Herder, 1969]) 17-46. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). For a discussion of the ways in which theologians have made use of this research, see Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (Naperville: Allenson, 1972).

³For brief discussions of the way in which the future is treated in process theology, Teilhardian theology, and the theology of hope, see *Hope and the Future of Man*, ed. Ewert H. Cousins (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972). The volume consists of the proceedings of a conference of the same name in 1972 featuring representatives from these three approaches to theology. On process theology see the essay by John B. Cobb, Jr., "What is the Future? A Process Perspective," 1-14.

hope, then our present situation is hopeless and action is meaningless; but (against the traditional approach) if good must inevitably triumph, this too undercuts the seriousness and risk of human action now. They suggest another route by saying that the real focus of hope according to the Bible is not in the end of history but in the present experience of God. And, if that is so, then there is no need to insist on an end to the process. Christian hope is to be understood as confidence in God in the midst of a creative adventure which does not need to have an end. Hope is focused on God instead of the future (as even the old hymn has it; God is "our hope for years

to come”), and this is the interpretive key for unlocking the meaning of eschatological language in the New Testament.

The main criticism of this position is that it gains intelligibility at the expense of faithfulness or appropriateness to the biblical materials.⁴ While the future is not omitted altogether (and this is certainly an important gain), the New Testament theme of the reversal of all unresolved problems of human existence at the end of time is downplayed too much. It should be added that when such fulfillments are minimized, this position may be religiously inadequate as well, for it seems to leave the individual with little hope beyond an altruistic contribution to the life of God and to offer little help in the face of sin, death, and evil. Process theologians would reply that intelligibility is no small gain, however, and that something which is somehow “appropriate” to the biblical materials without being conceivable is hardly religiously helpful. And they would reiterate the important point about our hope being in God, after all, and not in the future.

B. An *evolutionary approach* toward the future characterizes the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose work has influenced many contemporary Roman Catholics and others.⁵ For Teilhard the future is intelligible only as the future or destiny of what has been and now is; the future itself can have no independent existence. He understands everything in reality in terms of its coming to be up until the present moment and with reference to what it will become. Thus it is crucial in his approach to grasp the structure of this dynamic process.

The central focus for Teilhard in understanding the evolutionary process is humankind; human consciousness is seen as the epitome of the evolution of the world, because it is the most complex configuration to date, and it is a clue for seeing that the trend in evolution is toward greater complexity. This is not only a movement toward greater multiplicity but also toward centeredness; the destiny of the world and of humankind is to fulfill this trend. This entails also an ethical imperative to advance the process. Rather than seeing any inevitable optimism about this whole project, Teilhardians point to the fragility of a hope that depends for its realization on the need for human consciousness to realize its destiny and to act upon this realization.

Yet Teilhard does see the work of God in the process as he examines it, so that ultimately God and not humans are said to be the basis for faith. But this is put in a way which insists on an open future; everything is still evolving, and new

⁴On the criteria of appropriateness and intelligibility, see Schubert Ogden, “What Is Theology?” *The Journal of Religion* 54 (1974) 13-34, and David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975) chapter 3.

⁵Note the references in *Hope and the Future of Man*, and see especially Philip Hefner, “The Future as Our Future: A Teilhardian Perspective,” 15-39.

things will occur. Thus our faith is in God in the sense of an awareness that the world matters to God; the evidence of billions of years of evolution is reliable!

In specifically Christian terms, our symbols grow out of a particular history and are considered to be clues for seeing the meaning of the process. Christ is the Omega toward which the process is heading; he reveals to us that the process is in God, finally, and that persons and values are eternal.

The future about which Christianity speaks is understood in this approach to be in some

sort of continuity with the present, although not in the sense that it can be extrapolated from the present or manipulated. The basis for Teilhardians saying this rests on the perceived confidence that the created order is trustworthy. As Philip Hefner notes, “the God question *is* the question of the reliability of the created order.”⁶ We speak of God and of the future on the basis of this reliability. To take it even further, Teilhard claims that God has so incarnated himself into the self-consciousness of the creation that the future seems to rest on his working through human beings.

