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Eschatology: Essential, Yet Esstentially Ignored

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Essential, Yet *Essentially* Ignored

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Each of the authors writing for this issue of *Leaven* might vie for the title "Defender of That Aspect of Theology Most Significantly Neglected among Churches of Christ." I would nominate myself and eschatology for the honor if eschatology were not so inextricably interrelated with all the other aspects of theology, which are also neglected. As Karl Barth declares, "If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ."[1] Barth, though often sounding intemperate in his assertions, is usually right. And nearly everyone doing theology in the mid-twentieth century agrees with him rather than the unreconstructed liberal or modernist theology that came out of the nineteenth century.[2]

This twentieth-century consensus on the centrality of eschatology is broad based enough to include many different types of theology: existentialist (Rudolf Bultmann, Amos Wilder), realized (C. H. Dodd, John A. T. Robinson), promise and fulfillment (Oscar Cullmann, Werner Georg Kümmel), proleptic (Wolfhart Pannenberg), hope (Jürgen Moltmann), political (Johannes Baptist Metz), or revolutionary/liberation (Gustavo Gutierrez).

Though the final forms and shapes are different, the passion of contemporary biblical and systematic theologians for eschatology is, I believe, crucial for the explication of the meaning of the Christian faith in the modern world. For, as Johannes Metz asserts, "[E]schatology is not a discipline beside other disciplines, but that basic discipline which determines, forms, and shapes every theological statement."[3] I have found little such passion in contemporary Churches of Christ for theological writing or preaching.

This has not always been so. Alexander Campbell and Robert Milligan, for instance, frolicked uninhibitedly in the excitement of postmillennial hopes, which were then abroad in the land. Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger* begins on the foundation of a postmillennial eschatology, and Milligan's *Scheme of Redemption* (the most systematic theology from our Restoration fathers) ends with a vigorous exposition of a postmillennialist eschatology.

The next generations were stunned, however, by a growing realization of the overwhelming corruption of the modern world and disappointed by the failure of evolutionary and utopian visions to evidence the slightest tendency to materialize in history. They were struck by the futility of attempting to bring in the kingdom by combating error and ignorance and promoting the restoration of the ancient order of things.

They were therefore prone to savor a more apocalyptic mood, which resulted more naturally in millennial expectations of a very different type from those of Campbell and Milligan. This apocalyptic type of eschatology had already been nurtured in

the Barton W. Stone tradition and had made its way into popular Church of Christ thought by way of the Lipscomb-Harding-Boll school of world-relating. This millenarian vision looked for a radical break with history as we know it, bringing human institutions under the sway of the kingdom of God by means of a swift series of end-time events, culminating in the second coming of Christ. These events would inaugurate a radically new time for a redeemed people on a redeemed earth.

Some were specifically and literally premillennial (e.g., R. H. Boll), expecting a literal and temporal thousand-year reign of Christ over the earth. This reign would be messianic, but temporal and penultimate rather than ultimate and eternal. Others (e.g., David Lipscomb) believed that the biblical pointers to a new age should be read quite realistically with reference to the redeemed earth, but they understood the renewed earth to be the site of the eternal kingdom.[4] Lipscomb's apocalyptic eschatology led him to a severe sectarian separation from the world's social, economic, and political structures as belonging to the old age and, for the most part, to the devil.

It might be argued that the eschatological thinking of our first generations was primitive and uncritical. It certainly was virtually untouched by dialectical theology's critique of liberal, modernistic, or utopian doctrines of progress. It also suffered from a lack of engagement with the biblical theology movement and recent gains of biblical scholarship with respect to understanding biblical eschatology. But at least it was interesting—and serious.

