

ESCHATOLOGY AND SOCIAL CONCERN

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The principal emphasis of this our Thirty-Second Annual Meeting has been on our evangelical responsibility for social concern and action. As might have been expected, there are differences among us. Yet we thought it worthwhile to use the forum furnished by the Evangelical Theological Society. Kenneth Kantzer has reminded us that

evangelicalism has a built-in corrective in the norm provided by Christ and Holy Scripture. . . . Therefore, however badly they may practice it, the duty of the Evangelicals is clear—in obedience to Christ and to His Word, to preserve unity in essentials, in nonessentials to foster liberty, and in all things to love as only God can teach us how.¹

In this spirit I invite your attention to the theme of eschatology and social concern. First, I shall argue that though we hold differing end-historical eschatological schemes the weightier demands of eternal life or eternal condemnation require us, in loyalty to Scripture, to have as our primary aim in all social involvement the presentation of the gospel. I hope that a brief historical survey of eschatological thought in the Church will help us find unity in essentials and charity in nonessentials, which we cherish in the Evangelical Theological Society. Second, I wish to trace in 1 Corinthians and Romans the striking correlation Paul assumes between eschatology and ethics. Finally, I wish to present for our reflection the challenge of seriously grappling with our differences in eschatological schemes so that we in the Evangelical Theological Society might adopt appropriate attitudes and goals.

I. TENSIONS AND DIFFERENCES IN END-HISTORICAL CONCEPTIONS

A brief historical survey will help us to understand the origin of the differing end-historical eschatological schemes so that we may deal with them constructively. First, we glance at the trajectory of Augustinian thought. In taking over the scheme of Tyconius, including the idea that the millennium is the present age, Augustine made this view dominant for 1300 years. Harnack has an acute analysis of Augustine's eschatological thought. He sees that Augustine, carried away by the power of the Church and moved by the fall of the Roman empire, whose existence was continued in the Church, felt that the millennium of Revelation 20 was being presently fulfilled in the Church. He radically restructured the chiliasm of the ancient Latin Church. The Church was elevated to the throne of supremacy over the world: Through the Church, Christ reigns supreme. This

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¹K. Kantzer in *Evangelicals Face the Future* (ed. D. E. Hoke; South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1978) 146.

view prevailed in medieval and Reformation times.

Richard Bauckham has shown that the uniform eschatological view of sixteenth-century England was the old Augustinian view "with a new Protestant slant."² The pope was identified as Antichrist. The millennium itself is variously dated, but generally Satan's loosing comes with an apostate papacy. The Geneva Bible of 1560, in its notes on Revelation, dated the binding of Satan with Christ's nativity and his loosing with Pope Sylvester II (999-1003). Bullinger ended the millennium with Pope Gregory VII (1073-85); others ended it at 1300. In any case, they believed they were in the time of Satan's release for the "little season" of Rev 20:3. Gog and Magog were the pope and Muhammad,³ and the imminent destruction of the Roman Church was anticipated,⁴ along with the return of Christ. This would be followed by the last judgment and the end of all history. Bauckham says:

Hugh Latimer, with considerable justification, felt that his own expectation of the End was backed up by the unanimous opinion of the early Reformers: "All those excellent learned men which without doubt God hath sent into this world in these latter days to give the world warning, all these men do gather out of scripture that the last day cannot be far off."⁵

This was the more or less uniform outlook during the sixteenth century, but there was a shift at the end of the century toward a more optimistic, postmillennial view. With the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 men began to believe that Antichrist could be defeated in this world. There came about a shift from the view of the imminence of the end to a view that interposed a future millennium before the return of Christ and the end of all things. The new view gained currency in the seventeenth century and was formulated in the classical postmillennialism of Daniel Whitby at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This was the line of development that flowed into the American experience. George Marsden in his chapter on "The Kingdom of Christ and the American Nation" characterizes American millennial thought thus:

By far the most prevalent apocalyptic view among American Protestants in the Civil War era is known technically as "postmillennialism." It teaches that Christ will not come again until *after* a millennium of prolonged progress on earth and special spiritual blessings. . . . In 1859 the nondenominational *American Theological Review* characterized these views as "the commonly received doctrine." They were firmly rooted in the English Puritan and New England tradition of American theology. . . . The zeal of New England reformers increased as they saw the reforms of the present age as preparation for the great age when the Spirit would triumph over evil. The campaigns for Sabbath reform, temperance, and antislavery were all part of the program to prepare the nation for the advent of the great millennial age.⁶

²R. Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse* (Sutton Courtenay, 1978) 217.

³Ibid., p. 218.

⁴Ibid., p. 209.

⁵Ibid., pp. 147-148.

⁶G. M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale University, 1970) 185, 186.