Criticisms of this position range from doubting that the world process is truly evolving in any progressive direction (that is, whether the position is descriptively accurate) to objecting that the evolutionary model is too optimistic and does not take evil and suffering seriously but simply leaves them behind. This latter objection is made in terms of the biblical emphasis on the transformation of all injustice and incompleteness promised for the end of time. In similar fashion, it could be argued that the idea of Christ as the Omega point does not do justice to the biblical emphasis on the crucified One through whom God reconciles the world and overcomes suffering. Finally, in terms of Reformation categories, it might appear that Teilhard’s emphasis on human decision and responsibility for future salvation partakes of the semi-Pelagian position which *sola gratia* and *sola fide* opposed.

C. The *theology of hope* takes quite a different approach, being biblical and confessional rather than metaphysical in its interests.⁷ Theologian of hope Jürgen Moltmann stresses that what Jesus thought of and spoke of as the Kingdom of God was a coming event, and thus it cannot be interpreted as merely an ontological dimension of the present world in the process of becoming. If viewing the future as an oncoming event not growing out of present history does not make sense in terms of contemporary thought systems, then it stands in judgment over such thought systems—which have been constructed apart from an eschatological standpoint. Indeed, Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg consider the resurrection of Christ to be a foretaste of the end of time and assert that *it* ought to be the starting point for all thought about reality. Moltmann might even say that for his theology “the method is the mission,” meaning that the proclamation of the future hope must challenge and overthrow all of our “old” ways of thinking.

⁶Ibid., 37. In addition to this quotation, most of this report on Teilhard is dependent directly on Hefner’s article.

⁷See Carl E. Braaten, “The Significance of the Future: An Eschatological Perspective,” *Hope and the Future of Man*, 40-54; see also the articles in that volume by Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Johannes B. Metz, as well as Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, and Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) chapters 1-3.

To make their point, these theologians will say that God is the “power of the future” and that in a sense God “does not yet exist” because his power (his rule) is still coming to be. They give such primacy to the future that it is said to be the “cause” of present events.⁸ Such notions seem problematic to those who stress human freedom and a contingent future, and here the theologians of hope reveal their own confessional backgrounds in stressing more traditional notions of the lack of human freedom apart from service to God and in insisting that God does not “become” God by our historical contributions to his being.

The theologians of hope reiterate in an almost literal fashion the symbols of the future in

the New Testament. For example, they say that the end of all people will be like the end which happened to Christ—resurrection from death. Such primacy given to the future means that this theology emphasizes Christianity’s revolutionizing and transforming power. In Moltmann’s words, “Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present....It makes the Church the source of continual new impulses toward the realization of righteousness, freedom, and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come.”⁹

The main criticism of the theology of hope’s way of treating the biblical language about the future is that it is unable to specify just how such primacy as it gives to the future might be conceivable. This theology is unable to spell out how the future “causes” the present; or, when it attempts to do so, how any present freedom is then preserved. Implied also in its talk of God in the future is the absence of God in the present, which seems to neglect the doctrines of creation and preservation on a theological level, and which downgrades the importance of present existence on a personal level. It might be added that here, in contrast to process and Teilhardian theology, we have faithfulness to the biblical materials at the expense of contemporary intelligibility. Even if the theologians of hope could make a case for their position by redefining what is “intelligible,” I think that it is still questionable whether all of Christian theology is understood properly as eschatology, as Moltmann claims. Large portions of the New Testament (e.g., the Johannine literature) make little sense if they are interpreted solely in terms of a linear futuristic expectation. Finally, this theology may make such strong claims about the divine future that it is unable to specify any continuities with present action in history; hence, history and the world are usually spoken of as “godforsaken.” The other side of this may be a fideistic optimism which is seemingly not grounded in any dimensions of the present.