Eschatology died as a living concern among our churches because of at least four related developments: (1) the acceptance of the church-kingdom identity fostered by Tolbert Fanning and like-minded sectarians; (2) the powerful and brutal assault on millennial modes of thought and millennial thinkers, particularly premillennial, by the Foy E. Wallace Jr. cadre of de-eschatologizers; (3) the subsequent ruthlessly enforced triumph of amillennialism and the dogma of church-kingdom identity; and (4) the filling of the vacuum in eschatological thinking with inane, hybridized life-after-death language uninformed by biblical or systematic theology.

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From the 1940s onward, not only millenarianism but serious study of eschatology in general became "an excellent subject to let alone." I do not believe it is an exaggeration to suggest that the Churches of Christ, since the middle part of our century, have been living in a theological wasteland left by the systematic destruction of premillennial piety among us and the heartbreaking oppression of our premillennial brothers and sisters by the self-appointed suppressors of error and developers of nothing.

It would have been quite beneficial, I believe, if we could have experienced, instead, an ongoing critical and insight-seeking dialogue between postmillennial, premillennial, and amillennial believers. Combined with a renewal of biblical theology, such a dialogue could theoretically have produced some wondrous results. I can envision a biblical and spiritually potent understanding of eschatology that might have carried us to the forefront among American theologies.

Instead, all we have left is ah-millennialism. We are neither passionately radical nor invigoratingly hopeful. We are only a-, from the Greek term meaning "zilch." The eschatological character of our popular preaching and teaching ended up becoming the most bland, impotent, paganizing, ahistorical, docetic body-soul dualism to arise out of the theological confusion of frontier-rural America. It was the kind of eschatology that Mark Twain and H. L. Menchen could earn a living making fun of. From our homemade eschatological vision, one would think that the only purpose for our being on earth is to believe the right religious doctrines, do the right religious things, and associate ourselves with the right religious folks so as to induce God to admit

our immortal souls, when we shuck our bodies, to a place beyond the blue.

The only important aspect of our being, according to this vision, is the immortal soul, the cultivation of which (especially the intellectual and moral aspects) is the prime function of our religious doctrines, activities, and institutions. After enduring the indignity of being trapped in the irrelevant spheres of biology, time, and history, we finally die, shucking off our bodies and our worldly connections. Our spirits are then set free to walk on golden streets that you can see through, beneath the shadow of giant pearls. There we shall be for ever and ever.

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The one slight hitch in this scenario is an inexplicable interruption somewhere toward the beginning of forever, during which we must reunite with our bodies. This latter event remains incongruous, confusing, and incomprehensible, because nothing in our doctrine of creation, incarnation, or eschatology prepares us for it, much less for the redemption of creation itself or the new earth to which God descends and where he dwells with his people.

In this scenario, there is no grand vision of creation and its redemption. There is little relationship of life in the world to God's redemptive plan. The connection between the incarnation, the resurrection, and our creaturely bodiliness eludes us. The relevance of our earthly life, the significance of our secular work, and the meaning of our redemptive suffering escape us. The suffering of God and his patient work of redeeming our lives and working all things together for good are not in focus.

Not only has Satan conquered God's beautiful creation and made the kingdoms of this world his own; we are going to let him keep them, as if God's whole creative and redemptive activity in the world were relevant to his eternal goal only insofar as it relates to immortal, individual souls. The whole purpose of the divine plan, thus interpreted, is to rescue human ghosts from Cartesian machines.

If my description of the implications of our popular eschatology is unfair or extreme, I am willing to let it rest. But we might still use this picture as a putative theological straw man who can serve as an example of the worst case that we must overcome in our theologizing about last things and their implications for life in God's world.

Our constructive task, if we are to serve the Churches of Christ as theologians, will require much hard work. It will require collective competence in exegesis, historical and biblical criticism, history of theology, dogmatics, and analysis of the contemporary situation. Without here rehearsing the hermeneutical path that brought me to them, or that might bring us to them, I would like to propose some elements of a biblical/dogmatic eschatological vision that would be of help to our people.