We will now turn to an historical sketch of the chiliastic tradition. There are three principal eras of the prominence of premillennial thought. The first of these is the first three centuries of the Church's history. This was followed by 1300 years of Augustinian domination. Then early in the seventeenth century Joseph Meade, through his teaching at Cambridge, was influential in the spread of premillennial thought in England. Many of the Puritan leaders were trained under Meade; many of the men who produced the Westminster Confessional documents came under his influence.

B. S. Capp points out that between the years 1640 and 1653 some 78 writers each published three or more works on eschatological themes. Of these writers some thirty were framers of the Westminster Confession. This is eloquent evidence of the keen interest in eschatology. As evidenced by their writings, a good number of these men were premillennialists.⁷ An outstanding member of the Assembly, Thomas Goodwin, was a forthright premillennialist and acknowledged his indebtedness to Meade.

The vigor of premillennial interest seems to have receded at the end of the seventeenth century, while the eighteenth century was a period of the dominance of the Whittyan postmillennial view, which had been naturalized in America and formed the background of Jonathan Edwards' eschatological thought. Ernest Sandeen traces the beginnings of the popular premillennialism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and gives abundant documentation as to how, through such agencies as the Summer Bible Conferences and the Scofield Bible, premillennialism (especially in its dispensational form) became a considerable force in American evangelical thought. Sandeen helps us to appreciate the complexities of our present position.⁸

From this backward glance over the history of eschatological thought, with all the implied complexities, I think we may conclude that there is no reason to think that our deep-lying differences will disappear overnight. Kantzer well says:

Tensions will continue in Evangelicalism. They are present now, and they will remain permanently. It is not really an evil to be deplored that they continue to exist in Evangelicalism; they are signs of life. And they represent the only way we can work through the problems of our Evangelical faith. By the rigorous examination of sincere and earnestly present alternatives, we can learn best how to apply the gospel in a radical way to the world in which we live.⁹

In spite of the Church's long history of interest in last things the Church has not had a decisive era of eschatological discussion, an illustration of which is the lack of a definitive history of eschatological thought. In his book *Prophets and Millennialists*, W. H. Oliver shows surprise that there is not a history of Christian thought on eschatological matters. We have had a worthy beginning in D. H. Kromminga's *The Millennium in the Church*. There is also the impressive collection of material in Leroy Froom's volumes entitled *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*. We must acknowledge, however, that Oliver's remark is true: There is

⁷B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972).

⁸E. R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University Press, 1970).

⁹Kantzer in *Evangelicals*, 142.

need for a comprehensive history of Christian thought on eschatology. The Church does not have the unity that has been achieved in other major areas of theology by concentrated discussion. There are differing conceptions of the drama of the end-times in various parts of the Church. Perhaps our age will be that time in the advancing history of doctrine that will bring the greater understanding and unity that is needed. It is true that, with the work of Albert Schweitzer (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*) at the beginning of the twentieth century, eschatology was brought center stage in critical discussion, and it may be that the work of Schweitzer and the increasingly intense interest in eschatology may be the stimuli needed to force the Church to state its position more clearly and consistently concerning the details of end-historical eschatological thought.

II. THE PAULINE CORRELATION BETWEEN ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS

Paul has a variety of sanctions for ethics in 1 Corinthians. He can appeal to the doctrine of creation as a basis for liberty: "Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it' " (1 Cor 10:25-26). He evidently expected his readers to complete the argument from the context of Ps 24:2: "for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters." Paul may also appeal to the cross as an undergirding for liberty: "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men" (1 Cor 7:23).

More particularly to our present concern, Paul can appeal to basic eschatological conceptions as sanctions for ethics: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (6:9-10). Paul can also appeal to the high status of believers in the future as guidance for the present: "If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (6:1-3a). Again, Paul's ironical rebuke appeals to the believer's eschatological status: "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!" (4:8).

Paul applies eschatology to the specific problem of quarrels and divisions in the Corinthian church: "So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God" (3:21-23). Most striking is the eschatological dimension assumed. All things were theirs in potentiality and would actually be theirs in their future inheritance. Therefore it was unthinkable and unseemly to boast in men, when even the apostles were ethically the possession of the Corinthians.

The eschatological climax of the epistle and a very striking ethical link come in chap. 15. Here the correlation of eschatology and ethics is carried back to its deepest root in the foundation promise of Genesis that all enemies will be put under the feet of Christ and his people. This theme is the allusion to the word that the serpent's head will ultimately be crushed. The theme, reiterated by David in Psalms 110 and 8, comes to its powerful focus in the Pauline apocalypse (1 Cor

15:20-28). The motif is strikingly reinforced by Paul's word in Rom 16:20: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." Here is the ultimate foundation of the correlation between eschatology and ethics. Because of the assured resurrection triumph, because God gives us the eschatological victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, "therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58).

In parallel fashion, Paul spells out ethical obligations in Rom 8:11-17: "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation. . . . You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. . . . Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." Here again is the grand structural correlation between future glory and present obligation.