D. *Liberation theology* has several links with the theology of hope in its biblical and confessional interests as well as in its concern for transformative action in accord with the hoped for future; but this theology is occasioned less by theological concerns than by the historical situations of oppression in which most of its proponents live.¹⁰ In ways similar to the theology of hope, although to an even

⁸W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, chapter 1. But see Philip Hefner, “Questions for Moltmann and Pannenberg,” *Una Sancta* 25 (1968) 32-51.

⁹J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.

¹⁰The most important work is Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973). See also the report and discussion by Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

greater extent, liberation theology opposes every system of thought which would allow or encourage one to bear with or to ignore present evils because of the hope for a glorious future. This theology insists on linking all talk about God’s future Kingdom to working for proximate realizations of that Kingdom now in history—and in situations of oppression this is to be done particularly by revolutionary activity.

For liberation theology the power of the future is primarily an extension of the power of God who is at work in present history, liberating the oppressed, and thereby guiding history toward its fulfillment. Eschatology is interpreted as the driving force within history. There will be

an end of history, to be sure, but it will be within history and will be directly related to the growth in history of liberation. Sin is identified as being primarily in the structures of society, and thus liberation from sin must include the restructuring of society. Communion with God is known in a humanized society.

Liberation theologians such as Gutierrez and Bonino draw on Marx's economic analysis of society to help make sense of the bondage of oppressed people as well as to help define what historical liberation might look like. This makes their discussions of sin and of justice, peace, and wholeness exceedingly concrete. Yet it is not that they identify salvation completely with historical liberation, but rather that they deepen the meaning of historical liberation by linking it to the full realization of true freedom which only comes through communion with Christ. For them the point of all Christian language about the future is to open people for commitment to social change in the present. Paraphrasing Marx and the liberation theologians, we might say that the task of eschatology is not to understand the world but to change it in the direction of the promised future.

Many of the criticisms of this theology are simply outright rejections of their socio-political positions which do not deal with their theology.¹¹ More significant criticisms engage liberation theologians in discussing the appropriateness of their interpretation of eschatology not for stressing its present dynamism but for the way in which they link God's Kingdom so closely with progress in history. To be sure, they usually make a distinction between historical liberation and salvation, but it may still be wondered whether liberation is not so closely linked to certain political positions that this theology does not see the penultimate character of all parties and movements in history. After all, the Kingdom also is to bring everything under judgment. Finally, it should be asked whether the use of Marxist analysis does not function at times to make them see certain historical changes as necessary rather than possible, thus causing them to bend eschatology to fit socialist ideology.

II. A PROPOSAL CONCERNING ESCHATOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

In light of the insights from these several ways of interpreting the biblical themes concerning the future, and mindful of the criticisms made of certain features of each approach, how might one go about constructing a way of making sense of

¹¹See R. Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 101-131.

these themes? Any proposal would need to take the biblical materials seriously while at the same time attending to the need to relate the future promised in the Bible to the present and immediate future in which we live and think.

Initially, it might be noted that in each position an attempt has been made to speak directly about the future, either in terms of a metaphysical description or by interpreting the biblical language as speaking literally of an historical future. It is commonly argued, however, that the future resists being considered in the same way as the present and the past since unlike them it does not yet exist. In Kantian terms, we should speak of the future in *aesthetic* categories: dreams, plans, hopes, myths, images, designs—these are the modes of thought which offer access to the future. Yet we would not wish to claim that they offer the same sort of “knowledge” of the future which we have of the past and present.¹²

In such an approach the future would be “represented” not by describing how it happens but by considering which things might happen. Language, in this mode, does not describe but designs. In terms of grammar, the mood would shift from the indicative to the subjunctive. In dealing with eschatological language, we would not understand it to be *explaining* reality but to be *exploring* new possibilities with the aid of the biblical images. We would move away from treating Christian faith as philosophy or as doctrine and would look at it as religion; this would be a move from *logos* to *mythos*, to faith’s images, hopes, projections, and myths.