Theologically, our doctrinal vision should begin with Jesus Christ. In the incarnation—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the eschaton has begun. In the Christ-event, the eschaton has broken into history from the future, the resurrection has begun, the new age has dawned. God himself, not just extended time or a sequence of eschatological events, is the future of human beings. But the vision is described in the language of time and sequence. The creation is not the old age, but it has come under the power of the old age. The new age, breaking in through Jesus Christ, has come into being by the resurrection power of God, which makes all things new.

The eschaton breaks in in a surprising way, however. It brings grace and fulfillment to light, and it guarantees its completion through the resurrection of Christ and the life-giving power of the Spirit. The eschaton has been inaugurated, the last days have begun, but the consummation is still in the future. In contrast to the clean and complete break envisioned by popular Jewish theology (and by the pre-Pentecost disciples of Jesus as well), the new aeon has come already, but not yet. We live now in the messianic age, to be sure, but in a mode that is between the times.

Because of our baptism and our reception of the Spirit, we may be tempted to believe that we have arrived. But we have not yet arrived. Sin, suffering, and death have been overcome and defeated proleptically, but there is a profound work to be done, an incredibly difficult redemptive process to be gone through. Our enemies, after all, are not as puny as the nationalistic and political enemies of Israel. Christ did not die to defeat the Romans on behalf of Israel. He died to defeat the ultimate and intractable enemies of the Romans themselves, as well as those of Israel. We live, then, in both the old and the new age at the same time—as those who are saved, but who are still to be saved; as redeemed, but still to be redeemed. We stand before God as saints and sinners at the same time—as already sitting in heavenly places, but awaiting that which God reserves for us in heaven; as having already tasted the good things of the age to come, but still subject to the stubborn remnants of the power of the old age.

The life between the times, the eschatological interim, is the busiest of times, for we can prepare for the consummation only by repentance. We can await the second coming only by doing with all our might what we were created to do in the first place: to praise God and become fully human by being conformed to the image of Christ. We also have a mission to all the nations: to proclaim the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ, the triumph of grace in Jesus Christ. Then comes the end, when all things (including the last enemy, death) are put under his feet. Then he delivers the kingdom to God. He raises the creation from the dead. He raises us from the dead. We mortals put on immortality, and we see the new heaven and the new earth and the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. God himself will dwell among us in a way more palpable than we can imagine, and we will be changed in a way we cannot portray, even symbolically, with any adequacy.

I see at least nine doxological, pedagogical, and pastoral implications of this vision:

1. Creation is not a mistake.
2. There is nothing wrong with being human, biological, and historical.
3. We are not immortal spirits trapped in bodies, but human beings made in the image of God.
4. Creation is not the fall.
5. Redemption is from the fall, not from creation.
6. Redemption is not salvation from our bodies, our sexuality, our sensual natures, our earthly relationships, but the redemption of our bodies, our sexuality, our sensual natures, our earthly relationships.
7. Redemption of individual human beings will take place only in the context of the redemption of the body of Christ, the church, which is the eschatological community of God—a pilgrim people, a servant people, a people proclaiming the good news about Christ and painting for the people the grand and exciting vision of the kingdom of God of which the church is the beachhead in this world.
8. Redemption of individual human beings and of the church will take place only in the context of the redemption of creation itself. We are creatures; if creation is not redeemed, there will be no context for our own redemption.
9. The incarnation reaffirms the essential goodness of creation, of our human life, of our history, just as the cross affirms the lengths to which God will go to redeem these things.

If Christ is not raised, then death is the most significant event in our lives, and second is making ourselves as comfortable as possible before it comes. If Christ is raised, however, I am redeemed, body and soul. God's ultimate plan for creation is fulfilled in principle, and God is worshiped and glorified. The meaning of life, suffering, and death is thus transformed. Every individual person and every individual event becomes uniquely valuable and significant. We cannot lose the value of the joys and pains, the loves and losses, of our lives. The destiny of Jesus Christ is our own destiny. We shall be like him—in the new heaven and the new earth.

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(Notes found on page 134)