III. CHALLENGES BEFORE THE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Our eschatological outlook has a bearing on our attitude toward our present social and personal problems. Consider some of these responsibilities. We have our responsibilities to those of the household of faith. We cannot say to our brother and sister, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed" (Jas 2:16), and not provide for them the things necessary for life. We have a vast responsibility for our society as a whole, for our government. There may be wide differences here in our approaches and in our various denominational horizons. There is not one easy solution to these problems. Very often we simply rejoice in the fact that others see one particular problem clearly. Very often we simply deal with problems on a single-issue basis.

In all our involvement in these things we must recognize the "not yet," the groaning of creation, limiting what we may expect to see accomplished. We may even expect that the more fervent our preaching and the stronger our efforts, the more bitter may become the satanic opposition. We must remember Geerhardus Vos' concept of generic eschatology—that though our preaching might succeed far beyond anything we can imagine, even then men would still need that marvelous eschatological transformation of a resurrection.¹⁰ As there needs to be a transformation of the physical universe, so also the need for the resurrection of the physical body. There remains the "not yet," the groaning of creation, even though that groaning is the pain of childbirth, not a groaning of despair. We must finally recognize the central theme of all end-historical eschatology: the final subjugation of all things and the final giving over of the kingdom to the Father by the Son. Thus, recognizing our differing eschatological scenarios and recognizing the ethical problems and obligations we have, yet because of the overwhelming finality and importance of eternal issues, there must be a committal to the grander and higher purpose of bringing men to Christ. Thus every social situation and problem becomes for the believer both an opportunity and obligation to share the gospel and also the obligation to minister to concrete needs. The gospel and its answer is absolute and eternal. The Christian's social concern, as important as it is, partakes of the limitations of our sin-wracked world.

¹⁰G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 405.

In the light of this perspective there is room for the multitude of insights and concerns for special problems, for appreciating the various gifts in the body of Christ. Spirit-led sensitivities and zealous attempts to ameliorate human needs should be recognized. There is room here for all the well-informed scriptural and scientific insights that may be brought to bear on the world's needs. How much can be accomplished by personal commitment and enthusiasm! Who of us can remain unmoved when we read of Chuck Colson's "life sentence" and commitment to bringing the gospel and practical help to those who agonize behind prison bars?

The present intense interest in social problems among evangelicals is not futile. It may be disturbing and premature to expect revolutionary change before the *parousia*, but research and thought will no doubt produce understanding and values that will be preserved in the Church and will one day be used gloriously. Meanwhile research and thought must be carried on in full loyalty to the authority of Scripture. We have an infallible rule of faith and life. But the ultimate issue of the eternal destiny of man remains primary. The vision and hope of either amelioration or radical improvement in social conditions should not obscure the basic responsibility of making the gospel clear. J. G. Machen aptly said that

Christian service, it is true, is not limited to the household of faith. All men, whether Christians or not, are our neighbors if they be in need. But if we really love our fellow men, we shall never be content with binding up their wounds or pouring on oil and wine or rendering them any such little service. We shall indeed do such things for them, but the main business of our lives will be to bring them to the Savior of their souls.¹¹

The evangelical, then, must recognize the solemnity of his confession: "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." From the eschatology thus presented we have the weighty ethical inferences that apostolic authority has laid upon us. In the foreground of that ultimate vision there is the complexity of the relationship of the transitional events leading from this age to the age to come. To emphasize this once again, let me borrow C. S. Lewis' eloquent words:

It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship . . .

and then Lewis draws the contrast in the ultimate destinies of men:

. . . or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspections proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. . . . Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal. . . . But it is immortals whom we joke

¹¹J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923) 158.

with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.¹²

Yet along with these radical obligations there remains the Church's perplexity as well as its agreement about end-historical eschatology. Here too, as we pursue the goal set last year—"Hermeneutics for the 80s"—we can hope for a more constructive response. Tensions will continue, no doubt, but we have learned to live with them. Meanwhile—to use a recent book title—we are "living in the shadow of the second coming."¹³

The closing words of the Frankfort Declaration sum up the argument of this address. The Frankfort Declaration, principally prepared by Peter Beyerhaus, was adopted with slight revisions by a group of confessional theologians on March 4, 1970, in Frankfort, Germany. The Declaration sets forth "Seven Indispensable Basic Elements of Mission." It is from the seventh of these that I quote, and with this quotation I conclude my remarks. It reads:

We stress, however, that unlike the eternally valid reconciliation with God through faith in the Gospel, all of our social achievements and partial successes in politics are bound by the eschatological "not yet" of the coming kingdom and the not yet annihilated power of sin, death, and the devil, who still is the "prince of this world."

This establishes the priorities of our missionary service and causes us to extend ourselves in the expectation of Him who promises, "Behold! I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5, RSV).¹⁴

¹²C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 14-15.

¹³T. P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming* (New York: Oxford, 1979).

¹⁴See *Christianity Today* (June 19, 1970) 843-846.