Theology’s task—and this is especially important in dealing with eschatology—would shift from definition to orientation. Faith has its thoughts, to be sure, but it is not identical with thought. Nor is it only trust or emotion. Faith is an “encompassing perspective” which is not congenial to complete definition, for it is a being in the presence of the divine with the result that those who live by faith claim a new reality in their lives which they are willing to trust for the future and in death.¹³ Faith in God’s future so understood would not be like a map, which lays out already discovered territory, but like a compass which points a direction of orientation in the uncharted regions ahead.

But is this enough? Must we seemingly give up explanation when it comes to the future? And, if so, are we giving up all claims to truth? That may seem to be the case *if* we only conceive of two ways of going about the theological task: that either we must settle for simply reasserting in literal terms the eschatological language of the Bible (which may have existential meaningfulness but makes no claims to be true in terms which relate to contemporary intelligibility by way of philosophical reflection); or we choose to explain the future philosophically in terms which are limited to the present and the immediate future and which cannot deal with the ways in which Scripture portrays the eschatological future as being beyond history and as transforming present circumstances and values.

A suggestion made over forty years ago by Reinhold Niebuhr may provide

¹²See Walter H. Capps, “Mapping the Hope Movement,” *The Future of Hope*, ed. W. H. Capps (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 1-49; Carl E. Braaten, “Toward A Theology of Hope,” *New Theology No. 5*, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 90-111; and the articles by Paul Ricoeur, *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973) 97-141, esp. 109.

¹³John Dillenberger, *Contours of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969) 84-85, 123. This book considers the effects of historical change on the relationship between faith and theology.

some help in this matter.¹⁴ Niebuhr thought that all language about ultimate dimensions of life or history in the Bible (such as talk about origins or destiny) ought to be considered to be “myth.” By “myth” Niebuhr does not mean that which is untrue, but that which seeks to express ultimate truth in narrative forms which seem at first glance to be historical (such as the creation stories in Genesis, the virgin birth, or the last judgment). He realizes that the stories themselves might seem primitive, but there has proved to be a “permanent value” contained in them which cannot survive extrication from the myth. Such “extrication” occurs both when they are treated as literal history and when philosophy seeks to explain completely the meaning of a myth in rational terms. The reason for this is that the myths themselves are the way in which religion seeks to grasp life in its unity and wholeness in a particular form which escapes complete rational description, for reason only observes and deduces and cannot logically account for aspects of

reality which are incomplete or irrational.

If one takes eschatological myths literally, as traditional religion did and as the theologians of hope and liberation theologians tend to do by speaking of them in terms of something that will happen in history or at the end of history, then the stories are absurd in that they are so much at odds with present ways of thinking that it is impossible to specify what they mean (and hence there is the recurring problem of relating the eschatological future to this world and its future). But if one does not take the myths into account at all other than to seek to make complete rational sense of their claims, then the transcendence of history to which they point is lost because reason seeks to bring reality into a “premature harmony”—premature because history is still in process. In a famous phrase, Niebuhr urges us to take the myths of Christianity “seriously but not literally.”¹⁵

Yet in what sense would myth be true? Are there really any gains in this route? According to Niebuhr, recognizing that these symbolic stories were born out of profound experiences of the divine and have nourished such experiences over the centuries means that they are subject to verification by experience. By giving attention to the particular myths of Christianity, we will insure that its unique claims that God “acts” in “history” (which must be stated as myth) will be emphasized without allowing them to be taken as merely historical (in the sense we speak of that today). Doing this will hold before us the claims for universal meaning which are part of these narratives so that their truth may possibly illumine *our* experience. (It should be noted that this can and does happen in a “pre-reflective” sense for those who have an immediate and naive relation to the myth, but presumably the number of such people is decreasing in our day.)

In considering the eschatological myths, this approach would deal with

¹⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Truth in Myths,” *The Nature of Religious Experience*, ed. J. S. Bixler (Freeport: Books for Libraries, 1937) 117-35; idem, “As Deceivers Yet True,” *Beyond Tragedy* (New York: Scribner’s, 1948) 1-24.

¹⁵See the works in the previous footnote and Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner’s, 1941, 1943) 2.289-98. For additional discussion of the use of myth being commended here, see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951, 1957, 1963) 1.80-81; 2.29-31; 3.151-55; Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1969) 161-74, 347-57; and Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) 268-76, 420-23. A more complete treatment of the subject of this section is in Marc Kolden, *Pannenberg’s Attempt to Base Theology on History* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation; University of Chicago, 1976) 150-79, 293-330.

God and eternity both as dimensions “above” present reality, as process theologians and Teilhardians do, and also as being “beyond” or at the end of history (since the stories *do* deal with the future), as the theologians of hope and liberation theologians do. If we look at these symbolic stories only in the former way, we shall obscure dimensions of transformation and fulfillment; but if we look only in the latter manner, we shall obscure the richness and responsibility in the process of history itself. In dealing directly with the myths as myths we shall be doing greater justice to that in our experience which constantly suggests a source, a center, and (in this case) a destiny for reality—which are things that not only transcend our immediate experience but that finally transcend rational forms and categories and can be expressed adequately only in myths.

This approach is not meant in any way to license a “retreat to commitment” or dogmatism

in theology. Langdon Gilkey has called for a “post-reflective” use of myth in this regard.¹⁶ That is, we should seek to explain the meaning of the myth in rational terms insofar as that is possible, but then we should still retain the myth in our theological thinking in recognition of the limits of reason in grasping God and reality completely. The *truth* of Christian myths (or of any other ultimate visions of reality) would be shown, finally, by demonstrating how well they account for subsequent data. In the terms of Paul Ricoeur, commending a myth has the character of a wager that such a way of looking at things is more illuminating than any other way. Which myth does most justice to our experience, critically considered?¹⁷ This would be to take myths seriously without taking them literally—in the case of eschatological myths, to ask about their *nonliteral* reference to the *future*: non-literal, because we are speaking of ultimate things which the literal cannot grasp fully; but future because we dare not let go of the specific ingredients of the myth in seeking to explain it.

III. THREE BIBLICAL THEMES CONSIDERED

Let us look briefly at the three most important ways of speaking about the eschatological future in early Christian literature, taking these passages as myths, to be considered seriously but not literally, and treating them in light of the problems and possibilities discussed above.¹⁸

A. The stories of *the return of Christ* or the “second coming” are among the most vivid in scripture. In Acts 1:10-11, two men in white robes tell the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus...will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” This image appears in a variety of ways in other places (Matt 25-26; John 14; 1 Cor 15; 2 Thes 2; and Rev 20 and 21). While the stories themselves are highly symbolic and puzzling in many ways, their main point is quite straightforward: because of the promised return of Christ we are to live with hope in the present time. This is put most clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of

¹⁶L. Gilkey, *Religion and the Scientific Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) chapters 3-4 and esp.114.

¹⁷P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 355-57.

¹⁸R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2.287-301, considers many of these same themes.

the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” If that were not clear enough, the sentence is preceded by “therefore,” hearkening back to the whole chapter concerning the resurrection of Christ, which is called the “first fruits” of the general resurrection of all people which will occur when Christ returns.

If we examine the stories of the return of Christ, we see that they testify to the *cosmic scope* of God’s judgment and grace—against any individualism. They also call into question any belief in progress in our world by their claim that the fulfillment of history lies beyond history. Yet at the same time, against any otherworldliness, they say that the consummation fulfills rather than negates the historical process. Jesus returns to this world, after all; he does not meet those who are saved somewhere else.

B. Closely related to the return of Christ is the idea of the *last judgment*. It is also portrayed in several places (Matt 25; 2 Cor 5; Acts 10; and Rom 2). The most important point is that it is *Christ* who will be the judge. Here *all* the New Testament’s testimony to Christ is important. The one who is truly human will judge. This means that the judgment is on sin and not

on our humanness, since it is Jesus who has taken on our flesh forever who will judge us. And this is the same one who is truly divine who speaks God's judgment. Thus God's last judgment will reflect his first judgment on our creatureliness—it is good. It is sin which is the problem.

Note also that in these stories good and evil do not vanish. Apparently being saved by grace alone does not mean that what we do does not matter, as some have thought. Good and evil are part of the final judgment, and even the righteous ones (the sheep in Matt 25) are uneasy about their righteousness. This ought not to be surprising, since all have sinned. But it reminds us of the importance of Christ's atoning work. For in the myth evil is not simply erased or ignored. Rather, the God who judges is the God who reconciles the world to himself by bearing the cost of the world's rebellion himself. Atonement for God, as for us, is neither easy nor automatic. The story of the last judgment holds before us the message that what we do now matters, whether good or evil; these things will remain, and they will come under judgment.

Finally, the judgment by Jesus is said to come at the end of history, not within it. That is, nothing we achieve or fail to achieve here will have the *last* word. God has the last word. In the "final judgment" of our own death—if this story may open our eyes to see it—our sin of centering our lives on ourselves will be shown to be idolatry. And as we see this idol collapse, we are finally to be opened to dependence only on God's mercy.

C. The New Testament speaks throughout of the *general resurrection* of all who have died when the end comes (see Matt 22; Luke 14; Rom 6; 1 Thes 4; and especially 1 Cor 15). The first point to be made from these materials is that resurrection is not identical with immortality, because immortality implies that there is something innately eternal about us to which we can hold in death. Against this, resurrection speaks about new bodies. This suggests at least two things: eternity will fulfill and not annul human life in the world; but also, there is nothing within the human condition itself which can accomplish this. Only God can perform a resurrection.

While we cannot "know" about this in the way in which we know present

things, we can trust it because it accords with all that we experience of the God who perpetually creates anew. One could say that the resurrection affirms meaning to history in a way similar to creation in the beginning, but now from the other "end."

It is important to note also that both the New Testament and the Apostles' Creed affirm the resurrection of the body. Since "body" is the biblical word for the whole person, referring to one's historical identity, we are to see that God will value all aspects of our experience. Heaven will not be absorption into God but *fellowship* with him. As an explanation this may be difficult to conceive, but if it is seen as an exploration into the future of God and his people it makes more sense of our experience than other views. Other views either must deny present contingency because they have the future all spelled out, or they have no final future at all and thus have no way of valuing and yet not worshipping present existence.

The images of resurrection, the return of Christ, and the last judgment all function to keep hope alive, for this existence is not all there is or will be. They also serve to keep the future open, for our actions will contribute to it but will not determine it, and thus these myths preserve the appropriateness of living by faith. This eschatological message of Christianity tells us that God will value good and condemn evil; the purpose of this is to encourage our creativity, responsibility, and self-sacrifice. But the insistence that God-in-Christ has the last word is to

keep us from depending on ourselves for the fulfillment of life. In any case, there should be no credibility granted to the charge often made that Christianity's hope for the future devalues present existence. This is so only when the hope is misconstrued as some sort of ironclad prediction which does not take into account the incompleteness of historical existence.

Treating eschatological language as myth should insure that we look at each story seriously but not literally—against the backdrop of both the insights and the limitations of those who seek to make complete rational sense out of an eschatological future, but who do not retain the story with its own unique features and claims and thus end up losing the divine future as our faith expresses it. And by so doing we shall be taking the stories more seriously than do those who take them literally, because we shall seek to verify them in human experience rather than to assert them in ways which have no connection with anything else we know or experience.